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The Critique of Myth in German-Jewish Thought

By

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Abstract

Taking up the opposition between Judaism and myth commonly invoked in modern Jewish thought, this dissertation traces its origins in nineteenth and twentieth century German-Jewish thinkers such as Heymann Steinthal, Hermann Cohen, Sigmund Freud, Erich Auerbach, Ernst Cassirer, and Theodor Adorno. It demonstrates how the imagined antagonism between Judaism and myth was formulated in response to supersessionist, anti-Jewish trends in the European study of comparative mythology, the colonial construction of religion, German nationalism, and emerging racial antisemitism. Further, it argues that, haunted by the very romanticism it repudiated, the German-Jewish critique of myth paradoxically entailed the construction of a new one: the myth of the Jews as the sole inventors of rationality, ethics, science, enlightenment, and disenchantment in world history. However, rather than warranting a rejection of disenchantment, the project contends that the critique of myth nonetheless challenges contemporary valorizations of re-enchantment in the scholarly and public spheres.

For Jordan, who asked big questions about small things.

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Most importantly, I thank Dr. Claire Eveline Aubin, for whom—and *with* whom—the future is bright.

*To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca,
we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who
leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown
land, and forbids his servant to even bring
back his son to the point of departure.*

—Emmanuel Levinas

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“...the revenge of myth against its conquerors is plain for all to see...”

—Gershom Scholem

I. The Question of Myth in Jewish Thought

Positing a binary opposition between Judaism and myth is commonplace. Judaism, on one reading, is characterized by “*ethical monotheism*”: a linear unfolding of revelation in history, a rational, abstract, de-anthropomorphized deity, and an injunction to moral responsibility. This is contrasted with the cyclical temporality, deterministic fate, polytheistic idolatry, and immoral extravagances of mythic, “pagan” religion. This rudimentary distinction is traceable as far back as German rabbi and philosopher Leo Baeck’s *Essence of Judaism* in 1905, a text inspiring a number of subsequent works in twentieth century Jewish philosophy and theology. “The way which leads to myth,” Baeck writes,

has always been remote from Judaism, despite constant changes in the history of its religious feeling and thought. ... Myth has its origin and place where the ethical is not yet at the center of religion, and where it is not yet recognized in its absoluteness and unity, where, therefore, there is as yet no comprehension of that all-inclusive task which tells man that he has to choose his life. Myth is essentially polytheistic, since it transfers the multifariousness of nature and the coming of fate into the godhead. So it has gods, or at least different forms of the godhead; they stand before men as creatures of fate and of nature. Often they are moral too—therein polytheism has its special development—but the moral does not constitute their character and essence. This moral significance is characteristic only of monotheism.¹

And yet, at least since the time of Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber—the two most eminent German scholars of Jewish mysticism in the twentieth century—this bifurcation has been repeatedly complicated. The Kabbalah itself, Scholem made clear, bore traces of mythic irrationality, often attributed to Gnostic influence.² Similarly, Buber returned to the tradition of Hasidic storytelling in

¹ Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism*, trans. Victor Grubweiser and Leonard Pearl (London: Macmillan and Company Ltd., 1936), 89-91. For clarity, I have amended the last sentence in the original translation, which reads, “To make this the essential significance of the moral is characteristic only of monotheism.”

² Gershom Scholem, “Kabbalah and Myth” in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken), 87-117.

order to communicate the lessons contained within the mythic tales of the *Ostjuden*.³ Scholem and Buber's valorizations of myth appealed to an entire generation of German-Jews who, faced with the failed promises of Jewish Emancipation, rising antisemitism, economic depression, political dysfunction, and the general alienation and malaise characteristic of modernization, sought a more authentic Jewishness by turning to movements such as Marxism and Zionism.

However, attempts to reconcile myth to Judaism were also formulated in response to prior movements in German-Jewish thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, namely the *Haskalah* and *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which portrayed Judaism as a preeminently rational and moral religion — the very roots of Baeck's ethical monotheism. For Scholem, this strain of thought represented a misguided assimilationist attempt on the part of an entire generation of German-Jewish intellectuals to conform Judaism to the image of the German Enlightenment and bourgeois culture. Speaking as a Zionist in the aftermath of the Holocaust, this effort seemed nothing but a naive, failed solution to the Jewish Question. Turning against this tendency, Scholem spoke of the “demonic in history” as he worked to uncover the volatile yet productive irrationalities in Judaism long suppressed by partisans of the Enlightenment.⁴ Myth, Scholem thought, had finally exacted vengeance upon its conquerors.⁵ Although the turn to myth among European Jews predated Scholem and Buber with the founding of the Society for Jewish Folkloristics, the publication of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, the popularization of tales of the Golem or the Dybbuk, or Jewish involvement with esotericist movements and theosophical societies, in their wake scholarship on myth and Judaism would largely follow suit.⁶ In general, the idea that Judaism and myth are somehow opposed would be dismissed out of hand by at least two generations of scholars.⁷

³ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidism*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken, 1991). See also S. Daniel Breslauer, *Martin Buber on Myth: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁴ David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 6-11.

⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946), 35.

⁶ See, for example, Gary Smith, “‘Die Zauberjuden’: Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and Other Jewish Esoterics Between the World Wars.” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 4 (1995): pp. 227-243, Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁷ The literature supporting this point is too vast to recount, effectively encompassing the entire study of Jewish mysticism, folk religion, and culture since the postwar era. Directly relevant examples of this attitude can be found

Despite the efforts of Scholem, Buber, and others in agreement with them, the idea of Judaism as a predominantly rational, anti-mythical religion persists. This dissertation therefore answers the question: *why myth?* How did “myth,” specifically, come to play such an outsized role in the definition of Judaism, especially as a foil for “ethical monotheism”? What is the origin of this opposition? What is its history? As I will demonstrate, the Jewish critique of myth originated in the German context among the direct descendants of the rationalist movements Scholem dismissed and, stretching from the middle of the nineteenth century to the postwar era, assumed its own theological-political valence and efficacy. For figures such as Heymann Steinthal, Hermann Cohen, Sigmund Freud, Erich Auerbach, Ernst Cassirer, and Theodor Adorno, the imagined ambivalence, dissonance, or outright antagonism between Judaism and myth would become instrumental. This was true, in the first place, in terms of triangulating Judaism relative to other “world religions,” especially as myth had become a central category of analysis for the emerging secular, social-scientific study of comparative religion. For the German Romantics, myth had long been celebrated as an antidote to the ills of secularization and a source of national, cultural, and *racial* identity. For many anthropologists and other adherents of the European Enlightenment in the study of religion, myth would be understood as an irrational facet of “primitive religion,” part of that “childhood of the human race” to be abandoned on the march toward modernity, science, and civilization.⁸ The German-Jewish critique of myth would align itself with the latter tendency, effectively pitting itself against romanticism. In the second place, myth was also crucial in the effort to render intelligible the cultural forms responsible for the rise of modern racial antisemitism, Nazism, and the Holocaust. As such, the critique of myth would be articulated as a thinly veiled polemic against fascism’s irrationalist conditions of possibility. Within the European study of mythology, Jews and Judaism were put in an impossible position, castigated as either too mythological or not

in the edited volume *The Seduction of Jewish Myth*, in which the notion of Judaism and myth’s opposition is hastily dispensed with in order to consider the implications of the presence of myth in Jewish history. See *The Seduction of Jewish Myth: Challenge or Response?*, ed. S. Daniel Breslauer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

⁸ Bruce Lincoln distinguishes between the romantic and evolutionary-anthropological paradigms in mythography in *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 72.

mythological enough. For the Romantics, Judaism was characterized by a lack of myth, whereas for social-scientific partisans of the Enlightenment it was defined by an excess of primitivism. Finally, in view of mythography's role in the formation of German nationalism and the seemingly irrational nature of fascist fervor, propaganda, and conspiracy theories combined with its harkening to a pre-Christian *völkisch* mysticism and esotericism, fascism would be seen by many as nothing but mythological.⁹

However, the critique of myth in German-Jewish thought would remain haunted by the very mythic romanticism it repudiated.¹⁰ *The critique of myth paradoxically entailed the construction of a new one: the myth of the Jews as the sole inventors of reason, ethics, science, enlightenment, and civilization in world history.* Following what Jason Josephson-Storm has termed the “myth of disenchantment,” I argue that narrating the story of disenchantment often involves a kind of mythmaking.¹¹ Ever since Max Weber famously defined modernity by its “disenchantment of the world,” the “secularization thesis” postulating an inevitable, progressive, teleological breakdown of religious ideas, institutions, and social forms in history has been repeatedly problematized. This has been done by detailing, for instance, the ways in which secularism retains latent theological residues or by highlighting the continued influence and appeal of religion in an ostensibly irreligious world. In short, *we have never been disenchanted*. The secularization thesis itself has therefore become something of a myth, speaking to the preponderant human tendency to construct stories, fantasies, or “metanarratives,” one might say, to understand experience. In this case, the myth of disenchantment concerns the role of the Jews in world history at the moment when their existence had become threatened. This is part of a larger trend discerned by Adam Sutcliffe, who has chronicled the manifold attempts to identify the specific purpose of the Jewish

⁹ Although it has later become something of a trope in postwar culture, Eric Kurlander has demonstrated the extent to which myth and esotericism were deeply imbedded in Nazism. See Eric Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

¹⁰ As Andrew Von Hendy has argued, romantic myth theory has largely determined the study of mythology despite the rise of positivist studies of myth in the twentieth century. See Andrew Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

people since the seventeenth century emblematic of the older and more historically grounded belief in Israel's chosenness.¹²

When it comes to the critique of myth, the story of Judaism's disenchantment of the world no doubt appears as an overt simplification mediated by its turbulent historical context. If the German people had betrayed their own Enlightenment ideals of reason, pluralism, and culture, this was because those ideals were in some ways foreign to them in the first place, instead the provenance of the Jews. As we know, the emergence of reason, science, and so on in the *longue durée* of human history is far more complex than the critique of myth would have it, involving a vast array of movements, individuals, and civilizations. In this sense, the critique of myth is another instance of what British-Jewish philosopher Gillian Rose termed "Neo-Hebraism," an attempt on the part of modern Jewish philosophers to locate in Judaism the "sublime Other of modernity" as an ethical counterweight to fascism.¹³ Moreover, the myth of Judaism's disenchantment of the world also had the potential to dangerously play into the antisemitic caricature of the Jews as hyper-intellectual and economically and politically cunning as an anti-modern, romantic reaction to the vertigo of secularization. Notwithstanding these misgivings, I will argue that the critique of myth still testifies to the continued relevance of critical reason and the radical potential of Enlightenment thought, a truth whose articulation became imperative for a group of German-Jewish intellectuals facing reason's eclipse as Europe descended into "barbarism."

II. Jews, Christians, and Their Others

As indicated above, the German-Jewish critique of myth made common cause with the social-scientific, evolutionary-anthropological view of myth in the study of religion that saw it as a feature of "primitive religion." Yet as numerous historians of religious studies have shown from Talal Asad to J.Z. Smith, Tomoko Masuzawa, Brent Nongbri, and David Chidester, the very idea of religion as a

¹² Adam Sutcliffe, *What are Jews For? History, Peoplehood, and Purpose* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

¹³ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 79. This also forms the basis of Rose's series of critiques of Jewish thinkers in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Verso, 2017).

universally observable form of culture and feature of society is the product of two dynamics illustrating its historical and geographic particularity.¹⁴ In the first place, the category of religion arises with the Protestant Reformation and Wars of Religion as Europeans sought to adjudicate doctrinal disputes between Protestants and Catholics. Secondly, enabled by colonial technologies of knowledge production, “world religions” would encompass the globe as Europeans came into contact with the cultures of Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Americas. In due course, the concept of religion would be infused with a Protestant flavor emphasizing interior belief and textuality owing to its European provincialism. This fact, Leora Batnitzky has argued, shaped the acceptance of Judaism itself as one religion among others during the *Haskalah*.¹⁵ Following scientific theories about the evolution of species and the development of human culture in history, scholars of religion would construct theories postulating an evolution of religion from the simple to the complex, animism to monotheism, superstition to science, and so on. This would effectively racialize the concept of religion, positioning it as the primitive, Oriental Other to European secularism. In the words of Gil Anidjar following Edward Said, “secularism is Orientalism.”¹⁶ For some in the recent past, this has warranted a total rejection of the category of religion on account of its problematic pedigree in addition to its lack of internal coherence and explanatory power. Beyond this, however, the construction of religion was also made possible by Enlightenment ideals of abstract reason and universal humanism. These principles would fare no better, subject to critique by not only postmodern philosophers such as Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida, but postcolonial theorists like Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gayatri Spivak, Marxist feminists like Silvia

¹⁴ See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269-284; Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

¹⁵ Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Gil Anidjar, “Secularism” in *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 39-65.

Federici, or Black feminist thinkers like Sylvia Wynter and Denise Ferreira da Silva.¹⁷ For them, Enlightenment rationality and the figure of “the human” are both plagued with immanent contradictions and emerge as products of historical processes particular to European history. In short, reason and humanism have been made in the image of the white man. The particular disguised as universal, these concepts were violently forced upon the world as part of colonialism’s purportedly civilizing mission, deployed as justification for acts of repression, marginalization, and extermination as Black and indigenous religious traditions would be persecuted as animism, paganism, or witchcraft.

With this in view, the valorization of critical reason and universal humanism in the critique of myth in German-Jewish thought becomes implicated in a problematic legacy. The idea of Judaism as not only the harbinger of rationality and civilization but their teleological apex becomes complicit in the same habits of thought undergirding the oppression of colonized and enslaved peoples. The German-Jewish myth of Judaism’s disenchantment of the world would thereby become part and parcel of the European subjugation of the world. Paradoxically, those who espoused the critique of myth to combat anti-Judaism would undermine their own agenda by colluding with ideas no less responsible for anti-blackness and anti-indigeneity than antisemitism. Judaism had long been treated as a kind of “primitive religion” superseded by Christianity, a theological tenet underpinning Christendom’s centuries-long persecution of European Jewry. In this sense, the colonial construction of religion could be understood as supersessionism *writ large*, expanded to encompass a global heterogeneity of peoples whose Oriental, primitive “religion” is surpassed by the achievements of European civilization. Just as the Jews are superseded by Christianity, the religions of Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Americas are superseded by

¹⁷ As Foucault famously predicted, the European image of the human would be “erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1970), 386. The rational European subject has also been problematized across postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist theory, for instance in Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument,” *The New Centennial Review* 3:3 (2003), 257-337; Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward A Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2007); Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

secularism. Thus, German-Jewish appeals to reason, humanism, and the Enlightenment would lend credibility to Scholem's thesis that the idea of Judaism as a religion of reason amounts to nothing more than a series of paltry concessions to German, Christian, bourgeois culture. On this view, the critique of myth in German-Jewish thought would be dismissed as not only morally, ethically, and politically problematic, but futile in the aftermath of the Third Reich. One could even make the further point that the critique of myth perpetuated a Jewish supersessionism inspired by the biblical critique of idolatry wherein paganism functioned as a foil for Judaism just as Judaism did for Christianity.

However, the reality is significantly more complex. Just as Judaism can be understood as a kind of "primitive religion" superseded by Christianity and secularism in the European imagination, Jews themselves—Susannah Heschel has argued—can be understood as Europe's internally colonized Other, or even—as Anidjar maintains—its internal enemy.¹⁸ In this sense, the German-Jewish critique of myth seeks to turn the Enlightenment against itself through the method of immanent critique. This is another exercise in what Sven-Erik Rose has termed "Jewish philosophical politics," the act of drawing on philosophical discourses to imagine new political possibilities for Jews in the German State.¹⁹ By weighing the emancipatory potential of reason and humanism against their actually existing outcomes, the critique of myth shows that modernity has not measured up to its own standards. Rather than freeing humanity from mystification, prejudice, and brutality, modernity has created the conditions of possibility for ideological violence on an even larger scale, resulting in the perpetration of crimes against the very humanity it sought to liberate. Instead of culminating in peace and harmony, modernity has brought destruction. Specific to the situation of German-Jewry, the critique of myth was no doubt born of modernity's shortcomings, namely the struggle for Jewish Emancipation and its failure to deliver on its promises.²⁰ Leaving the Jewish Question perpetually open, this would lead to the rise of modern racial antisemitism, Nazism, and the Holocaust. However, rather than consigning reason, humanism, or the

¹⁸ Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1-22; Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 3-39.

¹⁹ Sven-Erik Rose, *Jewish Philosophical Politics in Germany, 1789-1848* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2014).

²⁰ David Sorkin, *Jewish Emancipation: A History Across Five Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

Enlightenment to the dustbin of history on account of its impotence, the German-Jewish critique of myth maintained its fidelity to these ideals, believing that they nonetheless retained their critical force in the face of reason's forfeiture.

The critique of myth is therefore a species of German Enlightenment humanism descended from the likes of Herder, Humboldt, Schiller, Goethe, and Kant. Although it would reject romantic nostalgia for mythic paganism and this tradition's implicit antisemitism, the German-Jewish critique of myth would share in the German Enlightenment's vision of a universal *humanitas* liberated from the bonds of mystification into the sunny day of rational self-consciousness. This was the foundation of Steintal's *Völkerpsychologie*, Cohen's Neo-Kantianism, Freud's psychoanalysis, Auerbach's realism, Cassirer's philosophy of culture, or Adorno's Marxist humanism, all of which were predicated upon the innate human capacity for *Bildung* or "self-cultivation" at the level of both the individual and the collective.²¹ In addition, the critique of myth shared this tradition's disillusionment with instrumental rationality. In the early twentieth century this would transform into a hostility toward logical positivism's fetishization of technical and scientific knowledge, calculative rationality, and quantitative reasoning at the expense of more holistic conceptions of human life and society sensitive to questions of ethics, morality, aesthetics, and qualitative concerns—what Edward Skidelsky has called the "alienation of reason."²² For the German-Jewish critique of myth, it was precisely this division that would create the conditions of possibility for philosophies of irrationality—namely German Romanticism, Jungian psychology, Aryan philology, *Lebensphilosophie*, or Heideggerianism—to fill the void left by positivism's instrumentalization of reason in order to confront questions of meaning left open by its refusal to apply rationality to problems beyond the purview of science and technology. Ironically, the impoverished rationality of positivism had set the stage for a resurgence of mythic thought enabled by a nascent nationalist

²¹ Here I will largely follow George Mosse, who interprets German-Jewish fidelity to the Enlightenment in terms of *Bildung*. See George Mosse, *German-Jews Beyond Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1997). See also Jennifer Herdt, *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

²² Edward Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 9-21.

romanticism and anti-Jewish animus. Yet it was this romanticism's ultimate victory in the rise of fascism that would again lead to the castigation of Enlightenment in the following decades, especially as many highlighted the technological and scientific character of Nazism. This would lead scholars to write off along with it the modernist, rationalist, and humanist legacy that the critique of myth considered essential for human flourishing. As such, the German-Jewish critique of myth belongs to an overlooked species of German rationalist-humanist thought that sought a Kantian "release from self-incurred tutelage" by turning reason against mystification.

Indeed, the critique of myth concerned nothing less than the possibility of distinguishing between truth and falsehood, of discerning reality from illusion. This is perhaps one issue that, even beyond the European provincialism of Enlightenment reason and humanism, is universal. Far from representing the triumph of reason and truth, for the German-Jewish critique of myth modernity remains mired in illusions, fantasies, mystifications, and enchantments continually thwarting Enlightenment's emancipatory potential. As such, this strain of thought can be understood as an attempt to answer what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari once identified as "the fundamental problem of political philosophy" which "Spinoza saw so clearly, and that Wilhelm Reich rediscovered: 'Why do men fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?'"²³ For the critique of myth, this became the question of why and how humans become subject to fictions of their own creation. In Rose's parlance, myth becomes something like the willful misrecognition of reality.

Additionally, the critique of myth shows itself to be not only another iteration of the Enlightenment critique of religion but an episode in what David Biale has understood as a larger tradition of Jewish secular thought, which expressed Jewish theology in an irreligious idiom.²⁴ In this case, the religious concept in question is the critique of pagan idolatry, a permanent fixture in the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud and rabbinic literature, and medieval and modern Jewish thought, as Moshe

²³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 38.

²⁴ David Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Halbertain and Avishai Margalit have shown.²⁵ Specifically, the critique of myth evinced a thoroughly Maimonidean bent by radicalizing the medieval Jewish philosopher's iconoclastic critique of paganism as well as his pedagogical theory of sacrifice. The essence of Maimonides' skepticism toward anthropomorphic conceptualizations of the Godhead and his insistence upon divine apophasis would be fused with Enlightenment skepticism toward not only religious and political authorities, but the habits of thought and mass delusions justifying their existence. This is to say, in the critique of myth *Judaism's critique of idolatry was transformed into the critique of ideology*. As a result, the disenchantment effected by the German-Jewish critique of myth is akin to the Hegelian, Feuerbachian, or Marxist critique of false-consciousness, exposing the manner in which mythic illusion obscures truth and reality in the name of human emancipation from structures of domination.²⁶

The particular ideology at issue for the critique of myth was Western Christianity. Not unlike postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist thinkers as well as earlier scholars interested in questions of political theology, all of those involved in the critique of myth were acutely aware of the Christian theological residues lurking beneath the surface of secular modernity—what Anidjar has called the “Christian Question.”²⁷ On account of the quasi-colonial plight of European Jewry, this meant that the critique of myth was also transformed into the critique of Christianity, especially to the extent that modern racial antisemitism could be understood as a descendant of medieval theological anti-Judaism.²⁸ Further, by situating Judaism as a religion of reason, Christianity could be depicted as its violent, irrational, mythological Other, an oppressor that had attained hegemonic power not only in Europe, but the world over. As it pertained to the study of myth itself, supersessionism had long been woven into the

²⁵ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

²⁶ Elizabeth Portella and Óscar Ralda have argued for the reconceptualization of disenchantment as a form of ideology critique while also offering a defense of the latter relative to its turbulent history in twentieth century critical theory. See Elizabeth Portella and Óscar Ralda, “Disenchantment Redux: Marx, the Frankfurt School, and the Critique of Ideology,” *Chiasma* 6:1 (2020), 22-51.

²⁷ Gil Anidjar follows Carl Schmitt's provocative thesis that modern political thought can be understood as a series of “secularized theological concepts” to argue for the fact of Christianity's continued hegemonic power in a secular age. See Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 235-258.

²⁸ David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013).

fabric of mythography by depicting the Jews as either excessively mythological or insufficiently so. This was a secularization of a medieval theme that established Judaism as a legitimating negativity for the triumph of European Christendom.²⁹ Yet even beyond this, as George Williamson has said, debates in European mythography often concerned the very essence of Christianity itself amidst processes of secularization.³⁰ With the breakdown of medieval Christendom and the Protestant Reformation, mythography became a staging ground for the romantic renewal of German culture and a return to pre-Christian, Germanic and Hellenic paganism in the quest for German Unification. However, rather than jettisoning Christianity, Romanticism capitulated to its logic of anti-Judaism nonetheless.

Although the critique of myth's critique of Christianity therefore resonated with certain strains of postmodern and postcolonial thought, by equating the violence of antisemitism with paganism and primitive religion in order to champion reason and humanism, it remained enveloped in colonial paradigms. This is perhaps due to the fact that, again, the critique of myth was itself mythological, even to the extent that it became *ideological*. As critics of Enlightenment are often keen to point out, disenchantment can easily attain the status of a tyrannical dogma with disastrous results for indigenous cultural and religious traditions. This speaks to the fact that, as important as the apparatus of critical reason may be, it must be qualified by a rigorous reflexivity and democratization. Indeed, Jewish intellectuals in Germany were by no means immune to Orientalist attitudes toward either the religions of colonized peoples or other forms of Judaism—for instance among the *Ostjuden* or Sephardim.³¹ Yet at the same time, as members of Europe's "internally colonized Other," German-Jews were often Orientalized as strangers in a strange land both by themselves and their hosts. This would result in the

²⁹ As Lindsay Kaplan has argued, the idea of Jewish hereditary inferiority has long been woven into the fabric of medieval Christian theology, setting the stage for its overt racialization in modernity. See Lindsay Kaplan, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³⁰ George Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

³¹ John Efron, *German Jewry and the Lure of the Sephardic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); *Orientalism and the Jews*, ed. Davidson Kalmar and Derek Penslar (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2005); Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Fin-de-Siècle Orientalism, the *Ostjuden* and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 1 (1984), 96–139. Also relatedly, see Samuel Spinner, *Jewish Primitivism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

paradox that the German-Jewish critique of myth's blind valorization of rationality can be seen as both an appeal to the spirit of the Enlightenment as well as the construction of an Oriental counterprinciple capable of inveighing against Western irrationality. Because reason was important to Germans and Jews alike, it could be leveraged as either a common denominator in efforts toward a cultural symbiosis or a polemic weaponized against antisemitism. German-Jews of the rationalist persuasion could imagine themselves as both belonging to the tradition of the German Enlightenment while also embracing their status as Oriental outsiders whose rationality served as a corrective to Occidental irrationalism.

III. Specters of (Dis)Enchantment

A further consequence of postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist critiques of reason, humanism, and Enlightenment has been a renewed interest in enchantment coupled with an effort to actively seek out sources of re-enchantment in a secular age. While this pendulum swing back toward re-enchantment has certain resonances with the romantic rejection of modernity, it differs in that its skepticism toward disenchantment is based in an analysis of colonial and patriarchal power and violence. On the other hand, for historians of esotericism, the critique of disenchantment takes the form of interrogating the extent to which its own adherents were enchanted, detailing the role of magical thinking in the development of modern science or dispelling the notion that occultism and theosophy necessarily led to a reactionary romanticism. For Josephson-Storm, many if not most modernist harbingers of disenchantment are themselves steeped in spiritualism. From Francis Bacon and the French *Philosophes* to Kant and Hegel, major figures in the early study of religion like Max Müller, E.B. Tylor, and James Frazer, and Max Weber and his Vienna Circle, the supposed "*de-magick-ing*" of the world has taken place with the aid of conjuring, divination, and necromancy. This is enough, Josephson-Storm thinks, to dismantle the "myth of modernity" by showing that the very idea of modernization as a progressive expungement of enchantments germinated in a society saturated with spiritualism, magic, and theosophy.³² In a similar vein, Allison Coudert has detailed the imbrication between magical practices,

³² Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 302-316.

religious belief, and the rise of natural science in early modern Europe and America, again problematizing the secularization thesis by undercutting its triumphalism. As she shows, for many Enlightenment figures from John Locke and Isaac Newton to Robert Boyle, Leibniz, Voltaire, and so on, the line between rationality and irrationality, science and magic, was often blurred to the point of indistinction.³³ This again shows the simplistic narrative of modernization to be fiction—a *myth*, one might say—subject to critique, modification, and redefinition. Finally, Corinna Treitel has examined this issue in the immediate sphere of German modernity, showing how the Wilhelmine and Weimar periods witnessed the rise of esotericist and theosophical movements garnering major support among the public. Here as well, magic, divination, and necromancy were interwoven with the everyday lives of otherwise “modern” lay Germans as well as scientists, politicians, and intellectuals. This leads Treitel to argue that the common conflation of occultism and fascism—an idea widely espoused since the postwar era—is a gross misconception obscuring the polyvalence of theosophical and occultist movements.³⁴

Disproving the myth of disenchantment extends also to many of those involved in the German-Jewish critique of myth. For his part, Josephson-Storm has demonstrated the extent to which figures like Freud and Adorno meddled in the magical and spiritual. As is well known, early Freudian psychoanalysis involved the use of hypnotism just as the interpretation of dreams and the unconscious bore traces of divinatory practices. Beyond this, Josephson-Storm highlights Freud’s own interest in mysticism, seances, telepathy, mediums, and necromancy, as if he was actively engaged in the study of esoteric sciences on a personal level.³⁵ In the same vein, Joseph Berke has extrapolated from Freud’s brief encounters with the Lubavitcher Rebbe to suggest the Hasidic and Kabbalistic roots of psychoanalysis.³⁶ On this account, the Freudian project of disenchantment is not only revealed to be a myth, but Freud himself becomes a kind of hypocrite who proclaimed the triumph of reason with one

³³ Allison Coudert, *Religion, Magic, and Science in Early Modern Europe and America* (Oxford: Praeger, 2011).

³⁴ Corianna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

³⁵ Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 180.

³⁶ Joseph Berke, *The Hidden Freud: His Hassidic Roots* (London: Routledge, 2015).

hand while dabbling in occultism with the other. Similar charges are also levied against Adorno by Josephson-Storm. While Adorno's work has the merit of acknowledging the intimate dialectical relation between Enlightenment and myth, in his faith in the possibility of Enlightenment despite its regression to irrationality Adorno fails to perceive the myth of disenchantment. Further, Josephson-Storm highlights Adorno's involvement with the occultist philosopher and noted antisemite Ludwig Klages.³⁷ This is enough, he thinks, to also expose Adorno as either two-faced or unaware of his own contradictions. When it comes to Hermann Cohen, several commentators have endeavored to reveal the mystical aspects of his rationalism. This follows the lead of his own student Franz Rosenzweig, who claimed that in his later years Cohen had become open to the ways in which his own thought might result in a kind of mystical existentialism. This would spur scholars like Dieter Adelman and Klaus Köhnke to speculate about the Kabbalistic character of his readings of Plato, for instance.³⁸ More recently, Paul Nahme has gone so far as to suggest that Cohen's idealist philosophy amounts to a kind of enchantment simply for the fact that it involves a "belief in ideas."³⁹ Peter Gordon has also followed this reevaluation concerning Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, which he has interpreted as akin to Lurianic Kabbalism.⁴⁰ Needless to say, contrarian maneuvers such as these are part of a larger trend in the historiography of rationalist thinkers who championed modernity and disenchantment going back as far as Spinoza—another figure widely suspected of being a crypto-Kabbalist by commentators. As Gordon goes on to acknowledge, however, "it is one of the habitual problems of Kabbalistic esotericism that it detects the hidden presence of mysticism nearly everywhere it looks."⁴¹

Therefore, by staging a series of counter-readings, these interpretations refuse to confront the figures they study on their own terms while also blunting the force of critical reason championed by

³⁷ Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 220.

³⁸ See Friedrich Beiser, *Hermann Cohen: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4.

³⁹ Paul Nahme, *Hermann Cohen and the Crisis of Liberalism: The Enchantment of the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

⁴⁰ Peter Gordon, *Migrants in the Profane: Critical Theory and the Question of Secularization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 121-129.

⁴¹ Gordon, *Migrants in the Profane*, 135-136.

them. What's more, they ignore the tension between "genesis and validity" in intellectual historiography. As Martin Jay has said, ideas are not simply reducible to their context and circumstances but have validity beyond them. The very act of thinking is itself a kind of creative, active endeavor seeking to open up a space beyond the present.⁴² This principle suggests, in this case, that interest in mysticism, spiritualism, or occultism among partisans of disenchantment, far from invalidating their intellectual agendas, actually speaks to their critical edge and the power of the negative. How else might disenchantment be conceptualized except as the negation of an enchanted present? Thus, the German-Jewish critique of myth can be understood as a kind of qualified modernism or "dark enlightenment" seeking a "rational theory of irrationality" or a "logic of the illogical."⁴³ Far from postulating an entirely demythologized modern subject, the critique of myth intends to show how irrationality always lies in wait.⁴⁴ This invites what we might call a speculative reading of disenchantment in the manner of Rose's reading of Hegel. Modernity inhabits the "broken middle" between enchantment and disenchantment, non-identical with itself.⁴⁵ Yet it is this very conflict that generates the conditions of possibility for both the production of fantasy as well as truth's recognition. As Josephson-Storm admits, naming the "myth of disenchantment" or the "myth of modernity" as such is an act of disenchantment.⁴⁶ This speaks to the fact that disenchantment is inescapable, that romantic efforts to stem the "tide of modernity" often reveal themselves as "modern critiques of modernity."⁴⁷ In this case, disenchantment means dispelling the naïve,

⁴² Martin Jay, *Genesis and Validity: The Theory and Practice of Intellectual History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022).

⁴³ See Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Freud: In His Time and Ours*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 215-232 and Joel Whitebook, *Freud: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 11-12, 146. Roudinesco and Whitebook both derive the notion of "dark enlightenment" from Yirmiyahu Yovel in *Spinoza and Other Heretics, Vol. II: Adventures in immanence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 136. Peter Gordon similarly highlights Cassirer's theory of myth as a "logic of the illogical" in *Continental Divide: Cassirer, Heidegger, Davos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 242-243.

⁴⁴ Here I disagree with Gordon, who critiques Cassirer's late works on myth as naively championing a thoroughly disenchanting subject. See Peter Gordon, "Myth and Modernity: Cassirer's Critique of Heidegger," *New German Critique* 94 (Winter 2005): 127-168.

⁴⁵ "To read a proposition 'speculatively' means that the identity which is affirmed between subject and predicate is seen equally to affirm a lack of identity between subject and predicate." Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (New York: Verso, 2009), 52. See also Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

⁴⁶ Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 316.

⁴⁷ Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 21.

ideological myth of the secularization thesis, showing that despite its claims to the contrary, the modern world is far from disenchanted. However, acknowledging the extent to which the ongoing, incomplete project of disenchantment remains haunted by specters of enchantment need not curtail efforts to exorcise them. While dispelling the secularization thesis might serve as a basis for re-enchantment, it could just as equally serve as a basis for a sharper, more reflexive form of disenchantment.

Therefore, in this dissertation I will underscore the critical force of the German-Jewish critique of myth despite its own ideological mythmaking as a counterweight to the widespread valorization of enchantment and re-enchantment in both the scholarly and public spheres. The recent past, one might argue, has been characterized by a hasty dispensing with reason without regard for its consequences. This has resulted in an epidemic of “bad thinking” and an “epistemological crisis,” especially in the face of a litany of contemporary catastrophes.⁴⁸ These include resurgent authoritarianism, ethnonationalism and genocide, economic inequality, immigration crises, global pandemics, and climate change exacerbated by misinformation, propaganda, and conspiratorial thought resulting in a new wave of antisemitism, islamophobia, xenophobia, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia—to name but a few. Surveying the contemporary moment, many of these trends are undergirded by enchanted political and cultural narratives endowing the present with world-historical, apocalyptic significance. This often involves a refashioning of elements descended from the long history of theological anti-Judaism and racial antisemitism. Indeed, it is not hard to see correlations between the blood libel, vaccine skepticism, and anti-abortion extremism or the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, Jewish Bolshevism, Cultural Marxism, the “Deep State,” QAnon, and the Great Replacement Theory. This is combined with a general reactionary turn in North American and European politics toward traditional religious institutions and belief systems representative of a supposedly bygone age dismantled and fragmented by specters such as “globalism.” Moreover, the propagation of these narratives is increasingly facilitated by new lines of communication and information technology. Rather than leading to the victory of truth in

⁴⁸ See Steven Nadler and Lawrence Shapiro, *When Bad Thinking Happens to Good People: How Philosophy Can Save Us From Ourselves* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 1-12.

a freely accessible digital public sphere, the utopian technological positivism of the present has instead led to the increased proliferation of falsehood precipitating outbreaks of violence and new fascisms. This suggests that the lessons of the German-Jewish past remain relevant as ever.⁴⁹

Thus, from the vantage of the critique of myth, the present too is exceedingly mythological, necessitating not a flight into the realms of enchantment, but a further interrogation of ideology's precise mechanisms. This occasions a renewed fidelity to the possibility of distinguishing truth from falsehood, an engagement in what Rose called the "drama of misrecognition": the endeavor "to know, to misknow, and yet to grow."⁵⁰ Part of this involves an attentiveness to the critique of myth's tendency to lapse into ideology. As I have said, the history of disenchantment is not only rife with contradictions but implicated in histories of violence. This puts advocates of disenchantment in a difficult position, especially as the contemporary moment necessitates a mobilization of truth-telling to iconoclastically combat the dangerous ideologies of the present. Therefore, rather than engage in a bombastic defense of the Enlightenment critique of religion or enact a nostalgic return to an enchanted past, perhaps the only option available for disenchantment is a humble self-reflexivity open to destabilization by non-European and non-patriarchal epistemologies and ontologies. This also entails a reconceptualization of disenchantment as a form of ideology critique rather than simply the expungement of religion.⁵¹ It requires that disenchantment be continually turned back upon itself to confront its applied effects as well as its own historical, ontological, and epistemological conditions of possibility. In short, the ideology of disenchantment must be disenchanted. This no doubt constitutes an "infinite task," the particulars of which lie beyond the scope of this work. "In the end hope," Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, "wrested from reality by negating it, is the only form in which truth appears."⁵² The truth sought by

⁴⁹ As Mathias Berek has argued, efforts to heed the lessons of the German-Jewish past must be based upon its own emancipatory ideals. See Mathias Berek, "The Thin Crust of Civilization: Lessons From the German-Jewish Past," in *The Future of the German-Jewish Past: Memory and the Question of Antisemitism*, ed. Gideon Reuveni and Diana Franklin (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2021), 84.

⁵⁰ Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 72-73. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 310.

⁵¹ Ideology critique has a long history in modern political theory. See Jan Rehmann, *Theories of Ideology: the Powers of Alienation and Subjection* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

⁵² Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 98.

disenchantment can be understood as a beyond toward which one strives, a negation of the false present. *Although we have never been disenchantēd, we still could be.*

IV. Argument and Structure

To summarize, in this dissertation I will demonstrate how the critique of myth in German-Jewish thought was formulated in response to anti-Jewish trends in the European study of comparative mythology, the colonial construction of “religion,” and emerging racial antisemitism—all of which can be understood as secularized forms of Christian theological anti-Judaism. I will show that here the theorization of myth among the German-Jewish intellectuals in question follows three main lines of development: myth is understood as either the personification of nature, an illusion masking reality, or a totalizing form of thought. Further, I will argue that, haunted by the very romanticism it repudiated, the German-Jewish critique of myth paradoxically entailed the construction of a new one: the myth of the Jews as the sole inventors of rationality, ethics, science, enlightenment, and disenchantment in world history. However, rather than warranting a wholesale rejection of disenchantment, I will contend that the critique of myth nonetheless challenges contemporary valorizations of enchantment in the scholarly and public spheres in the wake of secularization. This is because the critique of myth can be understood as a mode of ideology critique which attempts to distinguish between truth and falsehood, a secular expression of Judaism’s theological critique of pagan idolatry. In this I follow the methodological, historiographical principle of “genesis and validity” to argue that ideas are not merely reducible to their contexts, but have legitimacy beyond them.

Chapter one, “Mythography and the Jews: Between Lack and Excess,” traces the treatment of Jews and Judaism in the European study of mythology from Giambattista Vico in the eighteenth century, through the German Romantics of the nineteenth century, to anthropologists in the early study of comparative religion at the dawn of the twentieth. I argue that for many mythographers Judaism is understood as either too mythological or not mythological enough. For the Romantics, Judaism is characterized by a sterile, legalistic, and rationalistic lack of myth resulting in the cultural, national, and

racial inferiority of the Jewish people. By contrast, for Enlightenment philosophers, biblical critics, and anthropologists, Judaism is characterized by a superstitious and irrational excess of myth, marking it as an archaic, primitive, and even savage religion. As another iteration of what David Nirenberg has called “thinking with Judaism,” these trends can be understood as a secularized form of supersessionism. In each case, Jews and Judaism are positioned as what I term “legitimizing negativities” for the triumph of European, Christian, or secular civilization. By way of the development of the Indo-European hypothesis and the concept of religion in the context of European nationalisms and colonialism, I argue, the transition from medieval Christian theological anti-Judaism to modern racial antisemitism is at least partly effected in the intellectual sphere by mythography.

Chapter two, “Personification: Heymann Steinthal and Hermann Cohen,” shows how Steinthal’s linguistic-anthropological theory of Judaism and myth is articulated as a polemical response to the French Orientalist Ernest Renan, who held that the Semites’ monotheistic lack of myth spoke to their inferiority relative to their creative and vital Aryan counterparts. Against this, Steinthal argues that Judaism is instead the product of an earlier Israelite mythic polytheism. Myth, for Steinthal, is defined as the “deification of man and nature,” a form of thought and culture derivative of early humanity’s apperceptions of natural phenomena. Out of this milieu Jewish monotheism gradually emerges over the course of centuries as the basis for abstract reason, science, ethics, and disenchantment in world history. Steinthal would contrast this with Christianity, whose mythic logic represented a regression especially in the field of ethics, where its otherworldly nature culminated in an egotist chauvinism. This would explain, for Steinthal, the rise of antisemitism and vulgar German nationalism as a betrayal of the humanist values of the Enlightenment. Steinthal’s student Hermann Cohen would extend this theory to the philosophy of religion, understanding myth more broadly as the “personification of the impersonal,” a crude, sensuous, immoral, and irrational mode of reasoning accounting for the tendency toward monism, pantheism, and mysticism among Romantic philosophers. Myth would also explain the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, substitutionary atonement, and its disregard for the Other. This mythic foil would be contrasted with Jewish monotheism as a higher stage of religion and culture

characterized by idealism, reflexive critique, and abstract reason animated by ethical concern. However, like Steinthal, Cohen's critique of myth would be formulated in response to the Berlin Antisemitism Controversy as well as compounding anti-Jewish animus across the European continent in the early twentieth century. For both Steinthal and Cohen, Judaism would become the humanistic, rationalist antidote to this new "barbarism" undergirded by Christianity's lingering mythic residues.

Chapter three, "Illusion: Sigmund Freud and Erich Auerbach," emphasizes the impact of Steinthal's work on Freud's application of psychoanalysis to the humanities. Early on, Freud drew similarities between myth and dreams, theorizing both as forms of "wish-fulfillment" characterized by irrationality and instinct run amok. This notion would form the center of his dispute with Carl Jung. Whereas Jung valorizes myth as a mode of re-enchantment and escape, Freud sees an excess of myth as akin to the psychotic's break from reality. More, mythic thinking is therefore a form of religious illusion, one of the instinctual discontents Freud seeks to allay in the name of civilization. Faced with the rise of Nazism and his flight to London, Freud also saw antisemitism as a mythic neurosis, arguing that German Christian "Jew-hatred" is the consequence of Judaism's "advance in intellectuality" heralded by Moses. Indeed, Christianity remains a mythic religion in "bondage to the senses." Here Freud followed Steinthal's comparisons between Prometheus and Moses, showing that just as Prometheus brought fire to humanity, Moses brought the Torah as a basis for reason, ethics, and science. Erich Auerbach would similarly theorize myth as a form of illusion obscuring reality. First turning to Vico and Dante, Auerbach lionizes the latter's depiction of life in all its sensuous and historical concreteness in the otherworldly *Comedy*. It is Dante's "literary realism" that enables him to activate a "de-Christianization" of the world from within medieval Christendom, a rejection of reality's spiritualization in the name of secular, earthly life. Forced into exile in Turkey to escape the Nazis, Auerbach would then turn to the history of Christian figural interpretation, showing how it relegated the Jews to the status of mere "figures" whose spiritual "fulfillment" arrived only with Christianity—the very logic of supersessionism. This would lead Auerbach to counterpose the depth, complexity, and realism of the Hebrew Bible to the simplicity, enchantments, and illusions of Homeric myth as a polemic

against the German obsession with Aryanism and Greek literature as well as Nazi propaganda. In the process, Auerbach would reveal Christianity itself as a kind of mythic spiritualization and betrayal of Hebraic realism, whose denigration of Judaism leads to antisemitism.

Chapter four, "Totality: Ernst Cassirer and Theodor Adorno," emphasizes the impact of Cohen and Steintal on Cassirer's philosophy of culture. For Cassirer, myth can be understood as an early form of rationality that dialectically fosters the emergence of reason and science. However, while these later forms are characterized by reflexivity, ideality, and self-consciousness, myth remains ignorant of its own conditions of possibility, conflating sign with signified, representation with represented, accident with causality, and so on. Because of this, myth subordinates reality to a single set of principles resulting in totalizing forms of thought. Cassirer's initial ambivalence toward myth would transform into an outright hostility following his debate with Martin Heidegger at Davos as well as his own exile in England, Scandinavia, and the United States during the Third Reich. This would lead Cassirer to theorize fascism as a resurgence of "political myth," characterized by cultic devotion to race, nation, and leader. Taking up Cohen's notion of an anti-mythic Judaism, Cassirer again championed Jewish monotheism as the harbinger of reason, ethics, humanism, and disenchantment in history, also echoing Cohen's mythic critique of Christianity in describing Nazism. Myth would become important for Adorno mainly following his flight to New York and Los Angeles, where he would also theorize it as a dialectical form of Enlightenment harboring the potential to regress to mythic irrationality on account of its totalizing structure. Despite this, Adorno maintained faith in critical reason as a product of "the disenchanted world of Judaism," the historical emergence of monotheism out of polytheistic paganism. However, he would also acknowledge Judaism's own potential for mythic regression. Moreover, Adorno would again cite the mythic nature of Christian anti-Judaism as an explanation for modern antisemitism. In the postwar era, Adorno would extend this analysis to the study of occultism and astrology as forms of "the irrational in culture" threatening a reactivation of fascist violence in liberal societies. Finally, Adorno would articulate his philosophy of "negative dialectics" against the underlying mythic tendencies toward

totalization and identity thinking at the root of Western philosophy—principally in Hegel and Heidegger.

Chapter 1 | Mythography and the Jews: Between Lack and Excess

“We are still Jews and Christians, however little we may think of ourselves in those terms.”

—Karl Löwith

I. Introduction

Theories of myth in European intellectual history are above all theories of the origins of religion. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the concept of “religion” as a universal feature of human culture is a modern one. Religion thus appears as a category fabricated by the Western scholarly imaginary and shaped by Christian theological concepts and assumptions. As Andrew von Hendy has argued, the same is true of myth. It too is a “modern invention.”¹ The transition from early modern “fable” or ancient Greek *mythoi* to “myth” as a foundational literary artifact of culture developed first in the Renaissance and then the German Romantics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Romantics’ return to pagan myth quickly became a tool in the struggle against disenchantment and a means of articulating national, ethnic, and *racial* identity. On the other hand, scholars of anthropology and comparative religion transvalued the Romantic homology between myth and Ur-history such that it became a feature of “primitive religion” still observable in Africa, Asia, and the Americas evolutionarily surpassed by European Christianity and secularism. Myth became either a long-lost homeland to be rediscovered in a disenchanted age or a feature of humanity’s immature childhood to be abandoned on the march toward enlightenment, progress, science, and civilization. However, as George Williamson has shown, myth was also entwined with theological controversies immanent to Christian theology, namely the struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism as well as disputes over the historical-

¹ Andrew Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 1.

critical truth of the Bible.² The categories of myth and religion were therefore not only unique to European modernity but produced, as Marx might have said, “out of the entrails of Christianity.”³

This was nowhere more apparent than in the treatment of Judaism by scholars of myth. The role of Judaism in mythography assumed a fraught place as mythographers often secularized received attitudes toward Jews descended from Christian anti-Judaism. As Europe’s “internally colonized Other,” Jews had suffered centuries of subjugation as the unbelieving thorn in Christendom’s side. According to Christian theology, Judaism had been superseded in salvation history by the Church, meaning that the continued presence of Jews in Christian Europe resulted in a dissonance warranting their persecution. This was commonly justified by the Jews’ imagined political, economic, and spiritual power, social deviance, demonic traits, and hereditary inferiority. However, the medieval problem of Jewish Otherness, expressed mainly in theological terms, was further racialized in the modern period. No longer simply a religious Other, Jews were increasingly understood as members of a foreign race called the Semites. This was exacerbated by the rise of the nation state founded upon liberal ideals of equality, individual rights, and tolerance. Governments across Europe soon faced the Jewish Question: could Jews become equal citizens in either a Christian or secular polity? Could they be *emancipated* from their second-class position and gain civil and political liberties? Debates over the status of the Jews arose throughout Europe as the implications of this question concerned the truth of Christianity versus the possibility of pluralism, secularism, and tolerance.

This chapter briefly surveys the semantic deployment of Judaism and “the Jew” in discourses on myth in the history of the study of religion across romanticism, philology, literature, biblical criticism, philosophy, and anthropology from the eighteenth century to the dawn of the twentieth. This

² George Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4.

³ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question” in *Selected Writings*, trans. Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, ed. Lawrence Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). As David Nirenberg remarks, riffing on Marx, Christianity produces Judaism “out of its own entrails.” See Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013). This is a point Daniel Boyarin will repeat in *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), understanding this in terms of the broader invention of religion in modernity.

deployment is inseparable from the progressive racialization of the Jewish Question and debates over Jewish Emancipation as myth became integral for national, cultural, and racial belonging. For mythographers engaged in what historian David Nirenberg has called “thinking with Judaism,” Judaism and “the Jew” became “figures of thought” or floating signifiers whose seemingly infinite discursive malleability served to substantiate either the romantic valorization of myth or its evolutionary-anthropological denigration.⁴ Thus, the treatment of Judaism in mythography followed two main conflicting lines of development congruent with the two prevailing scholarly approaches to myth: Jews were either 1) for the Romantics, *lacking* in a national mythology thereby marking them as a sterile, hyper-rational, and inferior race or 2) from the evolutionary-anthropological viewpoint, suffering from an *excess* of myth, legalism, and ritualism branding them as “primitive,” superstitious, and archaic. This was explained by detailing Judaism’s theological insufficiency, the Jews’ cultural degeneration, attempts at forgery and falsification, egotism, or innate backwardness. This also dovetailed with attempts to de-Judaize Christianity by excavating its Indo-European or Aryan roots, thereby salvaging it from the wreckage of secularization. In this sense, Judaism still functioned as a superseded foil just as it had in Christian theology, only now it became a legitimating negativity for either romantic nationalism or enlightened secularity. In addition, the supersessionism of mythography amplified enmity toward Jews in the wake of the racialization of the Jewish Question, especially as Jews were Orientalized and equated with the “savage” peoples of colonized lands. Finally, the treatment of Judaism in mythography would mirror the Orientalist oscillation between fascination and repulsion toward the Other just as for Christians Judaism had become both an object of philosemitic valorization and antisemitic denigration—a contradiction Zygmunt Bauman termed “allosemitism.”⁵

Finally, this raised the issue of the true relation between Judaism and myth for Jewish scholars working in this context. If myth was, as the romantics argued, foundational for national, cultural, and

⁴ Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 2.

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, “Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern,” in *Modernity, Culture, and “the Jew,”* ed. Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 143-156.

racial identity, did the Jews in fact possess a mythology that could legitimate them as a people — perhaps serving as a basis for their own nationhood in Palestine? On the other hand, if myth was, as the anthropologists and other partisans of Enlightenment argued, part of the “childhood of the human race” to be abandoned in modernity, could Judaism’s abstract monotheism and prophetic, ethical core be reclaimed as a basis for the inclusion of Jews not only in Europe, but modern society more broadly? The question of Judaism and myth, therefore, had imminent political-theological implications.

II. The Israelite Anomaly

The idea that the Jews lacked a mythology had its origins in Giambattista Vico, whose *New Science* of 1715 marked the beginning of the systematic study of mythology in its own right. Specifically, what Joseph Mali has termed Vico’s “rehabilitation of myth”⁶ challenged the dismissal of fable as a lie about “what really happened” by Enlightenment philosophers, reconceptualizing it as a socio-historical *vera narratio* constituting “the vocabulary of the first nations.”⁷ A nation’s myths were important for its development amidst the divine, heroic, and human stages of history. However, Vico’s history of myth is explicitly qualified throughout the *New Science* as “gentile,” exempting the Jews from the mythic necessity of pagan, profane, secular history. To their merit, Vico’s Jews are a pure yet static chosen people untainted by myth, polytheism, and idolatry whose fidelity to monotheism serves as a vehicle for the arrival of Christianity. In their exceptionalism, the Hebrews serve as a constitutive counterprinciple to the brutish, mythic histories of the *gentes* embroiled in the sequential motions of the *corso-ricorso*. In a way, Vico *needs* the Hebrews to provide an eternal constant.⁸

The Otherness of Vico’s Hebrews is established in at least six ways: religiously, temporally, geographically, physiologically, intellectually, and linguistically. In the first place, since they are the most

⁶ See Joseph Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico’s New Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁷ Giambattista Vico, *The First New Science*, ed. and trans. Leon Pompa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 149.

⁸ For an extended treatment of Vico and the Jews see Frederick R. Marcus, “Vico and the Hebrews,” *New Vico Studies* 13: (1995); Frederick R. Marcus, “Vico’s New Science from the Standpoint of the Hebrews,” *New Vico Studies* 27: (2009).

ancient of all peoples hailing from Mesopotamia,⁹ it follows that the “true religion of the Hebrews” is the origin point for the religions of other nations.¹⁰ This is especially the case since Hebrew religion was founded “with the creation of the world in time by the true God,”¹¹ installing Adam as its founder rather than Abraham or Moses. Here Vico marks off Judaism from pagan idolatry and the practice of divination arising “from the worship of imaginary deities”¹² as a perversion of this more primary revelation at Sinai, a fact that will later contribute to the persecution and dispersal of the Jews by the Romans.¹³ As such, the mythic histories of the gentile nations are afforded less credibility than the “sacred history” of the Hebrews and the biblical record.¹⁴ Moreover, just as the religion of the gentiles is derivative of Judaism, so are their languages. Like the Tower of Babel, Vico describes a proliferation of tongues proceeding from “the language of a single God” along with the multiplication of polytheistic, pagan divinities.¹⁵ Because Hebrew is considered a “poetic language” despite its non-mythological character, it “passes in sublimity” even that of Homer.¹⁶ Furthermore, although poetry constitutes “the first common language of all the ancient nations, including even that of the Hebrews,” it is based upon the “distinction in truth” between the Adamic religion and that of the gentiles.¹⁷ Along with this division between religions, histories, and languages, Vico also posits a somatic, proto-biological, or even proto-racial distinction between Hebrews and gentiles. Yet here Vico’s theory is ostensibly philosemitic, suggesting Jewishness as “rich in royal humanity”¹⁸ as opposed to the barbarian, brutish traits of the heathen gentiles, just as the Jews also maintain a superior intellectual faculty or aptitude for learning and education. Indeed, Vico’s Jews are “philosophers by nature.”¹⁹

⁹ Vico, *The First New Science*, 142.

¹⁰ Vico, *The First New Science*, 10.

¹¹ Vico, *The First New Science*, 25.

¹² Vico, *The First New Science*, 10.

¹³ Vico, *The First New Science*, 15.

¹⁴ Vico, *The First New Science*, 21.

¹⁵ Vico, *The First New Science*, 177.

¹⁶ Vico, *The First New Science*, 155.

¹⁷ Vico, *The First New Science*, 151.

¹⁸ Vico, *The First New Science*, 166.

¹⁹ Vico, *The First New Science*, 172.

III. Hindu-Jewish Degeneration

While Vico's thesis about the absence of myth in Judaism was laudatory, this would not be the case in Johann Gottfried Herder. For him, although the Jews originally possessed a mythology that legitimated them as a nation, they have since lost it. A student of the early pre-critical Kant, Herder grounded his theory of myth in an empirical metaphysics based in sensuousness and ontological immediacy rather than critical reason or ideality. For Herder, forms of knowledge like mythology arise out of concrete experience of the world. A feature of poetic language, myth depicts humanity's confrontation with, and personification of, forces of nature and the environment. In this sense, myth becomes a legitimate, cultural-historical form of human cognition. However, Herder's theory of myth is predicated upon the entanglement of a people's environment with their forms of linguistic expression—particularly their poetic and imaginative faculties—that mediate the experience of nature between individuals. Like Vico, Herder believes that mythology contributes to the formation of a *völkisch* identity and culture out of the sources of its national literature. Put simply, without the interconnection of language and land, mythology as a vehicle for nationhood is impossible.²⁰

Herder's primary example of this process was ancient India, inspired in part by the work of English Orientalist Sir William Jones. In 1788 Jones first postulated the Indo-European hypothesis establishing the Aryans as the progenitors of European culture and Sanskrit as its linguistic basis. While Jones lauded the religion of the Vedas, he scorned medieval and modern Hinduism as a deviant and degraded form of religion, suggesting that its pure essence had instead been bequeathed to the West.²¹ Herder's treatment of Judaism in his theory of myth would mirror Jones' attitudes toward ancient Aryan religion and contemporary Hinduism. In 1782's *Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, Herder praised the Hebrew Bible as a compendium of poetic literature and national myth. Utilizing metaphor, allegory, symbol, and

²⁰ Herder's theory of mythology is elaborated throughout his magnum opus, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989).

²¹ Dorothy Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority Through Myths of Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 22-23. See also Sir William Jones, "Third Anniversary Discourse," in *Asiatic Researches* 1 (1788), 421.

personification, the biblical narrative appears as a mythic, sensuous depiction of the Israelite nation in its infancy. Familiar components of the Exodus such as the parting of the Red Sea, pillars of fire and smoke, and angelic host are understood as encoded personification of geographical phenomena, weather patterns, wildlife and livestock, and the pragmatics of nomadic life in the wilderness.²² Again like Vico, Herder valorizes Hebrew as a superior language to Greek, lauding Moses as a greater poet and lawgiver than Homer. Likewise, Hebrew metaphysics and theology stand out as cardinal achievements, marking the transition from a monistic cosmology and polytheism to a dualistic cosmos and monotheism.²³

And yet, Herder's philosemitism would transform into its opposite by the time of his 1787 magnum opus *Outlines for the Philosophy of History of Humanity*. Although the Hebrew Bible depicts the pure and untainted mythic life of a people, with the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, the dispersal of the Jewish people throughout the world, and the rise of rabbinic Judaism, this noble ancient Israelite religion—and by implication its corresponding mythic heritage—has been abandoned.²⁴ Like modern Hindus, contemporary Jews were therefore unable to maintain their connection with ancient Israelite religion on account of their diasporic condition. They have become a superficial and illegitimate people. "The Jew is actually only a creature of Palestine: there should no longer be any Jews outside of Palestine."²⁵

This imperfection is exemplified by their language. Writing during the German Enlightenment, Herder participated in debates about the granting of civil and political rights to Jews in Prussia.²⁶ In line with commonly held sentiments among Germans, Herder regarded Yiddish as a degenerate form of language whose intrinsic link to Hebrew had been severed just as Judaism has lost its continuity with ancient Israelite religion. At the point that Jews had lost their native homeland and became a degenerate

²² Johann Gottfried Herder, *Vom Geist der hebräischen Poesie* (Leipzig: J.A. Barth, 1825).

²³ See Liisa Steinby, "The Rehabilitation of Myth: Enlightenment and Romanticism in Johann Gottfried Herder's *Vom Geist der Hebräischen Poesie*," *Sjuttonhundratat: Nordic yearbook for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 6 (2009): 54-79.

²⁴ Jeffrey Grossman, "Herder and the Language of Diaspora Jewry," *Monatshefte*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (Spring 1994), 68. See also Herder, *Ideen*, 487.

²⁵ Herder, *Ideen*, 512.

²⁶ See Fredrick Beiser, "Herder and the Jewish Question" in *Herder: Philosophy and Anthropology*, ed. Anik Waldow and Nigel DeSouza (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

people, their language was unable to continue developing holistically in its natural environment, instead becoming a syncretistic product of the diaspora. Rather than a noble Hebrew *Volkssprache*, the language of the Jews became a “*trauriges Gemisch*.”²⁷ Further, this lack of language and place also contributed to the inability of Jews as an “alien Asiatic people” to attain to the German cultural ideal of *Bildung* necessary for participation in the German polity as fully human subjects.²⁸ As a result, Herder’s position on the Jewish Question and Jewish Emancipation remained ambivalent, more concerned with the utility of the Jews for German statecraft than the fact of their second-class status. Repeating numerous stereotypes descended from medieval anti-Judaism, Herder regarded the Jews as economically useful, for example.²⁹ Therefore, without land and language, although the Jews once had a mythology for Herder, they have since lost it.

IV. Mosaic Forgery

The idea that the Jews lacked a viable mythological heritage was also bolstered by tracing Judaism’s true origins to show they had stolen their religious ideas from other sources and presented them as their own in distorted form. This project was undertaken by Friedrich Schiller and Friedrich Schlegel. In his controversial 1788 poem “The Gods of Greece,” Schiller yearned for the simple, natural, and organic religion of Greek antiquity.³⁰ Mourning a world “bereft of gods” in the aftermath of Christianity and science’s triumph over paganism, Schiller scandalized theologians and philosophers alike. However, Schiller hoped that the divine could be rehabilitated through poetry and the method of “universal history.” For Schiller, universal history involves re-narrating the past to address the needs of the present. Approaching a constellation of disconnected fragments, records, and artifacts, universal history retro-teleologically organizes them into a “rationally coherent whole.”³¹ However, Schiller

²⁷ Grossman, “Herder and the Language of Diaspora Jewry,” 71.

²⁸ See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Bekehrung der Juden*, in *Sämtliche Werke* Vol. 10, ed. Günter Arnold et al. (Frankfurt: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 2000), 628–42.

²⁹ Herder, *Ideen*, 491–492 and 702.

³⁰ Friedrich von Schiller, “*Die Götter Griechenlands*” in *Friedrich Schiller: Sämtliche Werke, Vol. 1* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1962), 163–173.

³¹ Friedrich von Schiller, “The Nature and Value of Universal History: An Inaugural Lecture,” *History and Theory*

explicitly draws linkages between universal history and myth by personifying this history as one who, “[l]ike Homer’s Zeus ... gazes down with equal serenity” upon the vicissitudes of human life.³² Universal history therefore constitutes a kind of modern mythmaking, the creation of necessary fictions in view of present philosophical concerns. To this end, Schiller discerned the development of the Enlightenment and European civilization out of the barbarism of Africa, the “Red Indians,” and ancient Celts. This also entailed excavating the origins of religion, principally Christianity.

In Schiller’s 1789 lecture “The Mission of Moses,” the method of universal history is put into practice to address the origins of monotheism in light of recent archaeological findings concerning the cult of Akhenaten in Egypt.³³ Here Schiller reconstructs the Exodus narrative, yet countervailing the biblical record Moses is portrayed as a Hebrew masquerading as an Egyptian priest who fabricates Judaism as a religion of reason out of the esoteric secrets of Egyptian mysticism, philosophy, and statecraft. Schiller begins by extolling Judaism as the forerunner of Islam and Christianity but remains hesitant about the moral and intellectual character of the ancient Hebrews. A “depraved” and “impure vessel,” the Hebrew nation through its “instrumentality” was “chosen by Providence” but “destroyed as soon as it had accomplished its purpose.”³⁴ Explicitly gesturing toward the present issue of Jewish Emancipation, Schiller speaks of the Hebrews as a “state within a state” during their Egyptian residency. Stubborn and unwilling to assimilate into the larger culture, they suffer maltreatment from the Egyptians, resulting in “uncleanliness and contagious diseases” that perpetuate their hereditary inferiority. Burning against the oppression of his people, Moses the crypto-Hebrew becomes determined to emancipate them. Schiller suggests that behind a complex mythological system of “symbols and hieroglyphics” and “mysteries of the sacred animals” lay an encoded abstract monotheism devoted to the god *Jao*—the god who would become Jehovah. In Egypt “the unity of the Supreme Being was first

Vol. 11, No. 3 (1972), 331-332.

³² Schiller, “The Nature and Value of Universal History,” 333.

³³ Theodore Ziolkowski, *Uses and Abuses of Moses: Literary Representations since the Enlightenment* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 310.

³⁴ Friedrich von Schiller, “The Mission of Moses” in *Friedrich Schiller: Poet of Freedom*, vol. 2, trans. George Gregory (Washington D.C.: Schiller Institute, 1988), 307-329.

conceived by the human mind.”³⁵ Because ancient nations tended toward sensuous idol worship and other superstitions, the Egyptian priestly caste found it necessary to conceal the true meaning of its iconography, rituals, and sacred objects to maintain a peaceful hegemony. Among other similarities, Schiller draws correlations between the Coffin of Serapis and the Ark of the Covenant, also citing circumcision as an initiatory rite into the Egyptian priesthood. Trained as an adept and future priest himself, the fugitive Moses carries this esoteric knowledge with him into Arabia following his murder of an Egyptian in defense of a helpless Hebrew. Moses invents Judaism first and foremost as a political theology aimed at mobilizing the Hebrews toward their emancipation, relating the myth of the burning bush and the revelation of a singular, all-powerful deity opposed to idolatry and superstition. In doing so though, Moses unwittingly reveals the secret truth of monotheism to the world, preparing the way for the development of abstract reason, the conquest of nature, and the Enlightenment.

Because of its dubious origins as well as Moses’ own authoritarian tendencies, rationality and disenchantment conceal certain totalitarian dangers for Schiller. As Martha Helfer has noted, Schiller’s text announces an “emancipation *from* the Jews, not *of* the Jews.”³⁶ Indeed, Schiller’s ambivalence toward modernity results in an identification of Jewishness with a hyper-rationality that is in itself fraudulent, revealing Judaism as a farce. This has the effect of not only writing the Jews out of the intellectual genealogy of Christianity and the Enlightenment, but also deriding them as blind fools and their founding lawgiver as a thief. By portraying the Hebrews as diseased, superstitious, repugnant, and deficient, Schiller identifies them with other degenerate peoples such as the Hindu Pariahs as well as the colonized subjects of Africa and the Americas who are themselves superseded by Christian Europe.³⁷

Herder and Jones’ theories of cultural decay and Aryan origins were also taken up by Schlegel, perhaps best known for his heralding of a “new mythology” in 1800. “We have no mythology. But, I

³⁵ Schiller, “The Mission of Moses,” 315.

³⁶ Martha Helfer, *The Word Unheard: Legacies of Anti-Semitism in German Literature and Culture* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 23-55.

³⁷ Schiller, “The Mission of Moses,” 320.

add, we are close to obtaining one or, rather, it is time that we earnestly work together to create one."³⁸ This mythology would derive not from "systematic philosophy" but, like Schiller, from poetry as the original fount of its ancient predecessor. A "hieroglyphic of surrounding nature," this modern mythology would be predicated upon the Herderian entwinement between land and language but go further in its rejection of enlightenment by "cancel[ling] the progression and laws of rationally thinking reason, and ... transplant[ing] us once again into the beautiful confusion of imagination, into the original chaos of human nature, for which I know as yet no more beautiful symbol than the motley throng of the ancient gods."³⁹ Schlegel thus recognized the need to reawaken the Aryan mythologies of old in order to substantiate new ones.

Schlegel would undertake this task himself in *On the Language and Philosophy of the Indians* eight years later. However, here his investigation of Indian wisdom explicitly mirrors the historical relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Like Jones, Schlegel regards contemporary Hinduism as a perversion of an originary divine truth in ancient India, and, like Herder, regards language as the vehicle for its elaboration. This leads him in the first chapter of the text to introduce a taxonomical distinction between "organic" and "mechanical" languages based upon a finer distinction between inflection and agglutination. While Sanskrit (along with Greek, Latin, Persian, and German) is an organic, inflected language expressing divine truth, languages like Hebrew (along with Arabic and Chinese) are mechanistic and agglutinative.⁴⁰ Here Sanskrit is celebrated as a sublime form of language while Hebrew is denigrated as a technical symptom of unfeeling, instrumental, calculative modernity. Schlegel's taxonomy readily identifies Jews and Judaism with the very ills of modern alienation that he seeks to combat. While Sanskrit is considered what Dorothy Figueira terms a "living organism" for Schlegel, Hebrew becomes a dead letter in the quintessential Pauline sense.⁴¹

³⁸ Friedrich von Schlegel, "Talk on Mythology" in *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1968), 81.

³⁹ Schlegel, "Talk on Mythology," 85.

⁴⁰ Friedrich von Schlegel, *On the Language and Philosophy of the Indians* in *The Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works of Friedrich von Schlegel*, trans. Ellen Millington (London: George Bell and Sons, 1889), 425-526.

⁴¹ Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins*, 29.

This relationship between Hinduism and Judaism becomes more developed as Schlegel goes on to introduce the role of Christianity and tease out a philosophical history of the origins of religion. Elevating the Aryans of ancient India to progenitors of divine truth and mythology, Schlegel sees the Hebrews as merely appropriating and repurposing something that is not their own. In essence, the Jews have become *ersatz* Aryans. However, although Indian wisdom is expressed distortedly in Judaism, it still finds its fulfillment in Christianity. Thus, the thesis of Aryan origins serves to decenter the role of Judaism in the historical development of Christianity. Ancient Indian wisdom, transmitted by the Persians to other cultures, is “propounded in the Old Testament and developed and completed in the New.”⁴² Yet this process entails a certain obfuscation of these ideas also present in Egyptian religion by Moses himself, resulting in the fact that although certain Christian doctrines such as the trinity and immortality of the soul are present in Indian wisdom, they become plagued by “the grossest errors and superstitions” in Israelite religion. Moreover, the pure doctrines of Christianity—descended from the Aryan heritage—will be polluted and misunderstood if conflated with the delusions of the Jews, meaning that Indian sources and the New Testament serve as more valuable commentaries on the Hebrew Bible than even the Talmud.⁴³

Therefore, by obscuring the pure insight of Vedic religion, the Jews perverted the Aryans’ mytho-linguistic heritage, presenting it in a corrupted form. This was a byproduct of their mechanistic language, suggesting that they could never have fully developed a viable mythology on their own regardless. Further, as Jeffrey Librett has argued, Schlegel’s theory positions the Orient as a *figura* whose fulfillment lies in Christendom and, again, erases the Jews by sublating Judaism under the sign of Christianity.⁴⁴ In this way, Schlegel follows both Schiller and Herder in positioning Judaism and the religions of the Orient as archaic fossils superseded by Christianity and the West.

⁴² Schlegel, *On the Language and Philosophy of the Indians*, 483.

⁴³ Schlegel, *On the Language and Philosophy of the Indians*, 516-518.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Librett, *Orientalism and the Figure of the Jew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 69.

V. Monotheistic Deficiency

Another way of justifying the Jews' lack of myth was to challenge the assumed value and purpose of Jewish monotheism on the whole, a strategy adopted by Friedrich Schelling and Ernest Renan. Departing from his contemporaries, in his 1842 *Philosophy of Mythology*, Schelling inquired into the origin and essence of mythology as a form of religious consciousness and "theogonic process."⁴⁵ Working from ethnographic data collected in colonized lands and the Orient, Schelling traced the emergence of mythic polytheism out of an Ur-monotheism in Asia according to three successive stages or "potencies." Rejecting the Herderian definition of mythology as the personification of nature, Schelling understood it as the product of early humanity's awareness of a "necessary and universal being" in the monotheistic "first potency."⁴⁶ However, in agreement with Herder he maintained the intimacy between language and myth, positioning polytheism as a "diverged monotheism" following the breakdown of language at the Tower of Babel—the "second potency."⁴⁷ Along the way, though, this Ur-monotheism had been preserved and encoded in Greek myth. Like Schiller, monotheism for Schelling constitutes the esoteric kernel of Greek paganism, setting the stage for the revelation of Jesus Christ as the secret core of the Eleusinian Mysteries—the "third potency."

Elaborating on the transition from the first to the second potency, Schelling distinguishes between first order "peoples" like the Indo-Europeans and "races" such as Africans, Asians, Native Americans, and Jews, suggesting that after the Tower of Babel the latter undergo a "process of racialization."⁴⁸ This produces a variety of physical and mental states as well as social and cultural formations. Some groups become stronger or weaker, lighter or darker, more intelligent or less so.⁴⁹ For

⁴⁵ Friedrich Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, trans. Mason Richey and Markus Zisselberger (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 137.

⁴⁶ For a more detailed elaboration of Schelling's *Philosophie der Mythologie* see Edward Allen Beach, *Potencies of God(s): Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

⁴⁷ Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, 66.

⁴⁸ For an extended treatment of Schelling's *Racenprozess* see George Williamson, "Theogony as Ethnogeny: Race and Religion in Friedrich Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology," in *Ideas of Race in the History of the Humanities*, ed. Amos Morris-Reich and Dirk Rupnow (Farnham: Ashgate, 2017), 159-193.

⁴⁹ Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, 72.

example, Schelling mentions the dominance of white Brahmins over darker castes, the domination of black Africans by Egyptians, or the backwardness of South American indigenous tribes. Specifically, Schelling notes those “heathens” who regress to “a condition of complete unculture and animal coarseness” or “a state of absolute lawlessness ... without respect for any law, and any society, or any obligatory regulations, as well as without any religious ideas,” speaking with nasaly or gargly “lip and chest tones.”⁵⁰ Here polytheism is, on the one hand, the perverse cult of the lower races and, on the other, the sublime religion of the Greeks responsible for high art, science, and philosophy.

When it comes to the ancient Hebrews, Schelling maintains their exceptional status as adherents of a “relative monotheism” closer to the Ur-monotheism of the first potency.⁵¹ Following a broader trend among European scholars tracing the origins of the races to Abraham’s three sons, during the transition to the second potency the descendants of Shem continued to worship the first God and isolated themselves from the rest of gentile humanity.⁵² This results in a racialization both prohibiting them from becoming a historical people and binding them to an incomplete, stunted monotheism. The very structure of the Hebrew language bears witness to this, since in its disyllablism it harkens to the monosyllabistic languages of the first potency. By contrast, the Aryan descendants of Japheth achieve a polysyllablism symptomatic of their rich polytheism.⁵³ The link between Ur-monotheism and the “relative monotheism” of the Hebrews is also preserved in the two names for God. While Elohim designates the preexistent, universal, and immediate religious content of the first potency, Yahweh is revelatory, differentiated, and particular to ancient Israelite religion.⁵⁴

For Schelling, then, Hebrew monotheism is shown to be deficient. “Relative monotheism” cannot be considered true monotheism since it forms without its dialectical, polytheistic opposite. Because Christianity has passed through both monotheism and polytheism, revealing the Christological

⁵⁰ Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, 81.

⁵¹ Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, 97.

⁵² Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, 121.

⁵³ Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, 93-96.

⁵⁴ Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, 104-115.

secret of the Eleusinian Mysteries to the world, it alone can be called “Absolute monotheism.” This means that due to its dialectical incoherence, the relation to God in Judaism fails to be mediated by true knowledge or philosophy. God as God is unknown to Judaism, only fully realizable in a Christianity that has undergone a negation of the negation by creating a second monotheism out of the sources of polytheistic, pagan religion.⁵⁵ As “potency,” Hebrew monotheism only points toward this initial polytheist negation as a “darkening” for the arrival of Christian revelation.⁵⁶ This also means that Israelite religion and its contemporary representative—Judaism—are among the most primitive religions standing outside history. Whereas in Vico this indicated the Jews’ chosenness, in Schelling it signals their second-rate status as vessels bearing witness to something greater: Christianity. “Relative monotheism should not be preserved for its own sake, but rather just precisely as ground, and thus, then, the Mosaic religious law is also pregnant with the future, to which it points *mutely*—like a picture.”⁵⁷ Judaism is therefore nothing but a fossilized remnant of the first potency whose ultimate purpose is to be superseded. “Schelling’s theory of relative monotheism,” Williamson writes, “provided a way to reinscribe a Christian supersessionist narrative within the history of mythology.”⁵⁸ Moreover, “[w]hile Schelling had granted the Hebrews a special status in the theogonic process as bearers of knowledge of the true God, he made it clear that the arrival of the Christian revelation marked the end of Judaism’s historical mission, while implying that modern Jews, if they hoped to be part of the future, had no choice but to convert to Christianity.”⁵⁹

Ernest Renan’s theory of myth develops in conversation with Friedrich Max Müller, for whom myth is a “disease of language” brought about by semantic confusion. Like Schelling, for Müller the world’s religions had descended from an Ur-monotheism in ancient Asia associated with Sun-worship.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, 123-124.

⁵⁶ Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, 125.

⁵⁷ Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, 121. Italics mine.

⁵⁸ Williamson, “Theology as Ethnogeny,” 179.

⁵⁹ Williamson, “Theology as Ethnogeny,” 183.

⁶⁰ Friedrich Max Müller, “On the Philosophy of Mythology” in *The Essential Max Müller: On Language, Mythology, and Religion*, ed. Jon Stone (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 145-166.

While initially there had been a lucid connection between words and their referents, later in a period he designated the “Mythopoeic Age” these correlations were severed, resulting in the proliferation of polytheistic mythologies.⁶¹ Müller’s theory further sedimented the monotheistic, Sanskritic, Aryan ideal by contrasting it with Semitic religion. While the Aryans possessed a mythic creativity giving rise to Hindu “Kathenotheism,” the Semites remained rigid monotheists (or rather, “Henotheists”) devoted to a singular God, series of rituals, and sacred texts. While “Semitic” had been in circulation since the seventeenth century, in Müller it became part of a formalized structure and attained “scientific” veracity.⁶²

Although the Aryan-Semitic distinction was largely benign in Müller, for his French colleague it expressed a pronounced racial essentialism. In his 1859 text *New Considerations on the General Character of the Semitic Peoples and in Particular on their Tendency Toward Monotheism*, Renan blatantly stated that the Semites had no mythology at all, instead harboring an “instinct” for monotheism as a “minimum of religion.”⁶³ Following Müller, the genius of the Semites lay in their recognition of a singular abstract deity. However, for Renan this purportedly semitic characteristic was interpreted negatively. Due to their mythic deficiency, Renan concluded that the Semites also lacked corresponding aspects of civilized culture, science, literature, politics, and economics. Taking up the Herderian entwinement between mythology, land, and language, Renan argued that “Semitic monotheism” was born of the “*psychisme du désert*.” By this he meant that the barren and arid regions of Palestine were inconducive to mythic and philosophical creativity among the Semites unlike the “*psychisme de la forêt*” of the Aryans derived from the lush Indian landscape.⁶⁴ Stunted in their national development, Renan’s non-mythological Jews—like those of Schelling and Herder—were forever consigned to simple legalism.

⁶¹ Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*, 81.

⁶² Guy Stroumsa, *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism: The Rise and Fall of a Scholarly Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 73.

⁶³ Ernest Renan, *Nouvelles considérations sur le caractère général des peuples sémitiques et en particulier sur leur tendance au monothéisme* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1859), 40.

⁶⁴ Stroumsa, *Semitic Monotheism*, 118.

Equally disparaging of Jews and Arabs, Renan suggested Islam as the true inheritor of Judaism, thereby characterizing both as sterile monotheisms born of the desert steppe. This would allow Renan, again in keeping with Romanticism's de-Judaization of the West, to index Christianity as an Aryan religion in 1863's *Life of Jesus*.⁶⁵ Here Renan provocatively suggested that Jesus was no Semite at all, possibly belonging to an Aryan enclave in the Galilee opposed to the stifling rigidity of Jewish law. This was a consequence, as in Herder, of the Galilee's fertile natural environment providing a haven for a mixed population.⁶⁶ Just as India's landscape fostered the development of Vedic myth, the Galilee nurtured the Gospel. While this certainly implied the de-Judaization of Christianity and the Aryanization of Christ, it also meant that he could be conceptualized as a quasi-mythological figure set against a non-mythical Judaism. This suggested that Christianity could be understood as a universal, humanistic religion opposed to Judaism as a particularistic, ethnocentric sect. Selectively choosing among the founders of the world's religions, Renan looked for a Comtean scientific, secular, universal religion of the future integrating elements from a variety of traditions.⁶⁷

Renan's work catalyzed debates over the true origin of monotheism and the racial identity of Jesus, again writing Jews and Judaism out of the history of the West in order to legitimate Aryan supremacy. Although Renan did distance himself from vulgar antisemitism and speak out against discrimination against Jews when it came to the Jewish Question and debates over Jewish Emancipation, he did so while simultaneously constructing scholarly theories inadvertently undergirding these dynamics. Thus, despite the fact that both Muller and Renan insisted upon the "metaphorical" character of their racial categories, their ideas provided further scholarly impetus for the racialization of Semitism in the public sphere. This was also true of Schelling's "process of racialization," which distinguished between Indo-Europeans and their Others. By portraying Jewish monotheism as

⁶⁵ Ernest Renan, *Vie de Jésus* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1864).

⁶⁶ Stroumsa, *Semitic Monotheism*, 138.

⁶⁷ Stroumsa, *Semitic Monotheism*, 166.

an inferior form of religion inconsequential to the rise of Christianity, Renan and Schelling's theories implied that contemporary Jews could be seen as subordinate and irrelevant as well.

VI. The Jewish Enemy

The notion that the Jews lacked a viable mythological heritage culminated in the idea that they were enemies of those who did. This view was espoused by the Brothers Grimm and Richard Wagner. The creation of a "new mythology" announced by Schlegel entailed the scholarly reconstruction of Greek, Germanic, or Norse epics as well as the popularization of local fairy tales. In this regard, the encyclopedic compendiums of Germanic folklore published between 1812 and 1857 by the Grimms were instrumental, enjoying wide popularity in Germany well into the twentieth century. The Grimms' frame of reference was clearly influenced by the Herderian theory of myth and the Indo-European hypothesis. Like Schiller, the Grimms scandalously regarded the Germanic and larger pagan conversion to Christianity as disruptive of a prior mythic harmony descended from ancient India.⁶⁸ However, the Grimms had not entirely escaped the logic of Christianity, even positioning Germanic myth as its "Old Testament" to the exclusion of Judaism.⁶⁹ At least three of the Grimm's most important tales deploy the trope of the charlatan Jew as a villainous foil for the protagonist in order to communicate German cultural mores—"The Good Bargain," "The Jew Among Thorns," and "The Bright Sun Will Bring it to Light." As Martha Helfer writes, "the educational program laid out in the tales—in the collection the Grimms themselves regarded a primer designed to construct a German national spirit—contains an overt anti-Jewish agenda. Disturbingly, the Grimms inscribe this anti-Jewish agenda in the German Enlightenment tradition, as the German Enlightenment tradition."⁷⁰ For Helfer, "to be Enlightened is to

⁶⁸ Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 56-57.

⁶⁹ Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, *Deutsche Mythologie: Die Erfindung einer nationalen Kunstreligion* (Berlin: Philo, 2000), 58-65.

⁷⁰ Martha Helfer, "The Fairy Tale Jew," *Neulektüren – New Readings, Festschrift für Gerð Labriose zum 80. Geburtstag* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 33.

be antisemitic.⁷¹ However, the Grimms might also be read as anti-Jewish partisans of a slightly more romantic, anti-Enlightenment agenda by drawing correlations between *rationality* and Jews.

“The Bright Sun Will Bring it to Light” relates the travails of a traveling tailor who kills a poor Jew after an attempted robbery.⁷² Years later, the tailor admits the murder to his wife, who proceeds to spread the truth resulting in the tailor’s conviction. In “The Good Bargain,” an honest yet dim-witted peasant is repeatedly swindled by animals and then a Jew who lures him into a faulty investment.⁷³ Bringing the villain before the King, the peasant is vindicated after the King himself is swindled, condemning the Jew to severe punishment. “The Jew Among Thorns” is clearly the most antisemitic of the Grimm’s tales.⁷⁴ It again depicts a rural servant granted a boon for a magic fiddle, a rifle, and psychic influence over others which he uses to force a Jew to dance “among thorns” to torture him. Seeking revenge, the Jew attempts to swindle the servant but is thwarted, resulting in his execution. In each instance, correlations are drawn between calculative, Enlightened rationality and Jewishness. The first story warns against killing Jews if only for the fact that one cannot do so with impunity, their capacity for vengeance extending beyond the grave. In both the second and third stories, the medieval image of the scheming Jewish financier is invoked to warn against the “crafty, calculating Jew” threatening to cheat ordinary working-class Germans out of their hard-earned money. Finally, themes of deicide predominate in “The Jew Among Thorns,” condoning the persecution of Jews as revenge for the murder of Jesus and the undue power of contemporary Jewry in European politics and economy. In this sense, the Grimms’ stories might be read in terms of romantic anti-capitalism, counter-Enlightenment, and German identitarianism.

Heavily influenced by the Grimms and simultaneously taking up the romantic, *völkisch* recuperation of myth and revolutionary socialism, composer and playwright Richard Wagner railed

⁷¹ Helfer, “The Fairy Tale Jew,” 31.

⁷² Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “The Bright Sun Will Bring It to Light” in *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, ed. and trans. Jack Zipes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 380-383.

⁷³ See also Helfer, “The Fairy Tale Jew,” 37.

⁷⁴ Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “The Jew in the Thornbush” in *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, ed. and trans. Jack Zipes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 360-363.

against Jewish influence in both his essays and operas. In 1850's "Judaism in Music," Wagner famously assailed the presence of Jews in German society as a foreign illness infecting the body politic from within.⁷⁵ This is manifest in the "coldness and indifference" of Jewish art, virtually all of which is stolen and plagiarized from European music.⁷⁶ Similarly, due to their physiology, Jews speak European languages "as alien[s]" with "the peculiarities of Semitic pronunciation" and "gurgle, jodel, and cackle" — clearly alluding to Yiddish "jargon."⁷⁷ Finally, Wagner repeats the trope of Jewish financial prowess by suggesting that the medieval Jewish creditor has, in modernity, evolved into the utilitarian and materialistic Jewish capitalist consumed by "egotism."⁷⁸ Like Schiller, Wagner argues that it is *Germany* who is in need of emancipation from the "yoke of Judaism."⁷⁹

Wagner conceptualizes myth as "the condensed aesthetic experience of a common view of life." For him myth becomes a vehicle for a revolutionary German nationalism predicated upon ethnic belonging, a vision articulated in "Artwork of the Future" in 1849.⁸⁰ The decline of myth for Wagner was brought on by cultural decadence, particularly in the modern period as culture came under the sway of instrumentality and, again, egotism. Against this, Wagner's "new myth" becomes an emancipatory vehicle for the rehabilitation of a *völkisch* sensibility and a kind of romantic anti-capitalism in fulfillment of Christian modernity.⁸¹ Read through "Judaism in Music," it becomes clear that the enemy of myth is none other than the Jews. Already in his 1848 essay *Die Wibelungen*, Wagner had repeated the story of Aryan origins descended from Herder and Jones, this time interpreting the Nibelungs as a race of Frankish kings who had overtaken the indigenous Germans.⁸² This laid the foundation for the conflict in *The Ring* as well as Wagner's broader theory of race.

⁷⁵ Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

⁷⁶ Richard Wagner, "Judaism in Music," in *Richard Wagner and the Jews*, trans. Milton E. Brener (London: Mcfarland, 2006), 309.

⁷⁷ Wagner, "Judaism in Music," 305 and 310.

⁷⁸ Wagner, "Judaism in Music," 307.

⁷⁹ Wagner, "Judaism in Music," 310.

⁸⁰ Richard Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future*. trans. Emma Warner. dd. Barry Millington and Tash Siddiqui, *The Wagner Journal* (2012): 13-86.

⁸¹ Williamson, *The Longing for Myth*, 181.

⁸² Richard Wagner, *Die Wibelungen : Weltgeschichte aus der Sage* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1850).

In *The Ring*, a cycle of four mythic operas written between 1848 and 1874, Wagner depicts a racialized conflict between the Germanized Volsungs and the Judaized Nibelungs. Here he pits the mythic hero Siegfried against the dwarfish antagonist Mime to explicitly play upon the notion of Jewish imitation or mimesis by highlighting Mime's grotesque physiology and language.⁸³ As Marc Weiner notes, Siegfried knows himself only in opposition to his Jewish Other.⁸⁴ Moreover, Wagner consistently emphasizes Siegfried's closeness to nature versus Mime's artificiality, depth versus surface, and true ideality versus faulty illusion. Like the Jews, the dwarfish body is a repugnant antithesis of pure humanity represented by Siegfried, gesturing toward the conflation of Jews and the demonic in medieval Christianity.

For all his hostility toward Judaism, Wagner remained ambivalent toward Christianity, seeing it as an Oriental religion descended from Judaism that maintained an intrinsic link with Germanic myth in its Catholic form. Wagner's main Christian enemy was Protestantism, which, as a "necessary error," had corrupted modern Germany while also opening the way for a revolutionary "new myth." However, if there was a version of Christianity that Wagner sought to salvage, it was an Indo-European one. In 1848, he had already begun work on *Jesus of Nazareth*, an unfinished opera depicting an Aryan, anti-capitalist Jesus pitted against the egoistic Pharisees.⁸⁵ While this project would remain fragmentary, Wagner would still follow figures like Schopenhauer in *Parsifal's* deployment of the Aryan Christ in 1882.⁸⁶ This would implicate Wagner in not only an anti-Jewish rehabilitation of Germanic myth, but the de-Judaization of Christianity. In his later years this would lead Wagner to adopt the racial theories of Joseph Gobineau, whom he invited to join his Bayreuth Circle. Thus, Wagner's antisemitism and his theory of myth went hand in hand.

⁸³ Richard Wagner, *Der Ring des Nibelungen. Ein Bühnenfestspiel für drei Tage und einen Vorabend* (Leipzig, J.J. Weber, 1873).

⁸⁴ Weiner, *Richard Wagner*, 38.

⁸⁵ Richard Wagner, *Jesus of Nazareth and Other Writings*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 283-340.

⁸⁶ Richard Wagner, *Parsifal: ein Bühnenweibfestspiel* (Mainz: Schott's Söhne, 1906).

VII. Hebrew Ideology

Up to this point, most mythographers had insisted upon the non-mythological character of Judaism. This began to shift with Feuerbach and Nietzsche, who, as Von Hendy suggests, both took up the Hegelian “struggle between enlightenment and superstition.”⁸⁷ This was an outgrowth of the Enlightenment critique of religion, which ultimately regarded myth as a form of illusion or ideology obscuring reality. Consequently, both would contrast the backward, idolatrous, and egotistical character of Judaism with the creative virility and insight of Aryan and Greek myth. For Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity* in 1841, religion is ultimately a product of the psychological projection of earthly realities and the subject’s inner desires onto the heavens.⁸⁸ Religion becomes a pernicious chimera under which humanity is oppressed by the creations of its own mind.⁸⁹ To solve this dilemma, Feuerbach argues that “consciousness of God is self-consciousness,” meaning that God is simply another name for humanity’s own inner divine nature.⁹⁰

However, even as he sought religion’s abolition, not all religions were deserving of equal contempt for Feuerbach. Early on, Feuerbach lauded Christianity as a religion of “criticism and freedom” for distinguishing between inner belief in Christ and exterior obedience to the letter of Jewish law.⁹¹ This continues as Feuerbach goes on to discuss Hebrew and Greek creation myths. Here he emphasizes the coarsely utilitarian, pragmatic, or instrumental relationship between humanity and nature in the Hebrew Bible, contrasting it with the harmony between the gods, humans, and nature depicted in Greek pantheism. Like Wagner, Feuerbach ascribed the domination of nature in Genesis to Jewish “egotism,” a fundamental disposition endemic to Jews and Judaism on the whole. In Genesis, nature is simply an arbitrary object made available by God for humanity’s use, an “abject vassal for his selfish interest, of his practical egotism.” Moreover, Feuerbach charges that this benefits Israel *alone* “to

⁸⁷ Here I follow Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*, 49-76. See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 329-348.

⁸⁸ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), 2.

⁸⁹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 32.

⁹⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 14.

⁹¹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 34.

the exclusion of other nations—absolute intolerance, the secret essence of monotheism.”⁹² These aspects of the Hebrew and Greek creation myths also determine the shape of their civilizational development. Whereas Hellenic harmony is expressed in the theorization of an eternal nature giving rise to high art, philosophy, and science, the instrumental relationship between nature and humanity in Genesis stunts the Hebrews’ development such that they never advance beyond the basest forms of culture. This is illustrated by the Jews’ obsession with eating and dietary laws, which reduce nature to a mere object for human consumption.⁹³ In the Hebrew creation myth, nature is the product of the *I Will*, the tyrannical and monarchical “dictatorial word” conforming cosmos to its whims.⁹⁴ Finally, Feuerbach ties this into his larger theory of religion as psychological projection, blaming the oppressive yoke of “Israelitisch religion” on the “supernaturalistic egotism” of the Jews themselves as its human authors. Indeed, Jehovah is none other than the “*ego* of Israel,”⁹⁵ a people bent on accumulation and domination.

Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of myth spans both the romantic and Enlightenment dispositions in mythography just as it both valorizes and denigrates Judaism. Myth is both a romanticized origin and an idol to be destroyed, while Judaism is both responsible for the odiousness of Christianity and the antidote to vulgar nationalism. In 1872’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche theorized tragedy as a genre composed of myth and music essential for the regeneration of Greek culture after the Persian war.⁹⁶ Socrates is villainized for the decline of myth and the rise of the dialectic, reason, logic, philosophical decadence, and cultural malaise. Wagner’s influence on Nietzsche is especially palpable when it comes to Nietzsche’s treatment of Judaism in *The Birth of Tragedy*. As commentators have noted, in early lectures Nietzsche equated Socratism with the “Jewish press,” a remark too explicit even for Wagner.⁹⁷ Instead, Nietzsche was encouraged to encode his anti-Jewish animus into his writing more covertly. As Robert

⁹² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 116.

⁹³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 117.

⁹⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 119.

⁹⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 122.

⁹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs, ed. Raymond Guess and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁹⁷ Richard Holub, *Nietzsche’s Jewish Problem: Between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 63.

Holub has shown, *The Birth of Tragedy* largely follows in the footsteps of Schopenhauer, who first identified Socratism's "entirely optimistic" and "Jewish" spirit as an alien threat.⁹⁸ Combining this with a Wagnerian disposition looking for the supersession of Judaism in a renewed mythological heritage, Nietzsche's text participated in Romantic mythography's denigration of Jews and Judaism as non-mythological. Further, in the text Nietzsche deployed the Aryan-Semitic distinction to essentialize various races, subordinating the Jews and other races to Aryanism. On the level of myth, Nietzsche compares the story of Prometheus to the myth of the Fall in the Hebrew Bible—tales intimately related "like brother and sister."⁹⁹ The Promethean myth is born of "the entire Aryan community of peoples," serving as "evidence for their gift for the profound and the tragic" and gendered as a masculine act of deliberate sacrilege and profanation. By contrast, the Fall is portrayed as the consequence of feminine deception, suggesting curiosity and creativity as effeminate sources of evil.¹⁰⁰

In later texts like *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, *The Antichrist*, or *Twilight of the Idols* written between 1886 and 1889, Nietzsche had reversed course by calling for myth's abolition as he sought to iconoclastically "philosophize with a hammer."¹⁰¹ Myth, Nietzsche concluded, lay at the heart of all language, exposing "truth" as a historically and socially constructed fiction, an idol or illusion concealing the nature of reality and prohibiting life-affirmation.¹⁰² The most insidious of these idols for Nietzsche was, of course, Christianity—a fact that would implicate Judaism once again. However, following his personal fallout and disillusionment with Wagner in the 1870's, Nietzsche not only began to regard myth in the pejorative sense but also increasingly distanced himself from German nationalist sentiments and burgeoning racial antisemitism. This did not mean he had entirely jettisoned the subtle anti-Judaism of *The Birth of Tragedy*, however. By the late 1880's, Nietzsche became acutely concerned with the pernicious impact of Christianity upon Europe, ostensibly deploying criticisms of Judaism in

⁹⁸ Holub, *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem*, 76.

⁹⁹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 49.

¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 50. See also Holub, *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem*, 78-79.

¹⁰¹ Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*, 76.

¹⁰² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Normann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21.

service of a larger critique of Christendom. And yet, as Holub has pointed out, Nietzsche still viewed Christianity as a continuation and fulfillment of the Jewish spirit of *ressentiment* accounting for the “transvaluation of values” and contributing to the decadent decline of the Roman Empire.¹⁰³ This is to say, the problem with Christianity for Nietzsche is that it is too Jewish, a vestige of the revenge enacted upon the more noble Greco-Roman “aristocratic” or “warrior” values through the “priestly” creation of a life-negating “slave morality.”¹⁰⁴ Even in his later texts Nietzsche continued to deploy the opposition between Prometheus and the Hebrew Bible, Aryans and Semites, to not only demonstrate the difference between “Rome and Judea,” but Greek paganism and Christianity. As Holub notes, this too bears a striking resemblance to antisemitic thought, positioning the Jews as a historically subjugated people whose resentment toward their masters is transformed into a subversive conniving.¹⁰⁵ Thus, Nietzsche unwittingly regurgitated stereotypical anti-Jewish tropes in his depiction of Christian slave morality as an essentially Jewish ideology to be eradicated through a future “revaluation of values.” Rather than the Socratic enemy of a Germanic mythology to be reclaimed in a Wagnerian key, Judaism had become at least partly responsible for the greatest mythic deception of all—Christianity.¹⁰⁶

VIII. Biblical Mythologization

The rise of higher criticism and the historical-critical study of the Bible furthered the notion that Judaism was excessively mythological and primitive, demonstrating its incongruity with an Enlightened, demythologized age. Exemplars of this perspective include Wilhelm de Wette and David Strauss. Working from contemporary ethnographic data in the Middle East, Orientalists like Johann David Michaelis and Christoph Meiners had constructed theories of primitive Judaism, suggesting that the

¹⁰³ Holub, *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem*, 166.

¹⁰⁴ See for example Nietzsche's remarks on the Jews and Christianity in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 17-19, 31-33, 145. See also *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings* trans. Judith Norman, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 20-25, 41-42, 185.

¹⁰⁵ Holub, *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem*, 169.

¹⁰⁶ As Holub notes, Nietzsche's analysis regularly occludes any historical markers distinguishing between ancient Israelite religion and Judaism proper. Holub, *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem*, 173-174.

Israelites were no different than their Ancient Near Eastern neighbors and had engaged in all kinds of cultic obscenities such as human sacrifice and idol worship. As a corollary, figures like Herman Reimarus, Johann Eichhorn and Johann Philip Gabler depicted the stories of the Bible as either historically false or philosophical myths.¹⁰⁷ Following in their footsteps, de Wette set out to wade through the mythical aspects of both the Old and New Testaments to extract the pure rational core of Christianity.

In his first major work of biblical criticism in 1807, de Wette pejoratively deemed the entire Pentateuch a regressive work of Hebrew nationalism, theocratic mythology, and poetry containing almost nothing of actual historical value.¹⁰⁸ By the time of his *Biblical Dogmatics* in 1831, de Wette had theorized four phases of what he termed *Hebraismus*.¹⁰⁹ The first constituted a pre-Mosaic phase of polytheistic idolatry followed by the true revelation of God given to Moses and imparted to the people. This was an interior, pure, moral, anti-mythological religion of the heart corrupted in the third phase by a regression to polytheism and myth following the Babylonian exile. Here the Mosaic religion was further polluted by Persian influence, resulting in a purely exterior, sterile cult of formality and legalism, as well as the mythologization of history. Against this, in the fourth phase the Prophets resurrected the original purity of the Mosaic revelation, setting the stage for Christianity. By the first century, this “degenerated, petrified *Hebraismus*” mired in mythology, dogma, and the dead letter of Jewish law had morphed into Pharisaism and Rabbinic Judaism. This meant that while the Jewish roots of Christianity remained intact, contemporary Jews were adherents of a deviant form of ancient Israelite religion—here echoing Herder’s thesis of Jewish degeneration. The sworn enemy of Pharisaism, Jesus resurrected the anti-mythical religion of Moses and the Prophets by eschewing legalism, exteriority, and

¹⁰⁷ Williamson, *The Longing for Myth*, 152.

¹⁰⁸ De Wette explicates this thesis throughout *Kritik der Israelitischen Geschichte: Erster Theil, Kritik der Mosaischen Geschichte* (Halle: Schimmelpfennig und Compagnie, 1807).

¹⁰⁹ W. M. L. de Wette, *Biblische Dogmatik Alten und Neuen Testaments: oder kritische Darstellung der Religionslehre des Hebraismus, des Judentums und Urchristentums* (Berlin: Reimer, 1831), 52

superstition.¹¹⁰ De Wette suggested that although the Gospels were ensconced in mythological garb, this could be whittled away to get at the pure, rational, interior, and spiritual message of Christ.

Predating Feuerbach and in fact setting the stage for the Young Hegelian movement, Strauss was heavily influenced by the Hegelian struggle between Enlightenment and superstition, seeing Judaism as a superseded fossil in the drama of the Absolute's dialectical unfolding in history. However, countering the Hegelian sublation of historical criticism in the philosophical concept of Absolute religion, Strauss was intent upon a ruthless critique of the biblical text as an end in itself.¹¹¹ Strauss' mythological approach to the New Testament was a synthesis of rationalist approaches to the Bible explaining away the miraculous with supernaturalist approaches based in fideism.¹¹² Navigating this tension, in 1835's *The Life of Jesus*, Strauss established a chasm between the historical person of Jesus and the mythological trappings of Second Temple Judaism, setting for himself the task of "demythologization"—an idea that would famously reappear in twentieth century biblical criticism.¹¹³ In Strauss' disenchanted view, the Bible unconsciously dressed up historical events in mythical garb to make sense of them and draw lines of continuity between traditions and texts. Rather than explain the miraculous away as human error or attempt to extract discrete historical details, Strauss again deemed biblical narrative entirely mythological, showing how its form of representation allowed the biblical writers to assert their theological agendas.¹¹⁴ Roughly following the structure of the dialectic, Strauss began by describing a story from the Bible in all its spiritual absurdity before raising modern objections and sublating the tension in a "mythical point of view." Yet Strauss' view of myth was uncompromisingly pejorative, writing "as if there had been no romantic movement in Germany."¹¹⁵ The goal of Strauss' work was ultimately to rescue Christianity from mythology and superstition. Following Hegel,

¹¹⁰ See Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation of the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 79-86.

¹¹¹ Williamson, *The Longing for Myth*, 159.

¹¹² Williamson, *The Longing for Myth*, 160.

¹¹³ David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* Vol. 1 (Tübingen: Osiander, 1837).

¹¹⁴ Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 41.

¹¹⁵ Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*, 52.

Christianity served as the apotheosis of religion in preparation for the final triumph of reason and science. Christ had become merely a symbol for the union of God and humanity in history resulting in a kind of humanist pantheism.

Strauss would follow de Wette by making a distinction between the “noble ethical kernel” of Mosaic religion and the Pharisaic or rabbinic interpretation emphasizing outward obedience with which Jesus was at odds.¹¹⁶ Also like de Wette, Strauss underscored the difference between pre-exilic Hebrew religion and post-exilic Judaism as a process of degeneration or decay. Specifically, Strauss held Persian influence responsible for the introduction of apocalyptic and messianic elements into “Late Judaism.”¹¹⁷ In the Second Temple period, these elements were projected onto the figure of Jesus, dressing up the life of an ordinary man in sacred legend. On this basis, Strauss could show how various aspects of the Gospel narratives rehashed apocalyptic and messianic themes in the Hebrew Bible, meaning that the miraculous was simply the product of historical contingency and mythmaking not unlike the mythologies of the Greeks or Romans. Strauss’ task lay in decoding these Hebrew mythologizations to get at the truth of the person of Jesus as a symbol of humanity’s inner divinity and self-consciousness.

De Wette and Strauss’ understandings of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity had immediate bearing on their positions on the Jewish Question. The idea that Judaism was a particularistic sect mired in superstition and legalism buttressed their opposition to Jewish Emancipation and motivated their calls for full assimilation. This was expressed in de Wette’s romance novel *Theodor* in 1822, which advocated tolerance toward Jews without granting them rights out of fear that they would coalesce into a “state within a state” threatening German sovereignty and Unification.¹¹⁸ Ironically, although he dismissed the Hebrew Bible and Judaism as mythological, de Wette’s political-theological agenda entailed the construction of a new “Protestant mythology.”¹¹⁹ This mythology would

¹¹⁶ Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 556.

¹¹⁷ David Friedrich Strauss, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft dargestellt*, Vol. 1 (Tübingen: Osiander, 1840), 32.

¹¹⁸ W. M. L. de Wette, *Theodor oder des Zweiflers Weibe: Bildungsgeschichte eines evangelischen Geistlichen* (Berlin: Reimer, 1828). See also Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism*, 89.

¹¹⁹ Williamson, *The Longing for Myth*, 96.

combat Judaism as well as Catholicism, whose ritualism rendered it merely “Christianity sunken down into Judaism.”¹²⁰ Following Feuerbach, Strauss assailed Jewish “national egotism,” suggesting even if the Jews were offered Emancipation, they would reject it. The only solution, in Strauss’ mind, was to allow intermarriage between Jews and Christians in order to progressively dilute Jewish blood.¹²¹ Both Strauss and de Wette were dismissed from their respective academic positions on account of their views, which scandalized an academic establishment seeking to reconcile historical criticism with the truth of the Bible. However, their views on Judaism would have lasting effect in biblical criticism as twentieth century scholars, also following the work of Renan, attempted to de-Judaize Christianity by resurrecting the notion of an Aryan Christ.¹²²

IX. Primitive Judaism

Finally, the assumption that Judaism was essentially mythological and primitive was reinforced by anthropologists and ethnographers at the turn of the twentieth century like William Robertson Smith, E.B. Tylor, and James Frazer. The study of Semitic monotheism took new form in Smith’s 1889 *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*.¹²³ Smith’s work, however, appeared at the crossroads of biblical criticism and anthropology as he grounded his own theory of myth and Judaism in not only Ancient Near Eastern sources, but ethnographic research in the Middle East. Precipitating the rise of the “myth and ritual school,” Smith underscored the primacy of religious rites prior to their mythologization. Before questions of meaning, there was only deed. What was “obligatory” was not “belief in a certain series of myths” but rather “the exact performance of certain sacred acts prescribed by religious tradition.”¹²⁴ The greatest exemplars of this were the ancient Israelites, whose legends explained the particulars of

¹²⁰ W. M. L de Wette, *Über Religion und Theologie: Erläuterungen zu seinem Lehrbuch der Dogmatik* (Berlin: Reimer, 1821), 125.

¹²¹ David Friedrich Strauss, “Judenverfolgung und Judenemanzipation”. *Jahrbücher der Gegenwart* 30, no. April (1848), 117–119. See also Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism*, 128.

¹²² See Susanna Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹²³ William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: First Series: The Fundamental Institutions* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1901), 137-139.

¹²⁴ Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*, 89.

Levitical sacrifice. To substantiate this theory, Smith theorized “totemism” as the identification of a clan or tribe with an animal or object necessitating its ritual slaughter to effect social cohesion. This lay at the heart of the “fundamental institutions” of Semitic monotheism.¹²⁵ Smith not only shifted emphasis from belief to practice, but also elevated the sociological function of religion. Connecting this with his ethnographic work, Smith showed how these practices survived among the inhabitants of the Orient who remained practitioners of a kind of primitive religion by now extinct in the Occident.

Smith’s theory therefore implied a direct correlation between Judaism and primitive religion. However, it also played upon supersessionist ideas about Judaism as an undeveloped tradition whose fulfillment lay in Christianity. This is reflected in Smith’s attitude toward post-biblical and contemporary Judaism in 1881’s *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church* where he unflatteringly portrays Judaism as a quintessentially backward religion whose true potential is realized only by Christianity and, much later, historical criticism.¹²⁶ Although Smith maintained the structural vestige of Christian anti-Judaism, he explicitly rejected Renan’s hardline racial distinction between Aryans and Semites in his second and third series of *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* published posthumously.¹²⁷ In the first series of *Lectures* Smith had already denied the difference between Semitic and Aryan religion, revealing this stark opposition as untenable and effectively spelling the collapse of the Aryan-Semitic divide among scholars of religion at the close of the nineteenth century. Here he also repudiated Renan’s claim that the ancient Israelites had no mythology as a “mere unfounded assumption,” a critique borne out by his first series of *Lectures*. This did not mean, however, that Smith was eager to elaborate the nature of Semitic mythology, instead remaining coy about this possibility based upon the dearth of reliable ancient

¹²⁵ Robertson Smith, *Lectures*, 117.

¹²⁶ William Robertson Smith, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church: A Course of Lectures on Biblical Criticism* (New York: Appleton and Co., 1892). See also Stefan Reif, “William Robertson Smith in Relation to Hebraists and Jews at Christ’s College Cambridge,” in *William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment*, ed. William Johnstone (Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 218-219.

¹²⁷ Stroumsa, *Semitic Monotheism*, 209 fn. 72.

sources.¹²⁸ Therefore, while Smith may have departed from Renan's theory of Semitic monotheism, he elaborated his own according to which Judaism again serves as a kind of historico-evolutionary foil.

Smith's emphasis on the primitivism of Semitic religion concurred with English anthropologist E.B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* in 1871, which indexed Judaism as "animism" along with a smattering of other traditions regarded equally pejoratively as superstitious. Animism, for Tylor, was roughly correlative with the Comtean understanding of "fetishism," according to which inanimate objects are attributed agency and personality.¹²⁹ The history of mythology was simply a species of animism for Tylor, a record of human mental error produced by the "mythic faculty" mistaking miraculous stories and legends as legitimate history rather than fiction.¹³⁰ The "mythic faculty" was endemic to the psychology of the "lower races" such that "savages" remained trapped in "the myth-making stage of the human mind."¹³¹ Explicitly following an evolutionary paradigm, the Western mind had freed itself of its mythic past through reason, science, and secularity, although a capacity for mythopoeia persisted as a remnant of this archaic disposition. In particular, Tylor's Darwinian doctrine of "survivals" accounted for the persistence of animistic practices among contemporary peoples. When it came to Judaism, this mirrored Smith's notion that the inhabitants of modern Arabia served as leftover representatives of ancient Semitic religion. Indeed, Smith had shown how ancient Israelite religion descended from a prior "heathenism." By contrast, for Tylor "primitive Judaism" is primarily folkloric in character and precedes monotheism itself. Thus, although Tylor in no way singles out Judaism as particularly fetishistic or irrational in *Primitive Culture*, by locating Judaism among archaic religions of the mythic past he perpetuated the notion that it was roughly congruent with primitive religion as such, positing a homology between Judaism and the animism of Africa, Asia, or the Americas.

¹²⁸ Stroumsa, *Semitic Monotheism*, 210.

¹²⁹ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, Vol 1 (London: John Murray, 1920), 132.

¹³⁰ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 415.

¹³¹ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 283. See also Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*, 87.

The correlation between Judaism and primitive religion became more explicit in Scottish anthropologist James Frazer. Influenced by Smith and Tylor alike, *The Golden Bough* in 1890 traced the motif of dying and rising gods through a dizzying array of mythological systems, placing emphasis on “sympathetic magic” as a feature of primitive religion.¹³² In Frazer, myth would simply become the literary outgrowth of primitive religion conceptualized as a matter of belief, although it was still heavily reliant upon Tylor’s psychological theory of animism and Smith’s sociological notion of totemism. Here again, although Jews and Judaism were not singled out, their religious practices were catalogued alongside those of Greco-Roman antiquity and the savages of colonized lands. For instance, Frazer remarked upon the Jewish aversion to pigs, offensively suggesting that this resistance stemmed from a previous totemistic worship of them by ancient Israelites.¹³³ Likewise, he would remark upon the Levitical practice of scapegoating an animal for the sins of the community, drawing connections between this practice and similar ones among Africans, South Asians, or Roma in Eastern Europe.¹³⁴

Beyond this, though, Frazer would undertake comparative studies of Judaism and other religions in 1918’s *Folklore in the Old Testament*. Just as Tylor had drawn comparisons between the Kabbalah and Vedanta, for instance, Frazer used his doctrine of “survivals” to show how the contents of the Hebrew Bible not only shared similarities with the cults of other Ancient Near Eastern peoples, but religious traditions the world over. Comparing the stories, beliefs, and rituals proscribed in the Hebrew Bible with witchcraft and the animist practices observed among primitive Africans, East Asians, or aboriginal Australians, Frazer suggested that Israelite religion was merely a product of a polytheistic, folkloristic environment.¹³⁵ Reduced to its mythological parts, the Hebrew Bible utterly lacked originality and could be revealed as rooted in the very paganism it reviled. Here again, although Frazer’s project was not explicitly intended as an anti-Jewish one, in his deployment of the historical-critical and

¹³² James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Collier, 1922).

¹³³ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 547.

¹³⁴ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 659.

¹³⁵ James Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend, and Law* (London: Macmillan, 1919).

comparative methods to detail Judaism's relationship with adjacent mythologies and rituals he *de facto* equated it with primitive religion—a move evident in *The Golden Bough* as well. While this might subsist between the lines in Frazer's major published works, it surfaced elsewhere. Like Smith, Frazer's opinions of post-biblical Judaism and contemporary Jewry were also unflattering in his lectures and correspondence, sardonically cataloging European Jews among other ancient and modern "savages" in Africa, Asia, and the Americas—all sterile representatives of the dead letter.¹³⁶

Therefore, although figures like Smith, Tylor, or Frazer generally refrained from expressing blatant anti-Jewish sentiments like their German and French counterparts, there remained a residual tendency to position Judaism as a mythic remnant of primitive religion and contemporary Jews as its representatives in a modern, scientific, and secular age.

X. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that throughout the history of mythography from the eighteenth century to the dawn of the twentieth, Judaism and "the Jew" were deployed as "figures of thought" or floating signifiers serving as a foil for either myth's valorization or denigration. The assumed inferiority of the Jews was explained through their lack or excess of mythology, theological insufficiency, cultural degeneration, or attempts at forgery and falsification. Furthermore, the history of mythography evinces a systematic attempt to write Judaism out of the history of monotheism in order to erase the Jewish roots of Christianity. As part of the production of Judaism "out of the entrails of Christianity," this was imbricated with the rise of "religion" in the context of post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment Europe, especially as myth became embroiled in political-theological disputes amidst processes of secularization. More importantly, this also cannot be divorced from ongoing debates over Jewish Emancipation, which was realized in France in 1791, Britain in 1858, and Germany in 1871 before being revoked by the Nazis. Indeed, if myth had become instrumental for the articulation of, on the one hand, German national belonging and, on the other, the elaboration of a disenchanted secularity, mythography

¹³⁶ Robert Ackerman, "J. G. Frazer and the Jews," *Religion*, 22:2 (1992), 141.

directly concerned the political status of Jews not only in Germany, but across Europe. Jews could easily be characterized as either non-mythic aliens or backward savages, depending on one's intellectual and political-theological agenda.

Anxieties about Jews as Europe's "internal others" raised by the Jewish Question and laid bare in the history of mythography had roots in the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and the theology of supersessionism. These are theological anxieties that, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, would be secularized and transformed into racial ones. Just as the problem of Judaism as origin and Other had resulted in a series of attempts to resolve this disjunction in Christian theology, so too did mythographers attempt to solve the riddle of the place of Judaism in the history of religion and race. As this was happening, the same hereditary inferiority attributed to the Jews as a superseded "internal Other" was being attributed to Europe's "external Others" in colonial Africa, Asia, and the Americas by mythographers and other early scholars in the study of religion. This invites speculation as to whether the study of religion's received anthropological assumptions about the evolution of culture from the simple to the complex, superstitious to the rational, barbaric to the civilized, religious to the secular might also be understood in part as a secularization of the Christian supersession of Judaism, this time expanded to encompass a global heterogeneity of peoples under the yoke of "religion."

As is well known, by 1879 "Semite" had entered the cultural lexicon such that Wilhelm Marr could found his League of Anti-Semites as part of a growing hatred toward Jews in Germany fueled by propaganda and acts of violence. Likewise, Heinrich von Treitschke would make vulgar antisemitism palatable for the cultural elite that same year. Across the Rhine, the Dreyfus Affair would stoke animus toward Jews in France after 1894 just as the late nineteenth century would also see an uptick in pogroms in Eastern Europe. This often went hand in hand with a resurgence of conspiratorial theories culminating in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, whose apocalyptic fear of a grand Jewish plot for world domination mirrored motifs descended from biblical, late-antique, and medieval Christian anti-Judaism. These events would set the stage for the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust. It is undeniable that these developments were aided by mythography's deployment of "the Jew," Judaism, and theorization of the

Semite along with other aspects such as the positing of Aryan racial supremacy and the de-Judaization of Christianity. This went hand in hand with the popularization of race science and Social Darwinism by figures such as Gobineau or Ernst Haeckel. Further, the findings of mythography and larger developments in the study of “world religions” would bolster growing interest in the wisdom of the Orient among theosophical societies and occultist movements. This generated an esoteric current at the heart of European modernity, aspects of which were also famously integrated into fascist ideology and propaganda.

Lastly, for Jewish scholars in Germany especially, this phenomenon raised the question: *what really was the relationship between Judaism and myth?* If myth was, as the romantics argued, foundational for national, cultural, and ethnic or racial belonging, did the Jews in fact possess a mythology that could legitimate them as a people—perhaps serving as a basis for their own nationhood in Palestine? On the other hand, if myth was, as the anthropologists and other partisans of the Enlightenment argued, an aspect of that “childhood of the human race” to be abandoned in modernity, could Judaism’s abstract monotheism and prophetic, ethical core be reclaimed as a basis for the inclusion of Jews not only in Europe, but modern society in general? The question of Judaism and myth, therefore, had imminent political-theological implications for Germans and Jews alike. As mentioned in the introduction, for scholars like Scholem or Buber, the answer to the first question was affirmative. Rejecting the hyper-rationalism and assimilationism of the *Haskalah* and the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, Scholem and Buber turned to the Kabbalah and Hasidism to elucidate a rich history of Jewish mysticism and mythology that exceeded reason and even dabbled in the irrational. Making common cause with the Romantic paradigm in mythography, this agenda no doubt dovetailed with their Zionism as one solution to the Jewish Question. These figures often stressed the Oriental Otherness of Judaism, with mysticism and mythology serving as one foundation among others for a new articulation of Jewish identity in Palestine.

By contrast, this dissertation charts an alternative trajectory of thought among a series of thinkers who answered affirmatively to the second question, instead emphasizing the ambivalence, dissonance, or antagonism between Judaism and myth. For them, myth would become an object of

contempt held responsible for the rise of modern antisemitism, fascism, and the crimes of the Holocaust as it would for many others of the period. This prompted them to underscore the ethical kernel of Jewish monotheism as an antidote to the irrationalities and dangers posed by mythical thought. More in alignment with the evolutionary-anthropological paradigm than the Romantics, myth remained a feature of “primitive religion” whose stranglehold on a superstitious and idolatrous humanity was broken in history by the revelation of the Jewish God as a prelude to abstract reason. In their view, Judaism was integral to the development of European thought and culture. This would allow them to maintain a fidelity to the German Enlightenment as well as a *Maskilic* rationalism dismissed by scholars like Scholem. More than merely apologia or an empty rhetorical device, the imagined opposition between Judaism and myth served to advocate for the continued relevance of Jewish monotheism at the margins of a Europe rapidly descending into what would eventually be called “barbarism.”

Chapter 2 | Personification: Heymann Steinthal and Hermann Cohen

“In Prometheus is comprised the whole essence of heathenism: deification of man and nature.”

—Heymann Steinthal

“For the final meaning of myth is the personification of the impersonal.”

—Hermann Cohen

I. Introduction

Because the imagined relationship between Judaism and myth in the history of religion had become politically charged in light of the Jewish Question, it became increasingly incumbent upon Jewish scholars working in the fields of philosophy, theology, and the burgeoning human sciences to formulate a response. The Judaism-myth issue came to a head with what has been called *Der Monotheismusstreit* stoked by Ernest Renan in the 1850's. The French Orientalist had argued that the Jews lacked a rich and creative polytheistic mythological heritage, possessing instead merely a sterile “instinct” for monotheism as a “minimum of religion.” Unlike their vital Aryan counterparts, the Semites were impotent, backward, and archaic. Renan immediately raised the stakes of the Judaism-myth issue and, in the context of Jewish Emancipation, overtly politicized it like never before. He called into question not only the status of Judaism in the history of religion, but the very origin and enduring relevance of monotheism. This prompted a retort from none other than Heymann Steinthal, a widely respected if somewhat reclusive German-Jewish linguistic ethno-psychologist. In an apologetic, yet polemical and often sardonic, critique of Renan written in 1859, Steinthal took it upon himself to clarify the relation between Judaism and myth relative to the place of Jews in German society before embarking upon his own endeavors in mythography. Curiously enough, *Der Berliner Antisemitismusstreit* of the 1880's stoked by the eminent historian Heinrich von Treitschke's 1879 pamphlet calling for full Jewish assimilation through conversion to Christianity would serve largely the same role for his student, Neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen. Like the monotheism controversy to which Steinthal

responded, the antisemitism controversy would spurn Cohen to transpose his mentor's critique of myth in a new, critical idealist key. Treitschke's sanctioning of vulgar antisemitism among the cultured elite had supplied Cohen with the impetus to decry myth as an irrational, immoral foil for the truth of Judaism and enlightenment. Countervailing Aryan supremacy both in the human sciences and the public sphere, Judaism stood for reason and disenchantment against the very mystifications that fostered antisemitic fervor.

Steinthal and Cohen, this chapter will demonstrate, rebuffed the anti-Judaism encoded within both the romantic and anthropological paradigms in mythography simultaneously. This was done by championing an early Israelite mythic polytheism that, while leaving its traces in the Pentateuch and other biblical texts, was overcome by the prophets as the Jewish national consciousness matures in the exilic and post-exilic periods. Thus, not only do the Jews possess a national mythology, but they alone have overcome it through the gradual invention of monotheism, critical reason, and humanist ethics, concepts integral to the modern, secular, liberal nation state. Furthermore, this serves as grounds for Jewish Emancipation since, on the one hand, the Jews can be legitimated in the eyes of the romantics on account of their authentic mythic heritage and, on the other, they can claim affinities with the rationalism of the German Enlightenment and the cultural ideal of *Bildung*. At the same time, though, Steinthal and Cohen posited a defense of Jews and Judaism on their own terms, resisting calls to total assimilation through conversion and baptism. Although they make obvious concessions and engage in explicit apologia, they do so to advocate for the role of Jews and Judaism in Germany and European culture *writ large*. However, as I will return to in conclusion, this did not exempt them from either an overt reliance upon nineteenth century racial theories or romantic assumptions about the origins of human culture.

Steinthal and Cohen define myth as a pre-critical, sensuous, irrational, and immoral mode of thought that deifies both humanity and nature while also erroneously personifying or animating the latter. Nevertheless, both acknowledge that despite its inferiority myth is still a necessary and crucially important phase in the earliest stages of a people's historical development. This is contrasted with

monotheism as a more mature stage of religion and culture characterized by idealism, reflexive critique, and scientific reason animated by ethical regard. This portrayal of Jewish monotheism as essentially rational was no doubt a carryover from the *Haskalah* and the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* of which Steinthal and Cohen were direct descendants. However, while Steinthal writes as a linguist, psychologist, and quasi-anthropologist grounded in the German philological tradition often operating from romantic assumptions by default, Cohen writes as a rationalist philosopher immersed in the German and Jewish philosophical traditions with a marked fidelity to the idealism and ethics of Plato and Kant as well as Maimonidean negative theology. This means that Steinthal's critique of myth runs along the lines of nation, language, race, and spiritual-psychological makeup, whereas Cohen's critique is more ephemeral and expansive as he understands myth to be a broader structure of thought detectable in the tendency toward immanence, materialism, monism, pantheism, and mysticism. Although for Steinthal traces of myth still bore themselves out in modernity on occasion, Cohen saw a world still saturated with it. For both, myth was an obstacle to be overcome on the way toward a secular, civilized, and tolerant society. In this way they positioned themselves as cultural critics or philosophers of culture, viewing myth as an explanation for both the origins of human culture as well as certain contemporary aspects of it. This would set the stage for the further elaboration of the critique of myth among later German-Jewish intellectuals.

II. Inventing *Völkerpsychologie*

Steinthal's theory of myth was founded on the principles of *Völkerpsychologie*, the discipline he co-founded with his colleague and brother-in-law Moritz Lazarus. However, the roots of Steinthal's fascination with psychological ethnography run deeper and are intertwined with his penchant for languages. Born in 1823 in the town of Gröbzig in the Duchy of Anhalt, Steinthal was raised in an multireligious and multilingual environment consisting of a mixture of Yiddish and German as well as the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin Steinthal learned at the Jewish elementary school, the public gymnasium in Bernberg, and his own private Talmudic tutorials. In 1842 he matriculated to the University of Berlin

where he registered with the faculty of theology with rabbinical aspirations before switching to philosophy. In actuality, Steintal had begun devoting himself to an exploration of classical philology and Middle Eastern and Asian languages, studying with such notable figures as Franz Bopp and Wilhelm Grimm.¹ Completing his doctorate in 1847 at Tübingen, Steintal went on to write his *Habilitation* in 1848 at Berlin on Humboldtian and Hegelian philosophies of language.² Here the groundwork for Steintal's later thought was laid as he attempted to pit "Humboldt against Humboldt" by attending to what the philosopher had called the "inner language form."³ By this Humboldt meant the mental states preceding the emergence of language early in its development.⁴ Rather than seeing this as an isolated event in the formation of the intellect, Steintal seized upon it to explain the mental activity laying behind every speech act and logical representation. This gained him access to mental dispositions through the study of linguistic phenomena and, in concert with the Hegelian philosophy of history, to understand how peoples and cultures developed from the inside out.

In Berlin, Steintal met Leopold Zunz and Abraham Geiger, quickly ingratiating himself with the major figures of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, who had sought to concretize the "science of Judaism" as a secular academic discipline by underscoring its importance in world history and claims to rationality. Steintal would follow in their footsteps. However, in 1849 Steintal was introduced to Lazarus by the philologist Carl Heyse, igniting a friendship that would last decades. Steintal's tendency to withdraw and his philological emphasis on discreteness and difference was complemented by Lazarus' outspokenness, charisma, and aptitude for grand syntheses and generalizations. For his part, Lazarus had already begun outlining the program of *Völkerpsychologie* in essays like "On the Concept and

¹ For more on Steintal's early life and education see Ingrid Belke, "Einleitung" in *Moritz Lazarus und Heymann Steintal: Die Begründer der Völkerpsychologie in ihren Briefen*, ed. Ingrid Belke (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971), lxxxi-ciii. Also Heymann Steintal, "Aus den Jugenderinnerungen Steintals, mit Vorbemerkung von Leo Baeck," in *Moritz Lazarus und Heymann Steintal: Die Begründer der Völkerpsychologie in ihren Briefen*, ed. Ingrid Belke (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971), 371-384.

² Heymann Steintal, *Die Sprachwissenschaft W. von Humboldts und die Hegelsche Philosophie* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1848).

³ Heymann Steintal, *Der Ursprung der Sprache im Zusammenhange mit den letzten Fragen alles Wissens. Eine Darstellung, Kritik und Fortentwicklung der vorzüglichsten Ansichten* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1858), 117.

⁴ See Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Innere Sprachform" in *Gesammelte Werke*, Volume 6 (Berlin: Reimer, 1848), 92-103.

Possibility of a Peoples' Psychology" in 1851.⁵ Lazarus was heavily influenced by the thought of educational philosopher and psychologist Johann Friedrich Herbart, as well as Hegel. From Herbart, Lazarus took the idea that the mind is intimately involved in the construction of society on both the individual and collective levels through a common will. From Hegel, Lazarus adopted the penultimate notion of "objective spirit" and, like Steinthal in his use of Humboldt's "inner language form," expanded it to include objects of culture such as literature, art, architecture, and so on as the "materialization of the mind."⁶ This implied that society and history were animated by psychological forces that could be teased out and investigated according to a new science. Clearly then, Lazarus' ideas were already running parallel to Steinthal's, motivating them to found *Völkerpsychologie* as a new field incorporating insights from a vast array of academic disciplines with its own journal edited by the founders, the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*. Although the journal would enjoy a thirty-year career, by the 1890's it would fall into obscurity along with its disciplinary namesake, only to be transfigured into something very different by Wilhelm Wundt.

As a "psychological ethnology,"⁷ *Völkerpsychologie* avoided the major pitfalls of the human sciences in Steinthal and Lazarus' view. *Völkerpsychologie* was predicated on the notion of *Volksgeist* or "people's spirit," an idea that could be traced back as far as Vico, Montesquieu, Herder, Hegel, Mill, and Comte.⁸ In their introduction to the discipline in the first volume of the *ZfVS* in 1860, Steinthal and Lazarus argued the concept was already in usage across the humanistic disciplines.⁹ However, by elevating *Völkerpsychologie* to the level of its own science they sought to, on the one hand, broaden the scope of psychology beyond the individual and, on the other, resist the biologism of nineteenth century

⁵ Moritz Lazarus, "Über den Begriff und die Möglichkeit einer Völkerpsychologie," *Deutsches Museum: Zeitschrift für Literatur, Kunst und öffentliches Leben* 1 (1851), 113–26.

⁶ Moritz Lazarus, "Einige synthetischen Gedanken zur Völkerpsychologie," *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* 3 (1865), 1–94.

⁷ As Lazarus characterized it in an April 1852 letter to Steinthal in *Moritz Lazarus und Heymann Steinthal, Die Begründer des Völkerpsychologie in ihren Briefen* Vol. 1, ed. Ingrid Belke (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971), 255.

⁸ Belke, "Einleitung," xliii–xliv.

⁹ Moritz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal, "Einleitende Gedanken über Völkerpsychologie, als Einladung zu einer Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft," *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 1 (1860), 2.

anthropology.¹⁰ Beyond “lower” sensual representations studied by psychology, *Völkerpsychologie* investigated “higher” cultural representations. Indeed, *Völkerpsychologie* was predicated on the notion that cultures, societies, peoples, and nations possessed a sort of communal self-consciousness that exhibited itself in their forms of language, philosophy, religion, art, and so on that was irreducible to biology. In this sense, race and ethnicity were understood in a spiritual or idealist register. This approach was inextricable from the context of emergent European nationalisms, namely the drive for German Unification under Prussian leadership which Steinthal and Lazarus both supported.¹¹ Lazarus expressed his support in the 1850 essay “On the Moral Right of Prussia in Germany” with an eye toward a psychological ethnology of the German people.¹² At the same time, though, both figures were acutely aware of their situation as unemancipated Jews, meaning that the project of *Völkerpsychologie* was unintelligible apart from the Jewish Question. Immanent to the stated aims of *Völkerpsychologie*, a psychological ethnology of the Jews would legitimize them as a nation among nations, narrating Jewish history as the unfolding of *Volksgeist* in history and according to the Enlightenment ideal of *Bildung*.¹³ However, the treatment of Judaism in *Völkerpsychologie* by Steinthal and Lazarus would differ starkly from the analysis of other peoples as they championed the Jews as paragons of reason, universalism, and ethics undergirding their vision for a liberal, cosmopolitan Germany. This was especially the case when it came to mythology.

Myth achieved pride of place in the first volume of the *ZfVS*. “Next to language,” Steinthal wrote, “myth is the innermost core of *Volksgeist*, from which its entire theological and practical life flows.”¹⁴ This was established on a firm theoretical basis in the introduction: “mythology, like the word of language, is

¹⁰ For more on the relationship between *Völkerpsychologie* and cultural anthropology see Ivan Kalmar, “The *Völkerpsychologie* of Lazarus and Steinthal and the Modern Concept of Culture,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48:4 (1987), 671-690.

¹¹ Egbert Klautke has detailed the shaped of *völkerpsychologie* in relation to the politics of German nationalism in *The Mind of a Nation: Völkerpsychologie in Germany, 1851–1955* (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 58-103.

¹² Moritz Lazarus, *Über die sittliche Berechtigung Preußens in Deutschland* (Berlin: Schulze, 1850).

¹³ For more on Lazarus, Steinthal, and *völkerpsychologie* relative to Jewish Emancipation and the *Bildung* ideal, see Matt Bunzl, “*Völkerpsychologie* and German- Jewish Emancipation” in *Worldly Provincialism German Anthropology in the Age of Empire*, ed. H. Glenn Penny and Matt Bunzl (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 47-85.

¹⁴ Heyman Steinthal, “Wilhelm v. Humboldt’s Briefe an F. G. Welcker,” *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 1 (1860), 233.

a form of apperception of nature and man, a way of looking at things at a certain stage of the development of the people's spirit."¹⁵ Here the authors appealed to the Kantian theory of apperception as interpreted and psychologized by Herbart, according to which given sensations or mental creations are rendered intelligible in the mind by incorporating them into an already-existing structural whole through a process of systematization. For Herbart, this basic insight stood at the core of his pedagogical philosophy and psychology, elaborating a theoretical basis for *Bildung*.¹⁶ Steinthal had already combined this causal-mechanical theory of apperception with Humboldt's philosophy of language elsewhere, but here he attempted to disclose the process through which natural phenomena were increasingly personified as deities with their own temperaments, needs, desires, intentions, and actions affecting the lives of human beings. While the exact mechanics of this process would not be detailed until later, the introduction provided a programmatic hypothesis for entry into the emerging sub-discipline—"not yet two decades old"—of comparative mythology.¹⁷ Just as Herbart had verged on the discovery of psychological ethnology, Humboldt had encroached on the frontiers of mythography but was inhibited by both an inattention to the broader theoretical import of the "inner language form" and a lack of the source material from the Middle East and Asia now available to Steinthal.¹⁸

In their introduction, the authors outlined a thoroughly Herderian conception of myth as the product of land and language's entwinement—citing Bopp's work on Sanskrit and Grimm's history of the German language—but idealized and psychologized it by making constant recourse to *Volksgeist*.¹⁹ It was exactly this process of idealization in myth that would eventually lead to "religion" as its apotheosis and abolition. "Mythical cognition always takes hold of religious-mythical categories such as gods and heroes. Thus, all mythology counts as religious precisely because it contains grand generic apperceptions, while religion itself is the yearning and partial fulfillment of the apperception of nature

¹⁵ Lazarus and Steinthal, "Einleitende," 44.

¹⁶ See Johann Friedrich Herbart, "Von der Apperzeption, dem Inneren Sinne, und der Aufmerksamkeit," in *Sämtliche Werke* Volume 6, ed. G. Hartenstein (Leipzig: Voss, 1906), 188-205.

¹⁷ Lazarus and Steinthal, "Einleitende," 45.

¹⁸ Steinthal, "Wilhelm v. Humboldt's Briefe," 233-244.

¹⁹ Lazarus and Steinthal, "Einleitende," 46.

and the world through a supreme theoretical, practical, and ethical concept.”²⁰ As signaled in the previous chapter, the distinction between myth and religion was central in the context of the “world religions” discourse. Accusing their colleagues of uncritically conflating the two, Steintal and Lazarus suggested that while all religion was in some sense myth, not all myth was religion.²¹ Although the institutions and rituals of religion were derived from mythical sources, religion itself was animated by an ethical concern foreign to mythic consciousness. While, again, the programmatic introduction did not flesh these ideas out in detail, these hypotheses would allow Steintal to uphold Judaism as religion *par excellence* against a paganism still embroiled in mythology in later articles published in the *ZfVS*. This would be coupled with the conviction that the idealistic, ethical, and deeply iconoclastic nature of religion was congruent with rational, humanistic, and scientific aims. This meant that despite his reliance upon romantic mythography, Steintal firmly aligned himself with the evolutionary-anthropological paradigm. As he would write, “[t]o dissolve mythical forces everywhere is now the task of science.”²²

III. The Mythology of the Semites

In 1852, while *Völkerpsychologie* and the *ZfVS* were still in their infancy, Steintal was awarded the Volney Prize for his research in linguistics, affording him a four year stay in Paris to work on Chinese. During this time he came in contact with a number of intellectuals on the French scene, in particular Ernest Renan.²³ While their acquaintance would be amicable during these years, after Steintal’s return to the University of Berlin in 1856 as a *Privatdozent* in linguistics and the founding of the *ZfVS* things would turn sour. However, Steintal was not the only one provoked by Renan’s work. As Guy Stroumsa has termed it, the publication of Renan’s 1859 text, *New Considerations on the General Character of the Semitic Peoples and in Particular on their Tendency Toward Monotheism*,²⁴ generated a veritable

²⁰ Lazarus and Steintal, “Einleitende,” 44.

²¹ Lazarus and Steintal, “Einleitende,” 44.

²² Herman Steintal, “Assimilation und Attraction,” *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 1 (1860), 102.

²³ Belke, “Einleitung,” xciv.

²⁴ Ernest Renan, *Nouvelles considérations sur le caractère général des peuples sémitiques et en particulier sur leur tendance au monothéisme* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1859).

Monothemusstreit in the following decade.²⁵ For European scholars and Jewish thinkers alike, it had long been assumed that monotheism was the product of Hebrew genius, a presupposition first undermined by the German Romantics and then French and English Orientalists. This was enabled, again, by the already circulating Aryan-Semitic binary that for Renan expressed a racial essentialism. By attributing to the Semites merely an “instinct” for monotheism, Renan effectively rehabilitated the supersessionist trope of Judaism as an overly formalistic, ritualistic, sterile tradition motivated by a Pharisaic devotion to the “dead letter” of Jewish law. While Renan’s text prompted a range of responses, in his review Max Müller held that it was unlikely that the Hebrews had been the sole inventors of faith in a single God. Instead, Müller looked to the Aryans of ancient India for its genesis while also claiming “henotheism” as a kind of universal, primordial monotheism from which polytheism had fallen—an idea Schelling had espoused only two decades prior.²⁶ In both cases, the de-Judaization of monotheism—principally Christianity—was well under way in a manner that further stigmatized the Jews as an alien race within Europe.

Steinthal’s response to Renan in the first volume of the *ZfVS* was as apologetic as it was mockingly critical, setting him on a polemical trajectory that would continue for the rest of his career. Steinthal began his review of Renan’s text by undermining the theory of instinct itself as a fundamentally uncritical, ahistorical, and unquestionable horizon attributed virtually limitless explanatory power in realms of linguistics, philosophy, religion, and politics. This was in keeping with the anti-biologicistic thrust of *Völkerpsychologie*. “And what does Renan tell us about the essence, the organization, the effectiveness of these instincts? Nothing!”²⁷ Ironically, though, Steinthal readily accepted the factual existence of the races—also in alignment with the main tenets of *Völkerpsychologie*—arguing that the Jews are no different than their Ancient Near Eastern polytheistic neighbors. “The Israelites,” he asserted,

²⁵ Guy Stroumsa, *Semitic Monotheism: The Rise and Fall of a Scholarly Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 168.

²⁶ Friedrich Max Müller, “Semitic Monotheism,” in *The Essential Max Müller: On Language, Mythology, and Religion*, ed. Jon Stone (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 25-42.

²⁷ Heymann Steinthal, “Zur Charakteristik der semitischen Völker,” *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 1 (1860), 330.

“cannot be detached from the general Semitic background.”²⁸ Further, Steintal points to the contradiction between Renan’s euhemerist and anti-euhemerist approaches to Greek mythology and the Hebrew Bible respectively.²⁹ However, what Steintal ultimately challenges is the assumed immutability of the Semites, a supersessionist trope depicting the Jews as static and unchanging not unlike the noble savage of colonial lands. Against this, Steintal postulated an original Elohist polytheism out of which Jewish monotheism developed over the course of centuries. This also undermined Renan’s claim that monotheism is unnatural save for its ancient Aryan iterations.³⁰ By dismantling the Renanian theory of instincts, Steintal espoused a “transformed polytheism” as Israelite monotheism’s historical conditions of possibility, meaning that “pagan gods are woven even through the life stories of Moses, the Judges, and David.”³¹ Yet here Steintal also reiterated his idealist definition of monotheism as an antidote to the “idolatry of the natural powers,”³² challenging the notion that the former simply connotes that “Yahweh is Indra and Vritra at the same time.”³³ Thus, in his critique of Renan, Steintal mounted a defense of Judaism as historically sensuous and mythical, but presently idealist and monotheistic. This again had a twofold effect, both legitimating the Jews as a nation like any other while also singling them out as the Oriental, Semitic progenitors of monotheism, reason, and ethics.³⁴

Steintal’s theory of Judaism and myth, then, was an extension of both the program of *Völkerpsychologie* as well as his broader defense of the Semites. This was apparent in a pair of essays published in the second volume of the *ZfVS* in 1862 on the Greek myth of Prometheus and the biblical story of Samson.³⁵ These essays represented an attempt to flesh out the program laid out in the

²⁸ Steintal, “Zur Charakteristik der semitischen Völker,” 343.

²⁹ Steintal, “Zur Charakteristik der semitischen Völker,” 339.

³⁰ Steintal, “Zur Charakteristik der semitischen Völker,” 332.

³¹ Steintal, “Zur Charakteristik der semitischen Völker,” 339.

³² Steintal, “Zur Charakteristik der semitischen Völker,” 343.

³³ Steintal, “Zur Charakteristik der semitischen Völker,” 344

³⁴ For more on Steintal’s critique of Renan and his self-styled Orientalism, see Ivan Kalmar, “Steintal, the Jewish Orientalist,” in *Chajim H. Steintal: Sprachwissenschaftler und Philosoph im 19. Jahrhundert/Linguist and Philosopher in the 19th. Century*, ed. Hartwig Wiedebach and Annette Winkelmann (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 135-152.

³⁵ Heymann Steintal, “The Original Form of the Legend of Prometheus,” in Ignaz Goldziher, *Mythology of the Hebrews and its Historical Development*, trans. Russell Martineau (London: Longmans, 1877), 363-391. Heymann Steintal, “The Legend of Samson,” in Ignaz Goldziher, *Mythology of the Hebrews and its Historical Development*, trans. Russell Martineau (London: Longmans, 1877), 392-446. Originally published as Heymann Steintal, “Die

introduction to the first volume of the journal as well as shore up Steinthal's critique of Renan. However, in each essay Steinthal traces either Prometheus or Samson back to an original solar mythology, illustrating the clear influence of Müller's work on Vedic myth upon his thought.³⁶ "The Original Form of the Legend of Prometheus" is perhaps the clearest articulation of Steinthal's theory of myth relative to the Kantian-Herbartian notion of apperception. Noting the correlation between earthly fire and heavenly fire in the creation of solar mythology, Steinthal encounters a problem: which one is apperceived relative to the other? Steinthal surmises: "Earthly fire is more common and immediate to humans in their everyday life, from this basis heavenly fire is mythologized through apperception."³⁷ And yet, although the sense-givenness of the terrestrial fire serves as the basis for celestial fire—personifying natural phenomena such as sunlight and lightning—Steinthal's archetypal, primitive human erroneously reverses this relationship.³⁸ Overwhelmed by the awesomeness of the heavens, humans understand not only celestial fire but their own existence as the product of a solar source. This is then correlated with the flight of birds, birthing the Vedic myth of Agni.³⁹ With the maturation, metamorphosis, and migration of Indo-European mythologies, Steinthal contends, the personification of the heavenly sphere becomes more elaborate, taking on a procreative and sexual element mirrored in terrestrial acts of kindling and copulation.⁴⁰ At a certain point, though, solar mythologies diverge to generate a dramatic pantheon of personages ultimately becoming capricious and unjust. What must be explained, then, is the origin of heavenly fire among human beings. It is precisely the figure of the thieving Prometheus, Steinthal argues, who remedies this problem.⁴¹

ursprüngliche Form der Sage von Prometheus," *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 2 (1862), 1-29. Heymann Steinthal, "Die Simsonssage nach ihrer Entstehung, "Form und Bedeutung und der Herakles-mythos," *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 2 (1862), 110-120. Also published as "Die Sage von Simson" in *Zu Bibel und Religionsphilosophie* (Berlin: Reimer, 1895), 35-77.

³⁶ On the subject of Steinthal and Müller's complicated relationship, see Joan Leopold, "Steinthal and Max Müller: Comparative Lives," in *Chajim H. Steinthal: Sprachwissenschaftler und Philosoph im 19. Jahrhundert/Linguist and Philosopher in the 19th. Century*, ed. Hartwig Wiedebach and Annette Winkelmann (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 31-49.

³⁷ Steinthal, "The Original Form," 378.

³⁸ Steinthal, "The Original Form," 380.

³⁹ Steinthal, "The Original Form," 386.

⁴⁰ Steinthal, "The Original Form," 388.

⁴¹ Steinthal, "The Original Form," 390.

At this point Steinthal's essay abruptly ends by contrasting Prometheus with another hero born of solar myth: the biblical figure of Moses. Prometheus not only stands as the paradigmatic solar hero illustrating the mythical process of apperception, but also illustrates "the whole essence of heathenism: deification of man and nature."⁴² Striking a thoroughly Feuerbachian tone, Steinthal advances a theory of heavenly projection according to which gods are created "in the image of man," enacting a deliberate self-deception in their objectification. Against this, Steinthal champions the biblical notion "according to which man was created like one single God, and was expected to make himself like God in life," a task animating the deeds of the mythical Moses.⁴³ Just as Prometheus brings fire to earth, Moses brings the law, demanding obedience to the Hebrew God. Here Steinthal also draws linkages between the striking of the rock to yield water in Numbers 20 and the gift of fire, noting the possibility of a lingering polytheistic consciousness in the process of being modified. Rather than pointing to the divinity of Moses, this miracle would point toward the truth of the Hebrew God. This would foreshadow Steinthal's argument for the logical operation by which the pagan "deification of man and nature" would be progressively phased out by the Jews: the act of comparison.

The problem of apperception also serves as the entry point into the relation between the legend of Samson and his polytheistic antecedents.⁴⁴ Steinthal inquires after the mythical origins of Samson's riddle in Judges 14, estimating that the enigmatic golden honey produced out of the slain lion's carcass must have its roots in the solar mythologization of the summer heat.⁴⁵ Working from this assumption, Steinthal proceeds to draw a number of comparisons between Samson and sun gods the world over, among them Hercules, Sandan, Vritra, and Siegfried.⁴⁶ As the "Hebrew Hercules," Samson's latent solar symbolism accounts for his strength, appearance, promiscuity, and immorality. Steinthal considers Hercules to be a Hellenization of Hebrew myth rather than the reverse, again triangulating the

⁴² Steinthal, "The Original Form," 391.

⁴³ Steinthal, "The Original Form," 391.

⁴⁴ Steinthal, "The Legend of Samson," 395.

⁴⁵ Steinthal, "The Legend of Samson," 396.

⁴⁶ Steinthal, "The Legend of Samson," 399-402.

achievements of the Semites prior to the Indo-Europeans. Steinthal's point is to demonstrate the progressive idealization of pagan myth in the Hebrew national consciousness not as a critically self-reflective act, but a natural product of the "popular imagination"⁴⁷ nonetheless occurring via a teleological "monotheistic principle."⁴⁸ The legend of Samson is none other than a "Hebrew modification" of pagan myth and polytheism along with the whole of the Pentateuch. This is also illustrated in the story of Job, which demonstrates the omnipotence of the Hebrew God in a manner similar to Indra, Zeus, or Apollo.⁴⁹ However, although he generally follows a euhemerist interpretation that understands legend as mythologized historical personages or geographical locations, the genius of the Hebrew prophets for Steinthal lay in their reversal of this trend. In effect, the prophets bring heaven to earth by transforming celestial concerns into earthly ones without succumbing to the sensuous immediacy of myth.⁵⁰ Thus, the biblical text retains *prima facie* its mythical form and content; however, its overarching message becomes humanistic, idealist, ethical, and historical.

From here, Steinthal's analysis diverges to demonstrate the congruity between the Jewish development of monotheism and the Christianization of Germany. Like the Hebrews, Steinthal observes, the Germans were once mired in a mythological consciousness ruled by Wotan and Siegfried. The difference here though is that while Jewish monotheism arose internally, German monotheism had to be introduced from the outside by Christians.⁵¹ However, the receptivity of the Germans to monotheism demonstrates its universal applicability and truthfulness, meaning that belief in a single God must be the unavoidable, eventual outcome of mythical thinking. All peoples, Steinthal concludes, have the ability to arrive at the truth of monotheism, abstract reason, and science according to their own psychological laws of development. "The thought 'God' forms the apex of the pyramid of ideas."⁵²

⁴⁷ Steinthal, "The Legend of Samson," 403.

⁴⁸ Steinthal, "The Legend of Samson," 418.

⁴⁹ Steinthal, "The Legend of Samson," 420.

⁵⁰ Steinthal, "The Legend of Samson," 424-425.

⁵¹ Steinthal, "The Legend of Samson," 431.

⁵² Steinthal, "The Legend of Samson," 438.

However, this does not mean that mythical residues are erased, as the legend of Samson shows along with examples from German and other European cultures.

How, though, does the transition from myth to monotheism occur? Turning to the Psalms, the innovation of Hebrew poetry is its deployment of the particle “as,” denoting in this instance comparison between natural phenomena and the divine rather than a homology.⁵³ This allows for a distinction between God as an idea and the sensuous “deification of man and nature.” In the case of Samson, the sun is no longer god. Instead, the two are simply *alike*. The solar hero is brought down to earth, becoming a human tasked with demonstrating the salvific omnipotence of the Hebrew God. “The strictly mythical character, the allusion to a religion of nature, was entirely lost from the stories about Samson. Whatever happened to him took a purely human character.”⁵⁴ Even Samson’s suicide, Steinthal argues, is divested of mythical significance: “Samson dies and remains dead; he dies, and tears down with him his own pillars—the pillars on which he had built the world—to find a grave beneath them. The heathen god is dead, and draws his own world down with him into his own nothingness; his battles were a play of shadows. Yahweh lives, ... the Lord of the world, the King of the earth, and his hero is Israel.”⁵⁵

IV. An Imageless Religion

Steinthal’s essays on Prometheus and Samson therefore served the purpose of fleshing out the relation between Judaism and myth more broadly by establishing a number of essential differences between myth and monotheism as such. This also translated to the theoretical gulf Steinthal had established between myth and religion in his introduction to *Völkerpsychologie* and the *ZfVS* with Lazarus. In essence, monotheism and religion were synonymous, allowing Steinthal to eventually posit a structural homology between monotheism, religion, and science as idealist, synthetic forms of cognition moving beyond the mere sensuality of mythic thought. This was more fully developed in Steinthal’s 1870 public lecture *Myth and Religion*, in many respects a culmination of his work on myth in the 1860’s and

⁵³ Steinthal, “The Legend of Samson,” 443.

⁵⁴ Steinthal, “The Legend of Samson,” 445.

⁵⁵ Steinthal, “The Legend of Samson,” 446.

an anti-pagan manifesto. Steinthal begins by confronting the “fate of myth,” admitting that, far from disappearing, “it is still alive today. Should we destroy it? The question is whether we can. And if we cannot, just as little as we can remove a speck of sunshine, the task becomes narrowed to this: how much should we limit it?”⁵⁶ Not unlike either Schelling’s conception of myth as a primordial unconscious force or Tylor’s notion of “survivals,” myth links the modern consciousness with the pre-modern or “primitive.”⁵⁷ “Myth,” Steinthal writes, “encompasses the entire conceptual world of peoples at their first stage of development,” one since surpassed by “the peoples of world history” but still observable in the “cultureless tribes” and the minds of children.⁵⁸ To think mythically for Steinthal entails an encounter with the paradox of the world’s simultaneous immediacy and strangeness, its familiarity and uncanniness, a tension that produces the personification and deification of natural phenomena and animals in response to the perceived helplessness of human beings and the struggle for existence.⁵⁹ However, as nature is progressively mastered, these personifications lose their explanatory power, becoming fodder for the mythification of historical persons and events.⁶⁰

This leads Steinthal to turn to the relation between religion and its mythic sources. Religion, Steinthal declares, consists in the pleasure derived from the intellect’s passion for the good, the true, and the beautiful. In short, religion is zeal for the infinite, a vital impulse driving philosophical and ethical inquiry as well as scientific exploration and the mastery of nature.⁶¹ Here Steinthal’s definition is at once idealist, eudaemonistic, quasi-pantheistic, and even semi-erotic, locating the essence of religion in a kind of euphoria resulting from the full realization of the Absolute that betrays traces of Plato, Spinoza, and Hegel at once. On this basis, Steinthal suggests, “the difference between real religions is explained and determined. The knowledge of the infinite can be more or less perfect.”⁶² Religious consciousness is

⁵⁶ Heymann Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion* (Berlin: Luderitz, 1870).

⁵⁷ Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion*, 3.

⁵⁸ Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion*, 7.

⁵⁹ Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion*, 9-13.

⁶⁰ Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion*, 14-19.

⁶¹ Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion*, 19-22.

⁶² Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion*, 23.

judged by its ability to engender scientific reasoning. According to this definition of religion, though, Steinthal positions myth as a primitive form of scientific reason as such, since the personification and deification of nature, animals, people, and events gives rise to natural philosophy and history.⁶³ Religion therefore occurs at the point where objects are grasped conceptually, abstractly, and synthetically, understood in relation to the totality in which they exist according to the process of apperception. “Myth is a form of thought and representation,” Steinthal writes, “it creates images, views, narratives; religion, on the other hand, is a content, and when this sublime content is first created, it marries itself with those mythical forms, puts itself into those images and narratives of facts.”⁶⁴ Surpassing this “transitory form,” religion is able to become a pure content expressing a passion for the infinite free of mythic personifications, deifications, images, narrations, metaphors, and so on. It is the failure to make this essential distinction between myth and religion that plagues Steinthal’s colleagues, leading them to deride each in kind. By contrast, in separating them Steinthal seeks to purify the one of the other with the fine-toothed comb of the philologist rather than the hammer of the iconoclast. To “destroy the [mythic, finite] form so that the interior [religious content] shines all the more purely and brightly is a required deed, the task of our time.” This is an effort culminating in an “abstract, imageless religion”⁶⁵ that some would interpret as deeply atheistic.⁶⁶

The fulfillment of this duty, Steinthal signals in his addendum to the lecture, is nothing less than the mission of *Völkerpsychologie* itself, a purging of “the many mythical elements that are still hidden in our science today” inhibiting the accrual of “true empirical knowledge of the inner being of man.” This would be made possible only by “a rational psychology free from all metaphysical and religious

⁶³ Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion*, 24-25.

⁶⁴ Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion*, 27.

⁶⁵ Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion*, 29-30.

⁶⁶ Steinthal did not openly declare himself an atheist, but considered scientific atheism to be an ultimately religious orientation concerned with the good and the infinite in his 1892 essay “Über den Atheismus,” in *Zu Bibel und Religionsphilosophie* (Berlin: Reimer, 1895), 182-190. For more on Steinthal’s atheism from the perspective of his students, see Max Joseph, “Zum Gedächtnis Steinthals,” in *Ost und West. Illustrierte Monatschrift für das gesamte Judentum* (July 1903), 481–488. Also Simon Bernfeld, “Erinnerungen an Chajim Steinthal,” in *Ost und West. Illustrierte Monatschrift für das gesamte Judentum* (November 1907), 703–708.

presuppositions.⁶⁷ On this basis Steinthal hailed *Völkerpsychologie* as the sole scientific vehicle for his “abstract, imageless religion” in a series of additional essays and reviews over the next three decades. Although not nearly as charged as his texts from the 1860’s, Steinthal’s anti-mythic stance would retain its vigor. Also provoked by Renan, in 1876 Steinthal’s Hungarian colleague Ignaz Goldziher had written a book-length refutation of the French Orientalist in *Mythology Among the Hebrews and its Historical Development*, in many ways further elaborating Steinthal’s own theory of Judaism and myth.⁶⁸ Steinthal praised Goldziher in his review of the text, claiming that the author had finally succeeded “in constructing a real Hebrew mythology.”⁶⁹ Against notions of myth as the product of confusion or forgetfulness espoused by the likes of Müller or Adalbert Kuhn, Goldziher had deployed the Herbartian-inspired theory of the progressive apperception of natural phenomena as the origin of mythical thinking to Steinthal’s approval.⁷⁰ Moreover, Goldziher had interpreted the major figures of the Hebrew Bible as mythic personifications of natural phenomena just as Steinthal had done in his essay on Samson, seeing Abram as a depiction of the night sky, for instance, as well as Cain, Noah, David, and Elijah as solar figures.⁷¹ This illustrated, for Goldziher, the transition from the nomadic worship of the stars to the agricultural worship of the sun and clouds, triangulating this relative to a similar development in Indo-European lore. Here Steinthal raised criticism, demanding a higher contrast between Aryan and Semitic myths.⁷² For him, the question remained: how did a specifically Yahwist monotheism arise out of this nomadic-agricultural configuration? For Goldziher, this was due to a rise in the Hebrew national consciousness and the construction of a mythology during their Egyptian enslavement. Steinthal, though, would refute this theory on textual and archaeological grounds to effectively deny the historicity

⁶⁷ Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion*, 31-32.

⁶⁸ Ignaz Goldziher, *Der Mythos bei den Hebräern und seine geschichtliche Entwicklung* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1876).

⁶⁹ Heymann Steinthal, “Über Mythen-Schichtung,” *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 9 (1877), 272.

⁷⁰ Steinthal, “Über Mythen-Schichtung,” 273-275.

⁷¹ Steinthal, “Über Mythen-Schichtung,” 284.

⁷² Steinthal, “Über Mythen-Schichtung,” 288.

of the Exodus itself and posit the Hebrew prophets as the origin of the “Yahweh-thought.”⁷³ Indeed, it was only in the experience of exile that the Jews truly became a monotheistic people.

Steinthal similarly engaged the works of lesser-known mythographers like Wilhelm Schwartz, Eberhard Schrader, and Daniel Brinton to advance the cause of *Völkerpsychologie* as well as the Jews as the inventors of monotheism and the spirit of the German Enlightenment. This was especially the case in his sharp criticism of Schwartz, who had avoided any historical explanation for the rise of monotheism out of myth as such.⁷⁴ Likewise, Steinthal was deeply critical of Schrader, who he regarded as rehabilitating a Renanian anti-Judaism by denying to the Israelites the genres of epic, saga, and drama. As he put it sardonically, “What has the revelation cost them! Everything that otherwise a nation possesses and that otherwise makes a nation happy: statecraft, art, science, myth and epic.” Indeed, these literary forms were present in the Hebrew Bible itself for Steinthal just as they were in Indo-European, Babylonian, and Assyrian literatures, meaning that although “[t]he Israelite people may occupy a quite unique position in the history of mankind with regard to its religious development,” this “must not be withdrawn from the general laws of history.”⁷⁵ Again, the Jews were a nation like any other, whose “original polytheism ... still shimmers through their monotheism in legend, symbol and cultus.”⁷⁶ As for Brinton, the American physician and historian, Steinthal lauded his ethnographic account of Native American mythologies, considering it proof that the monotheistic concept did not originate in the New World spontaneously but was introduced by Christian missionaries.⁷⁷

In his later years Steinthal also engaged with groundbreaking texts such as E.B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture*, seeing the author’s thesis of the savage origins of civilization confirmed by the Hebrew Bible. Tylor’s notion of “survivals” mirrored Steinthal’s thesis regarding monotheism’s lingering polytheistic

⁷³ Steinthal, “Über Mythen-Schichtung,” 300.

⁷⁴ Heymann Steinthal, review of F. L. W. Schwartz, *Sonne, Mond und Sterne, Ein Beitrag zur Mythologie und Kulturgeschichte der Urzeit* (Berlin: Hertz, 1864), *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 4 (1866), 256.

⁷⁵ Heymann Steinthal, “Der Semitismus,” *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 8 (1875), 342.

⁷⁶ Steinthal, “Der Semitismus,” 349.

⁷⁷ Heymann Steinthal, review of Daniel G. Brinton, *The Myths of the New World: A Treatise on the Symbolism and Mythology of the Red Race of America* (New York: Leypoldt and Holt, 1868), *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 7 (1871), 300.

residues. More interestingly, though, Steintal praised Tylor's rejection of Romantic mythography, a school that had "decided in favor of the doctrine of apostasy. The savage and semi-civilized possess the remains of a formerly high culture; language and myth are products of a primordial culture."⁷⁸ Steintal, however, remained skeptical of the English anthropologist's approach to language, defending the spirit of Humboldtian linguistics and German Enlightenment humanism.⁷⁹ This sentiment would be partially reflected in his review of Andrew Lang's 1884 text *Custom and Myth*. A student of Tylor, the Scottish literary critic had opposed the "folkloric method" focusing on thematic form and content to the philological or comparative method of Kuhn and Müller that relied, Steintal admits, on unstable etymologies.⁸⁰ Here Steintal again praised the evolutionary-anthropological bent of Lang's work, singling out the barbaric and obscene, as well as his theories of totemism and fetishism as primary aspects of culture, a welcome assault on Müller's derivative conception of them. For Steintal, the folkloric method affirmed the findings of *Völkerpsychologie* contra the Romantics by postulating "a homogeneous spiritual development of peoples of the most diverse descent, regardless of various external influences such as climate and landscape."⁸¹ In short, English anthropology had independently demonstrated the unity of the human race just as *Völkerpsychologie* had done. However, for Steintal universal humanism was a "direct moral consequence" of Jewish monotheism: "where multiplicity of gods is assumed, a multiplicity of humanity is also assumed; each people arises with its god and its language from its own soil. Only to the one God, the only creator of the universe, corresponds a unified humanity. ... The pagans do not know the concept of mankind at all; they only know many peoples."⁸²

The notion of a universal humanity had become especially important for Steintal in the 1880's amidst *Der Berliner Antisemitismusstreit* spurred by the prominent German historian Heinrich von

⁷⁸ Heymann Steintal, review of Edward B. Tylor, *Die Anfänge der Kultur*, *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 8 (1875), 474.

⁷⁹ Steintal, *Die Anfänge der Kultur*, 476-478.

⁸⁰ Heymann Steintal, review of Andrew Lang, *Custom and Myth* (London: Longmans, 1884), *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 18 (1888), 300-302.

⁸¹ Steintal, *Custom and Myth*, 306.

⁸² Heymann Steintal, "Die Schöpfung der Welt, des Menschen und der Sprache nach der Genesis," in *Zu Bibel und Religionsphilosophie* (Berlin: Reimer, 1890), 109.

Treitschke.⁸³ Making same vulgar antisemitism of Wilhelm Marr’s “League of Antisemites” palatable for the cultured and scholarly elite, Treitschke argued for the extermination of German-Jews through full assimilation. By this point, Steinthal had been appointed as head instructor at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, an institute in Berlin for the scientific study of Judaism newly founded by Geiger where Lazarus also sat on the board.⁸⁴ Thus, Steinthal was again compelled to repudiate anti-Jewish prejudice, penning a series of articles further extolling the virtues of Semitism over against the Aryanism championed by his colleagues by deploying the full theoretical apparatus of *Völkerpsychologie*. More immediately, though, Steinthal set his sights on the political controversy at hand.⁸⁵ Steinthal’s 1879’s essay “On Tolerance” theorized the state as a “moral and spiritual institution” encouraging “the progressive perfection of man” and “the development of truth and morality in the individual and the whole.” Here Steinthal again appealed to the cosmopolitan tradition of Goethe, Lessing, and Humboldt while denouncing the *Herem* on Spinoza as an instance of Jewish intolerance.⁸⁶ As a corollary, “On Religious and National Prejudices” published that same year theorized discrimination as a logical error and intellectual-moral weakness. However, in this essay Steinthal theologized antisemitism, declaring that prejudices “form an opposition to enlightenment and in this respect are coordinated with superstition, from which they occasionally spring and with which they always willingly intertwine.”⁸⁷ As a superstitious “illusory judgement,” antisemitism along with “national vanity” could be read as close cousins of mythical thought.⁸⁸ Further, Steinthal blatantly called out the euphemistic use of “Semite” in political discourse and its imbrication with “the racist materialism that has become fashionable” which

⁸³ See *Der Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*, ed. Walter Boehlich (Frankfurt: Insel-Verlag, 1965).

⁸⁴ For more on Steinthal and the *Hochschule*, see Dieter Adelman, “H. Steinthal und der Begriff der ‘Wissenschaft des Judentums,’” in *Chajim H. Steinthal: Sprachwissenschaftler und Philosoph im 19. Jahrhundert/Linguist and Philosopher in the 19th. Century*, ed. Hartwig Wiedebach and Annette Winkelmann (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 113-133.

⁸⁵ For more on Steinthal’s Jewish writings in their political context, see Cornelia Kunze, “H. Steinthals *Über Juden und Judentum* im Kontext des aufkommenden Antisemitismus” in *Chajim H. Steinthal: Sprachwissenschaftler und Philosoph im 19. Jahrhundert/Linguist and Philosopher in the 19th. Century*, ed. Hartwig Wiedebach and Annette Winkelmann (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 153-170.

⁸⁶ Heymann Steinthal, “Über Toleranz,” in *Zu Bibel und Religionsphilosophie* (Berlin: Reimer, 1890), 191.

⁸⁷ Heymann Steinthal, “Über religiöse und nationale Vorurteile,” in *Zu Bibel und Religionsphilosophie* (Berlin: Reimer, 1890), 209.

⁸⁸ Steinthal, “Über religiöse und nationale Vorurteile,” 211.

“gives the strongest, scientifically sanctioned expression to the foreignness opposed to Germanness.”⁸⁹ Indeed, Steinthal had witnessed the secularization of theological anti-Judaism as racial antisemitism in real-time as he noted the peculiar hatred for Jews among Christians that persisted in an ostensibly pluralistic age among figures like Marr.⁹⁰ As he would write in an addendum, “antisemitism has become barbarism.”⁹¹

Steinthal’s faith in secular pluralism was unwavering. Ten years later in “The Chosen People: Jews and Germans,” he would mount a defense of Israel and Germany’s twin elections in history as paragons of religion, reason, and cosmopolitanism.⁹² This was followed in 1892 by “Judaism and Patriotism,” which not only declared the compatibility of Jewishness and Germanness but enlisted both in the service of universal humanism. “Judaism is humanity,” Steinthal declared, “and since this is compatible with every nationality, if it is seriously striven for by the nation, Judaism is naturally compatible with every humane rationality. Convinced that the essence of humanity is nowhere so profoundly recognized as by the thinkers of the German nation (although not equally realized by the German people), we ... thank providence for having allowed us to be born as Jewish Germans.”⁹³ At the same time though, Steinthal underscored the preeminence of the Jews in the history of *Volksggeist* in opposition to Aryanism. In one of his final texts of the 1890’s, “The Role of the Semites in World History,” Steinthal reiterated his theory of universal humanism, stating that the ancient Israelites, by working out a typology of their neighbors, had already attained to ethnology.⁹⁴ This allowed Steinthal to argue for the historical-intellectual primacy of the Semites themselves: “The Indo-Europeans ... are as old as the Semites, but they still slept for a millennium in a simple state of nature, while the Semites

⁸⁹ Steinthal, “Über religiöse und nationale Vorurteile,” 218.

⁹⁰ Steinthal, “Über religiöse und nationale Vorurteile,” 226.

⁹¹ Steinthal, “Über religiöse und nationale Vorurteile,” 233.

⁹² Heymann Steinthal, “Das auserwählte Volke der Juden und Deutsche,” in *Über Juden und Judentum*, ed. Gustav Karpeles (Berlin: Poppelauer, 1906), 12-17.

⁹³ Heymann Steinthal, “Judentum und Patriotismus,” in *Über Juden und Judentum*, ed. Gustav Karpeles (Berlin: Poppelauer, 1906), 69.

⁹⁴ Heymann Steinthal, “Die Stellung der Semiten in der Weltgeschichte,” in *Über Juden und Judentum*, ed. Gustav Karpeles (Berlin: Poppelauer, 1906), 106.

had already awakened to high culture."⁹⁵ Among the Semites' cultural achievements were writing, astronomy, art, and instruments of measurement.⁹⁶ This was due to the fact that, ultimately, "the Semites are more serious than the Indo-Germans," with a "highly irritable" temperament prone to introspection, contemplation, and philosophical reasoning. And yet, for this reason their "inner restlessness" inhibited the further development of science, passing instead to the Indo-Europeans.⁹⁷ Although the Aryans possessed an aptitude for technical knowledge, the Semites — specifically the Israelites — were proficient in philosophy and religion. "One single element of freedom," Steinthal wrote, "distinguishes Israel from all Asian peoples, Semites and Indo-Germans: prophecy." This element deterred them from reliance upon the superstitious divinations of the pagans, "interpret[ing] the future from certain natural processes, from the flight of birds and their cries, from the entrails of slaughtered animals, from the neighing of horses, from the emitted sounds of a woman seized with disgust: all this was an 'abomination' to the Israelites."⁹⁸ As such, the Israelites represented real religious genius in world history, a fact flying in the face of "present-day fanatics of Indo-Germanism."⁹⁹

By 1890's, then, Steinthal had come to the conviction that the rise of modern racial antisemitism represented a mythic barbarism undergirded by a reactionary romanticism. This could be countered only by maintaining a fidelity to the spirit of the German Enlightenment and the core tenets of Judaism understood as a scientific, universal, "imageless, abstract religion" opposed to nationalist idolatry. This no doubt constituted an infinite, ethical task. This had been referenced in Steinthal's major philosophical work *General Ethics* in 1885, which roughly followed Herbart's "five basic moral ideas" in attempting to place ethics on a scientifically methodological foundation with the aim of addressing the ills of an increasingly mechanized, instrumental, and technical modernity.¹⁰⁰ In the work, Steinthal counters the

⁹⁵ Steinthal, "Die Stellung der Semiten in der Weltgeschichte," 110.

⁹⁶ Steinthal, "Die Stellung der Semiten in der Weltgeschichte," 112.

⁹⁷ Steinthal, "Die Stellung der Semiten in der Weltgeschichte," 116-118.

⁹⁸ Steinthal, "Die Stellung der Semiten in der Weltgeschichte," 120.

⁹⁹ Steinthal, "Die Stellung der Semiten in der Weltgeschichte," 123.

¹⁰⁰ For more on Steinthal's *Allgemeine Ethik* see David Baumgardt, "The Ethics of Lazarus and Steinthal," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 2:1 (January 1957), 205-217. See also Ingrid Belke, "Steinthals *Allgemeine Ethik*," in *Chajim H. Steinthal: Sprachwissenschaftler und Philosoph im 19. Jahrhundert/Linguist and Philosopher in the 19th. Century*, ed. Hartwig Wiedebach and Annette Winkelmann (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 189-238.

scientific materialists of his day who consider the “idealism” of medieval theology and Aristotelian philosophy of nature as unethical in its outdated reliance upon religion, preferring instead a positivist ethics based upon the empirical observability of nature in its sensuous immediacy. This “idealism,” they claim, “is decried as mythology and metaphysics.”¹⁰¹ For Steintal, though, it is precisely the opposite that is the case. Indeed, a plunge into the “positive nothingness” of materialism would leave problems of meaning and human suffering unaddressed, yielding yet another situation necessitating a “pessimistic myth of a suffering God” —here clearly alluding to Christianity.¹⁰² Steintal and Lazarus had seen in the suffering heroes of Greek mythology a foreshadowing of Christ’s crucifixion.¹⁰³ This point was reiterated in Steintal’s interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount as a recapitulation of pagan egotism, promising an otherworldly reward for an otherwise ostensible moral altruism.¹⁰⁴ The mythical “deification of man and nature” explicitly expressed in the Christian doctrine of the incarnation was simply incapable of producing a genuine ethics. Thus, a depiction of Judaism as ethically anti-mythical rendered it anti-Christian as well. Therefore, although Steintal sought a rapprochement between Jews and Germans, he also understood himself to be standing in opposition to an entire edifice of mythical thought that had increasingly shown itself to be imbricated with an emerging antisemitism.

V. Plato, Poetry, and the Soul

When Hermann Cohen met Steintal in Berlin through family friends in the 1860’s, he was a struggling scholar working as a private tutor. Cohen was born in Coswig in 1842 to a devout family and had attended the Gymnasium at Dessau before departing for the Jewish Theological Seminary at Breslau in 1857. There he studied with the eminent Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz among other orthodox and conservative scholars in an atmosphere that also encouraged the exploration of secular subjects and the use of historical-critical methods. Zacharias Frankel, the seminary’s first leader, wanted

¹⁰¹ Heymann Steintal, *Allgemeine Ethik* (Berlin: Reimer, 1885), 17.

¹⁰² Steintal, *Allgemeine Ethik* 18.

¹⁰³ Williamson, *The Longing for Myth*, 227.

¹⁰⁴ See Steintal’s December 1852 letter to Lazarus in *Moritz Lazarus und Heymann Steintal*, 270-271.

to mold the curriculum in the image of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Alongside Biblical exegesis and Talmudic study, therefore, Cohen was also immersed in Latin and Greek literature. However, in 1861 he abandoned his rabbinical aspirations as Steinthal had done, frustrated with doctrinal disputes and searching for intellectual freedom. Consequently, he enrolled at the University of Breslau where he mainly worked in areas of philology, and then Berlin, where he studied philosophy under the Aristotelian metaphysician Adolf Trendelenberg. For his doctorate he transferred to Halle, completing a dissertation on “the antinomy of necessity and contingency” in the history of philosophy in 1865. In the text Cohen already evinced a clear draw to the idealism of Plato and Kant, seeing ideality as a solution to impasses in ancient philosophy that still persist in modernity.¹⁰⁵ This would carry over after his return to Berlin and encounter with the well-known and established Steinthal, who took Cohen under his wing and invited him to write for the newly founded *ZfVS*.¹⁰⁶ Although Cohen would follow the program of *Völkerpsychologie* in his essays, he would also depart into Kantian epistemology.¹⁰⁷ While *Völkerpsychologie* explained historical, ethno-psychological genesis of concepts and various artifacts of culture, it could account for neither their transcendental conditions of possibility nor their ultimate validity. Only what Cohen called “deductive critique” or a “critique of knowledge” could accomplish this, excavating a concept’s internal contradictions in order to weigh its truth claims. Thus, Cohen simultaneously incorporated and broke with *Völkerpsychologie* as he laid the groundwork for his own brand of critical idealism.

Cohen’s first published article in a series for the journal was “The Platonic Theory of Ideas Developed Psychologically” in 1866. Here he again turned to Plato but attempted to Kantianize him by

¹⁰⁵ For more on Cohen’s early life and an analysis of the dissertation see Friedrich Beiser, *Hermann Cohen: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 7-20.

¹⁰⁶ On Steinthal’s relationship with Cohen See Dieter Adelman, “H. Steinthal und Hermann Cohen,” in *Hermann Cohen’s Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Stéphane Moses and Hartwig Wiedebach (Hildesheim: Olms, 1997), 1–34. See also Ulrich Sieg, “Hermann Cohen und die Völkerpsychologie,” *Ashkenas* XIII (2004), 461–83. Klaus Köhnke, “Unser junger Freund’—Hermann Cohen und die Völkerpsychologie,” in *Hermann Cohen und die Erkenntnistheorie*, ed. Wolfgang Marx and Ernst Orth (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), pp. 62–77.

¹⁰⁷ Scott Edgar has detailed the nuanced relationship between Cohen’s involvement with Steinthal and the antipsychologism famously defining his later works in “*Völkerpsychologie* and the Origins of Hermann Cohen’s Antipsychologism,” *HOPOS* 10 (Spring 2020), 254-273.

interpreting the theory of ideas as a regulative rather than a constitutive principle. The *idea* would no longer be understood metaphysically as an entity or substance but heuristically, as a method or activity.¹⁰⁸ Cohen inquired into the role of myth in Plato's "discovery" of the *idea*, positioning it as an irrational garb initially cloaking but ironically contributing to the emergence of idealism. Following Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie*, myth was "the most primitive form of thought, the first apperception of phenomena, which can itself become the organ of higher apperceptions."¹⁰⁹ Making no mistake about the *idea*'s regulative nature, Cohen also suggested that if one "lets the idea be created by God [as an entity or substance], this is only the mythical expression of critical idealism, that ideas and thoughts can only be traced back to our consciousness, but cannot be explained beyond it."¹¹⁰ This was precisely what Cohen wanted to do, to develop an ideal method based upon a Kantianized Platonism in order to undertake an immanent critique of the "higher" forms of culture being investigated ethnopsychologically by Steinthal. This would necessitate a shedding of all mythic trappings while simultaneously detailing their role in the development of reason. As Cohen would write, "it behooves us, in developing the philosophical content of the Platonic doctrine of ideas, to draw on the mythical expression of it," suggesting that the Platonic myths themselves offered an account of this process.¹¹¹ A prime example of this for Cohen was the Platonic *anamnesis* or recollection of innate ideas, where the act of looking or "re-sighting" is understood as the activity of thought unfolding according to a regulative ideal.¹¹² Therefore, myth was important for the early Cohen both as a Kantian Platonist and an adherent of *Völkerpsychologie*.

The tension between psychology and epistemology would become more pronounced in Cohen's second article for the *ZfVS* in 1868, "Mythological Concepts of God and Soul Developed Psychologically." Emulating Steinthal, Cohen traced the origin of these concepts to the divinization of

¹⁰⁸ Beiser, *Hermann Cohen*, 29-30.

¹⁰⁹ Hermann Cohen, "Die platonische Ideenlehre psychologisch entwickelt," *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 4 (1866), 429.

¹¹⁰ Cohen, "Die platonische Ideenlehre psychologisch entwickelt," 455.

¹¹¹ Cohen, "Die platonische Ideenlehre psychologisch entwickelt," 456.

¹¹² Cohen, "Die platonische Ideenlehre psychologisch entwickelt," 458.

fire and the sun among nomadic peoples. However, going beyond his teacher, Cohen undertook a Kantian critique of them by seeking out their transcendental conditions of possibility, *de facto* announcing his antipsychologism. “This business of deductive criticism is not closed,” Cohen wrote, “for it has no end as long as men think.”¹¹³ This was possible only by again detailing the complementary nature of the historical empiricism of *Völkerpsychologie* and the critique of knowledge, taking the concepts of God and soul as objects whose “inner consistency” would be evaluated.¹¹⁴ And yet, Cohen stated outright that his foray into comparative mythology was “foreign to his specialized studies,” justifying it as an interrogation of the mythical fog clouding pure thought in continuity with the essay on Plato. Like Bacon and Locke, “the founders of realism,” Cohen wanted to cast off “mythological fetters.”¹¹⁵ Turning to Grimm and Kuhn, Cohen proceeds by rehearsing Steinthal’s own theory of myth as the apperception of natural phenomena from his essays on Prometheus and Samson, with the difference that Cohen considers myths as “late abstractions” predicated upon an earlier process stimulated by sense perception.¹¹⁶ Ideas and mythological concepts “are objectivizations of the original states of sensation” whose “homogeneous relation to physiological stimuli” prompts the mind to perceive natural phenomena in terms of causality.¹¹⁷ In this case, one looks for the origin of fire’s warmth and illumination, inventing a solar mythology as the product of feeling and imagination. This would also contribute to the association of the divine and the soul with flame. Just as the gods reproduce through sexual intercourse, for example, so too are embers ignited by friction and boring with a bow drill and the soul engendered through human imitation of divine procreation.¹¹⁸ However, as myths are objectified, they attempt to “detach” themselves from their roots in subjective consciousness, sensation, and feeling to take on a life of their own as higher forms of culture.¹¹⁹ Despite these attempts, though, they are largely unsuccessful, meaning that the

¹¹³ Hermann Cohen, “Mythologische Vorstellungen von Gott und Seele Psychologisch Entwickelt,” *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 5 (1868), 398.

¹¹⁴ Cohen, “Mythologische Vorstellungen von Gott und Seele,” 399.

¹¹⁵ Cohen, “Mythologische Vorstellungen von Gott und Seele,” 400.

¹¹⁶ Cohen, “Mythologische Vorstellungen von Gott und Seele,” 417.

¹¹⁷ Cohen, “Mythologische Vorstellungen von Gott und Seele,” 419.

¹¹⁸ The idea of the fire-soul is elaborated more in part two of Steinthal’s essay published in the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 6 (1869), 113-131.

¹¹⁹ Cohen, “Mythologische Vorstellungen von Gott und Seele,” 423.

original sensations inhere. Here, Cohen thinks, “monotheistic moods may already be germinating in the minds of some.”¹²⁰ As various mythological explanations become inadequate over time, subjective consciousness begins to understand the causal interrelatedness of natural phenomena in a more holistic way, leading to the conceptual trifecta of God, humanity, and nature.¹²¹ One remarkable example of an attempt to reconcile these entities theologically, the early Cohen mentions approvingly, is Spinoza’s pantheism—an attitude that would shift over the course of his career.

Therefore, although Cohen gestures toward a thorough explanation of the emergence of monotheism out of myth, the essay on God and the soul ultimately stops short, perhaps related to the author’s intent to avoid “a critique of theological speculation.”¹²² Steps toward this enumeration would be taken in Cohen’s third article for the *ZfVS* a year later in “The Poetic Imagination and the Mechanism of Consciousness,” where he gave an account of the origins of poetry out of myth. Against Romantics like Schiller, who considered poetry to be the spontaneous product of genius, Cohen intended to provide a rational, historical account grounded in the operations of the mind. Indeed, the Romantic theory was itself mythical, regarding the genius as a kind of incarnate deity who “does not recognize the psychic process in which he writes poetry” and therefore mistakes the mystical explanation as scientific.¹²³ The origins of poetry itself, though, lay in myth’s personification and divinization of things demonstrated in the attribution of gendered nouns to objects.¹²⁴ Further, mythological consciousness makes no distinction between physical, natural phenomena and mythical interpretations. Explicitly following Steinthal, this is only achieved in poetry, which arises through a reimagining and reconfiguring of the elements of apperception of myth such that they are ascribed “new relations.” As Cohen says, “The relation of two or more ideas, which in the myth was expressed in the form of the equation, is now expressed in the

¹²⁰ Cohen, “Mythologische Vorstellungen von Gott und Seele,” 417.

¹²¹ Cohen, “Mythologische Vorstellungen von Gott und Seele,” 433.

¹²² Cohen, “Mythologische Vorstellungen von Gott und Seele,” 426.

¹²³ Hermann Cohen, “Die dichterische Phantasie und der Mechanismus des Bewußtseins,” *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (ZfV) 6 (1869), 177.

¹²⁴ Cohen, “Die dichterische Phantasie und der Mechanismus des Bewußtseins,” 211-212.

form of the comparison, after unequal elements have been inserted."¹²⁵ Rather than seeing natural phenomena and their mythical personifications as synonymous, in poetry "the identity is weakened in the simile."¹²⁶ Also following Steinthal, this is facilitated by the use of the particle "as," which for Cohen creates the possibility of analogical reasoning. Myth yields causality as poetry yields analogy. As a result, the homological certainty of mythical consciousness is progressively destabilized, paving the way for scientific induction.¹²⁷ Despite this, "the mythical power is not extinguished in modern man, because the mythological conception is not qualitatively different from the scientific one, but only in the combination of the conceptions."¹²⁸ This means that the arduous task of science becomes the continual overcoming of myth through reeducation and reevaluation of the "true nature of things."¹²⁹ This is a pedagogical, *Bildung*-inspired duty requiring immense intellectual labor across all branches of knowledge in direct opposition to myth's Romantic valorization. By 1869 then, Cohen had not only appropriated Steinthal's theory of myth, but his aversion to it as well.

Cohen's meditations on myth would largely fall to the wayside in the years immediately following his articles for the *ZfVS* as he made Kantian epistemology his main object of study to elaborate the foundations of his aspirational "critique of knowledge." This stemmed partly from Cohen's well-known intervention in the ongoing public debate between his teacher Trendelenberg and Kuno Fischer over the subjective character of Kant's transcendental idealism, in which he provocatively affirmed the latter's position that *a priori* conditions of sensibility such as space and time were exclusive to the knowing subject's representations and did not extend to objects.¹³⁰ In his 1871 book, *Kant's Theory of Experience*, Cohen further interrogated the Kantian "Copernican revolution in epistemology" according to which the subject's knowledge of the "thing-in-itself" is conditioned by transcendental, *a priori* categories of the

¹²⁵ Cohen, "Die dichterische Phantasie und der Mechanismus des Bewußtseins," 215.

¹²⁶ Cohen later returns to the genesis of poetry out of myth in *System der Philosophie, Dritter Teil: Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* Vol. 1 (Berlin: Dümmeler, 1912), 369.

¹²⁷ Cohen, "Die dichterische Phantasie und der Mechanismus des Bewußtseins," 248.

¹²⁸ Cohen, "Die dichterische Phantasie und der Mechanismus des Bewußtseins," 237.

¹²⁹ Cohen, "Die dichterische Phantasie und der Mechanismus des Bewußtseins," 246.

¹³⁰ Hermann Cohen, "Zur Kontroverse zwischen Trendelenburg und Kuno Fischer," *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* 7 (1871), 249–96.

understanding immanent to an active mind. Going beyond Kant himself, Cohen asked after the conditions of possibility of all human experience, suggesting that there is no Being independent of thought.¹³¹ This would be part of a tripartite re-reading of Kant's logic, ethics, and aesthetics countervailing the psychologistic interpretations of figures like Trendelenberg and Herbart. Radicalizing the Kantian transcendental, Cohen went on in his formal *System of Philosophy*—especially 1902's *Logic of Pure Knowledge*—to raise it to the level of a formal method constituting an extreme idealism in which subjective experience forms the horizon of all knowledge. Indeed, following what he would call the “principle of apriority” or “principle of origin,” Cohen explained not how ideas emerged from the given, but rather how the given is the product of ideas.¹³² Cognition of the object is dependent upon the mind's spontaneous “generation” of concepts which are then continually refined and reevaluated through scientific investigation. “All pure knowledge must be variations of the principle of origin.”¹³³ Projecting an idea onto an object, the thinking subject brings it into accordance with reason in a process Cohen called “correlation.” For Cohen, it is the conceptual apparatus used to ascertain the given that is primary rather than the given itself, as though it could be accessed without this mediation. In this way Cohen rehabilitated Kantian philosophy as a scientific endeavor, with the concept or idea serving the same role as the hypothesis in the scientific method. Cohen built upon this in his *Ethics of Pure Will* in 1904, in which the process of correlation becomes an infinite task conforming nature and society to an ethical ideal of justice.¹³⁴ On the basis of his innovative interpretations of Kant, Cohen was elected the first unconverted Jewish professor of philosophy in Germany at the University of Marburg in February 1872, where he would go on to found Neo-Kantianism as a force in late nineteenth and twentieth century thought.

¹³¹ Hermann Cohen, *Kant's Theorie der Erfahrung* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1871). See also Hermann Cohen, *Kants Begründung der Ethik* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1877), and *Kants Begründung der Ästhetik* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1889).

¹³² For more on Cohen's “principle of apriority” see Hugo Bergmann, “The Principle of Origin in the Philosophy of Hermann Cohen,” *Kneset* 8 (1944), 143-153.

¹³³ Hermann Cohen, *System der Philosophie, Erster Teil: Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1902), 33.

¹³⁴ Hermann Cohen, *System der Philosophie, Zweiter Teil: Ethik des reinen Willens* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1904).

VI. Critical Idealism and Antisemitism

As he rose through the ranks of the German intellectual scene, Cohen maintained an amicable relationship with Steinthal and Lazarus. However, in the 1880's their relationship would become strained amidst *Der Berlin Antisemitismusstreit*. In the face of Treitschke's provocations, Cohen had taken it upon himself to repudiate the antisemitic historian amidst a flurry of reactions, although he would do so more publicly and directly than Steinthal had done. Following a truncated epistolary exchange with Treitschke, Cohen published his 1880 "Confession on the Jewish Question," in which he contended for Jewish inclusion in German society on the basis of a shared affinity between Jews and Germans as well as Judaism and Christianity as monotheistic, ethical religions—arguments that would foreshadow his later essay on Germanness and Jewishness during the First World War.¹³⁵ Departing from the liberalism espoused by many German-Jews including Steinthal and Lazarus—a liberalism he himself would later embrace—Cohen embraced a communitarianism that saw the state as an institution based in a shared culture, language, and even religious commonalities binding Judaism and Protestantism together. Moreover, Cohen understood Jewishness as a matter of *both* religion and race, although he downplayed the latter as a basis for national belonging.¹³⁶ On this score, Cohen's essay was a direct refutation of Lazarus' own interventions, which, emphasizing language and national feeling, refuted racial definitions of Jewishness entirely.¹³⁷ Drawing his ire, Lazarus accused Cohen of paradoxically siding with Treitschke and other antisemites by conceptualizing Jewishness in racial terms.¹³⁸ For Cohen, though, Lazarus had evacuated Jewishness of the racial-religious substance necessary for a defense of Judaism on its own terms against calls for conversion to German Protestantism. This would also foreshadow his

¹³⁵ Hermann Cohen, *Ein Bekenntnisse in der Judenfrage* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1880). See also Hermann Cohen, *Deutschtum und Judentum, mit grundlegenden Betrachtungen über Staat und Internationalismus* (Gießen: Töpelmann, 1915).

¹³⁶ See Beiser on Cohen's racial-religious conception of Jewishness and his 1880 position on the Jewish Question in *Hermann Cohen*, 117-123. Cohen was not alone in defending Judaism on racial grounds. See John Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

¹³⁷ See Moritz Lazarus, *Was heißt national?* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1880).

¹³⁸ See Lazarus' December 1899 letter to Sigmund Maybaum in Belke, *Moritz Lazarus und Heymann Steinthal*, 229–30.

later critique of Lazarus' *Ethics of Judaism* as a superficial "ethics without religion."¹³⁹ Needless to say, in the course of the dispute, Steinthal would side with his companion and brother-in-law, leading to a major falling out between Cohen and his former teacher.

In the wake of *Der Berliner Antisemitismusstreit* in the 1880's, Cohen undertook what Franz Rosenzweig called his "return to Judaism," a pursuit that would occupy him for the rest of his life.¹⁴⁰ As a corollary, this also occasioned his return to myth. However, Friedrich Beiser has countered Rosenzweig by showing that Cohen continued to write on Jewish themes in the intervening years between his seminary days and the antisemitism controversy. Curiously, Cohen also linked his early philosophy of Judaism to myth, especially in his 1869 lecture, "The Sabbath in its Cultural-Historical Meaning." Still under the influence of *Völkerpsychologie* as well as the historical-critical approach of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* he inherited at Breslau, Cohen argued for the human basis of the Sabbath in primitive religion without denying its divine mandate.¹⁴¹ The origins of the Sabbath, Cohen held, lay in mythologization of the lunar cycle and the divinization of Saturn among the Chaldeans and other Ancient Near Eastern peoples. While these peoples merely invented the segmentation of the week, it was the Jews who sanctioned it as a day of rest from agricultural work in accordance with their concern for the laboring masses. "The sabbath," Cohen said, "is in its origin a day of rest of the slave, of the indentured, of the working classes."¹⁴² Here Cohen again followed Steinthal's framework by suggesting that although the pagans had invented the Sabbath, the Jews had bestowed upon it an ethical content derivative of their monotheistic bent. Additionally, Cohen followed Steinthal in the 1860's in his adherence to a pantheism inspired by Heinrich Heine as well as Spinoza.¹⁴³ Himself an atheist, Steinthal had spoken disapprovingly of Spinoza's excommunication while also lauding him as a modern scientific

¹³⁹ Adelman, "H. Steinthal und Hermann Cohen," 33. See also Belke, *Moritz Lazarus und Heymann Steinthal*, lxxviii. For Cohen's critique see *Das Problem der jüdischen Sittenlehre: Eine Kritik von Lazarus' Ethik des Judentums*, *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 43 (1899): 385-400.

¹⁴⁰ Franz Rosenzweig, 'Einleitung', to Hermann Cohen, *Jüdische Schriften* Vol. I, ed. Bruno Strauß (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924), xxvi.

¹⁴¹ Hermann Cohen, "Der Sabbat in seiner kulturgeschichtlichen Bedeutung," *Jüdische Schriften* II, 45-66. See also Beiser, *Hermann Cohen*, 49-53.

¹⁴² Cohen, "Der Sabbat in seiner kulturgeschichtlichen Bedeutung," 60.

¹⁴³ Beiser, *Hermann Cohen*, 43-45.

Jew. In his later years, though, Cohen would turn against pantheism with vehemence, eventually seeing its emphasis on sensuality and immanence as mythological. While commentators have speculated about the reasons for this shift—mainly owing to his fidelity to Kant and rejection of colleague Friedrich Albert Lange’s materialism—it is likely that the break with Steinthal also had something to do with it.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, as Cohen made his return to myth in the 1880’s, the complementary-yet-strained relation Steinthal had established between Judaism and myth would become so radicalized in the aftermath of the antisemitism controversy that it would also be weaponized against the very pantheism Steinthal had adhered to. Therefore, just as Renan had motivated Steinthal to clarify the relation between Judaism and myth, Treitschke had galvanized Cohen to deploy the full apparatus of critical reason against it.

Across his major writings, Cohen elaborates a vision of Judaism as an idealist, scientific, ethical, and critical religion grounded in a prophetically-inspired socialist politics. This was simultaneously an inherited characterization as well as a deeply original one. Rather than a deviation from purely scientific pursuits, Cohen’s philosophy of religion was a natural outgrowth of his formal system as well as his enduring concern with major issues in Jewish theology since his seminary days.¹⁴⁵ For example, Cohen drew explicit linkages between concepts such as the “principle of origin” or “correlation” and what he believed to be core tenets of Judaism. In his 1919 posthumous masterwork, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, the principle of origin is clearly illustrated in the creation narrative, wherein God speaks humanity and nature into existence just as the mind ascertains the object through the spontaneously generation of the concept.¹⁴⁶ The world becomes structured according to a rational idea—namely, God—and although it is his creation, God remains distinct from it in order to resist pantheism. Also illustrating the concept of correlation, Cohen understands God’s love for humanity as an ideal archetype for the ethical encounter between human beings. Transforming this into a political program,

¹⁴⁴ Beiser, *Hermann Cohen*, 77.

¹⁴⁵ Here I follow Andrea Poma’s perspective on the relationship between Cohen’s Kantianism and his Judaism in *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. John Denton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 157-159.

¹⁴⁶ Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 59-70.

Cohen's idealist "ethical socialism" —not to be confused with a Marxist historical materialism—becomes a messianic, infinite task whereby a world of suffering and injustice is brought into correlative harmony with divine love.¹⁴⁷ Through the critical idealist method, then, God becomes both origin and goal. Cohen's philosophy of religion, though, would also be influenced by medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides. Cohen's conception of God as first and foremost an idea was derivative of Maimonides' negative theology, according to which nothing can be said positively of God and no attributes applied to him. As such, Cohen's Judaism itself, devoted to a hyper-transcendent God of the philosophers, became a critical idealism maintaining a continuity with Jewish rationalism. This would have consequences for his portrayal of myth as Judaism's foil.

VII. Out of the Sources of Paganism

Cohen's mature critique of myth spans his *System of Philosophy, Jewish Writings*, as well as the *Religion of Reason*, necessitating a thematic rather than chronological treatment. Moreover, many of the ideas germinating in the *System* and *Jewish Writings* find their full development in the *Religion of Reason*, which ultimately synthesizes many disparate strands in Cohen's thought overall. In short, myth is a name for philosophies and religious traditions presuming access to Being in its unmediated, sensuous immediacy without recourse to the transcendental method or critical, reflexive regard for its ideal conditions of possibility. Under this rubric Cohen would index not only polytheism, "primitive religion," or "paganism," but his own philosophical rivals in Europe—namely the German romantics and Hegelians falling prey to specters of materialism, pantheism, and mysticism in their metaphysical attempts to overcome the Kantian epistemological gap between subject and object. These schools precipitated a metaphysical monism leading to the identification of God with the world, thereby foreclosing the possibility of ethics by eliminating God as a transcendent counterprinciple. In his *Logic of Pure Reason*, though, Cohen would mainly repeat the view of myth he had outlined in his articles for the *ZfVS*, transposing Steinthal's psychological account into an epistemological one. Myth is again a

¹⁴⁷ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 144-164. See also Poma, *The Critical Philosophy*, 211.

vehicle for the apprehension of causality in nature and the origin of high art forms.¹⁴⁸ Cohen also further details the ways pure thinking remains caught in the “mythological worship of the consciousness of sensation,”¹⁴⁹ indicting medieval theology and romanticism as contaminated by myth in order to pit them in a “struggle” against scientific reason.¹⁵⁰ “Myth has become so-called religion, and myth in religion has remained the enemy of science and culture.”¹⁵¹ In continuity with his reinterpretation of Kant, Cohen similarly chides psychologism for remaining caught in mythology by confining itself to the biological.¹⁵² “There is only one means that is able to free us from the superstition and spell of mythology: the methodical realization that all concepts are creations, the foundation of the scientific spirit.”¹⁵³ Just as he disparages myth, though, Cohen again affirms it as the ambivalent source of true, monotheistic religion and abstract, scientific reason, noting that although “science is not mythology, myth has the naiveté and the seriousness of science.”¹⁵⁴

This charitable assessment of myth would not extend to the field of ethics, however. Even in the *Logic*, Cohen chides the “superman” and “hero cultus” as an egotism always returning to itself and opposed to a morality founded in the mutually reinforcing relation between the individual and the community—an ethics opening itself to the future.¹⁵⁵ This line of thought would lead directly to the view of myth expressed in the *Ethics of Pure Will*, where myth as a logical error or superstitious illusion would lead not only to irrationalism, but the same immorality culminating in antisemitism. “The opposition to metaphysics,” Cohen writes in the *Ethics*, “leads us to the opposition to mythology and mythological religion.”¹⁵⁶ Here the Kantian critique of metaphysics and pure reason is placed in the context of the philosophy of religion, opposing critical idealism to a pre-critical mythic sensuality. “Religions are tainted with mythology; and the alleged metaphysics does not cease to revive these rudiments again and

¹⁴⁸ Cohen, *Logik*, 261-2, 18.

¹⁴⁹ Cohen, *Logik*, 472.

¹⁵⁰ Cohen, *Logik*, 355 and 388.

¹⁵¹ Cohen, *Logik*, 423.

¹⁵² Cohen, *Logik*, 598.

¹⁵³ Cohen, *Logik*, 377.

¹⁵⁴ Cohen, *Logik*, 422.

¹⁵⁵ Cohen, *Logik*, 454.

¹⁵⁶ Cohen, *Ethik*, 43.

again. The idealization of religion, on the other hand, is always aimed at purifying it from these drosses of myth and working out more clearly the ethical motives which lie dormant in it to deliver them to purer fruitfulness."¹⁵⁷ The ethical and political problem with myth for Cohen, then, is that in its emphasis on sensuousness and immediacy, myth lapses into egotism by virtue of its inability to grasp the broader mediation of the individual by the community and society. For Cohen, individuation is contingent upon the broader social whole. Self-knowledge is only possible on the basis of an encounter with the Other. Idealism and transcendence thus correspond to communitarianism, socialism, and morality, while myth and immanence correspond to the individual, egotism, and barbarism. The reasons for this, however, lay in myth's response to the perennial problems of time, suffering, and death at the heart of the human experience. Cohen's critique on the whole is bound up with questions of theodicy, framing myth as an inadequate solution to the problem of evil on both an individual and social level. "Sin and suffering" are myth's "deepest mystery."¹⁵⁸ Shrouding the sources of human suffering in "comforting hopes, embellishments, and interpretations of mythological imaginings," myth mystifies and therefore sustains the status quo by engendering a passive acceptance of evil in the world.¹⁵⁹ By contrast, critical reason interrogates the sources of injustice and works to eradicate them. "There is only one meaning that evil and suffering can have, and that is that they ought to be abolished."¹⁶⁰

Cohen had established early on that the cardinal achievement of myth was its deployment of causal reasoning, which explained relations between natural phenomena by means of personifications. When it came to questions of time and death, the mythical notion of fate reckoned with a seemingly predetermined future. Just as the seasons come and go, organisms die and are reborn, gods and human beings must suffer their own respective fates. This is expressed in tragic drama, which attempts to justify the pain and toil inherent to existence as inescapable.¹⁶¹ "Myth has one of its deepest roots in the concept

¹⁵⁷ Cohen, *Ethik*, 555.

¹⁵⁸ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 22.

¹⁵⁹ Cohen, *Ethik*, 75-76.

¹⁶⁰ Cohen, *Ethik*, 450.

¹⁶¹ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 137.

of guilt. It is the doom, the fate to which the gods themselves are subjected. And out of this fate, out of the delusion of guilt, grew tragedy. If we, however, by means of guilt ascribe to religion the origination of the individual, we will here again lay bare the exact difference between religion and myth. In mythological guilt, man is not an individual, but rather the offspring of his ancestors. Tragedy, too, begins by accepting man's tie to his ancestry. To release man from it, to redeem him from his inherited guilt, becomes the task of tragedy."¹⁶² Although Cohen depicts myth as individualistic, he recognizes its failed attempts to grasp social interrelatedness through a disordered notion of guilt. Here human suffering is explained on a larger, socio-historical scale through a sense of inherited indebtedness to the gods and ancestors. However, this social theory of guilt merely reifies mythic individualism by subordinating the individual to these cosmic figures. Thus, mythic individuality remains a kind of pseudo-individualism falsely mired in mystification as a consequence of its disregard for the "antinomy between the individual and society."¹⁶³ One can only truly become an individual, for Cohen, in relation to a community inculcating a sense of personal responsibility and agency. "The individual as *I* cannot originate out of myth," since membership is merely a means to alleviate the individual's own personal guilt.¹⁶⁴

The expiation of guilt is also enacted through sacrifice, a ritual again reinforcing the individual's subjugation to the gods and ancestors in its attempts to appease their desires.¹⁶⁵ What is important about sacrifice for Cohen is that it further inscribes a sense of indebtedness to these idols by locating the roots of suffering in a sphere beyond the human. "The oldest mythical symbol through which the correlation between man and the gods is achieved is sacrifice," Cohen writes. "Originally it is offered to the godhead, of whose envy and hatred one is afraid and whom one strives to appease. When man becomes conscious of guilt, then one is in need of sacrifice not only against the envy of the gods but also for the purpose of one's own purification from this contamination of consciousness. Through this, the gods become the

¹⁶² Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 169.

¹⁶³ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 138.

¹⁶⁴ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 170.

¹⁶⁵ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 188.

guardians of morality, the violation of which makes man feel guilty."¹⁶⁶ Therefore, in myth the primary relation is between humans and the gods rather than between one another, meaning that a rational and ethical account of either the social sources of suffering or personal moral obligation becomes impossible. The individual is only an individual insofar as they are beholden to anthropomorphisms and deifications of natural phenomena. Indeed, another mythic attempt to grapple with suffering is the personification of evil itself as a diabolical figure, further abstracting the sources of suffering from humans themselves. "Manichaeism," Cohen charges, "is an anti-moral principle. ... A power of evil exists only in myth. It is the rule of myth that continues in the theology and metaphysics of a diabolical divine power."¹⁶⁷

Finally, myth poses a series of solutions to the temporal dimension of theodicy. Schematically, myth corresponds to circular time and successive cosmic cycles of death and rebirth represented by the concept of the *Aeon*. "Originally the Aion [sic] meant a period of the cycle from the end of the world to its renewal. It is personified time, therefore, also the personified world in the eternity of its cosmic development."¹⁶⁸ However, the cycle of the *Aeon* is animated by a romanticized return to its origin. This is illustrated in the mythical concept of the Golden Age, which harkens to a more peaceful, primordial epoch "in which people lived in unanimous equality without war and without distinctions of class."¹⁶⁹ Similarly, myth contends with the problem of death by means of immortality. "The idea of the immortality of the soul originates in myth, which in turn is linked with the most primitive notions of man and his connection with the family and tribe, and their origin and development."¹⁷⁰ Despite one's bodily death, the mythological soul lives on and retains its ancestral influence over the lives of the living from beyond the grave. This undergirds concepts of guilt and sacrificial appeasement in order to maintain social bonds. Lastly, myth refuses the spontaneity of creation, instead subscribing to the eternality of matter and notions of primal chaos.¹⁷¹ Like the determinism of fate and tragedy, the uncreatedness and

¹⁶⁶ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 170.

¹⁶⁷ Cohen, *Ethik*, 428.

¹⁶⁸ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 250.

¹⁶⁹ Cohen, "Der Sabbat," 52.

¹⁷⁰ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 296.

¹⁷¹ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 64.

constancy of the world justifies evil as a brute fact of existence on a cosmic level. In sum, then, through concepts of fate, tragedy, guilt, sacrifice, diabolism, cyclical time, immortality, and the eternality of nature, myth abstracts the sources of suffering from human beings themselves, thereby enforcing an uncritical acceptance of evil in the world.

Countervailing these inadequate mythic solutions to theodicy, Cohen opposes Judaism point by point as a religion that, in accordance with critical reason, places the onus for suffering upon individual moral choices and social injustices alike by interrogating the all-too-human conditions of possibility for evil. As Steinthal had said, although much of the Hebrew Bible depicts an inner struggle against superstition, the prophets are the ones who ultimately “lift the veil of myth.”¹⁷² It is for good reason that the prophets iconoclastically assail pagan idolators’ worship of fire as the origin of myth itself.¹⁷³ Against fate and tragedy, in the *Ethics* Cohen elaborates the concept of “pure will” as an *a priori* basis for morality that refuses passive acquiescence to injustice. This is explicitly grounded in the historical revelation of the Jewish God who breaks through the irrationalism and immorality of the pagan cultus, installing the Hebrew prophets as his mouthpiece against pagan idolatry.¹⁷⁴ The prophets not only campaign against oppression, but found a new kind of subjectivity and indeterminate futurity. This extends also to mythical social theory as the prophets decry hereditary guilt and indebtedness to the ancestors, instead reconceptualizing holiness as a matter of individual sin.¹⁷⁵ As a corollary, sacrifice becomes merely an ineffectual grasping at an atonement only made possible through inner repentance. “For who would be so deeply involved in mythology as to regard the sacrifice as an adequate means to self-purification? At most it can be a symbol, but nothing more. Repentance, however, should be more than a symbol; it should be a realizing action of the will which elevates man to the *I* individual. Therefore, it can be only an action of proper self-achievement. It must require all the conditions of the strictest work of

¹⁷² Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 26. See also 26 and 51.

¹⁷³ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 57.

¹⁷⁴ Cohen, *Ethik*, 52-54 and 82-83.

¹⁷⁵ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 109.

conscience.¹⁷⁶ Cohen upholds the notion of *teshuva* as a model for a critical, intersubjective ethics mediating between the individual and society. This is also connected to Cohen's Maimonidean critique of mythic anthropomorphism, personification, and the deification of nature. As an idea devoid of predicates, the Jewish God releases humans of their sacrificial duties to a capricious deity. Instead, monotheism prioritizes the relation between human beings themselves as a correlation or mirror image of God's love for humanity.¹⁷⁷ It is here that Cohen elaborates a prophetic ethics of the "Fellowman" to which the *I* becomes obligated, one facilitating the entry of the individual into the "realm of freedom" in Kantian fashion.¹⁷⁸

In terms of time and history, prophetic religion anticipates a messianic age in which questions of death, suffering, and theodicy will finally be put to rest as evil and injustice themselves are vanquished. Rather than harkening to an idealized past, messianism orients itself toward a utopian future: "Myth has no image of the future; it transfers the peace of man and nature into the past, into the golden age of the world. The prophet, on the other hand, projects his morality into the future. The concept of the future distinguishes religion from myth. The prophets designate this future by linking the liberation of mankind to the political longing for the freedom of their own people, expressed as the highest representative of their state: as Messiah."¹⁷⁹ This also signals a transformation of the mythical, apocalyptic idea of the Day of Judgement or End of the World premised upon a cycle of destruction and recreation as well as the eternality or uncreatedness of the world. Consciousness of evil, Cohen surmises, prompts a desire for vindication through total annihilation.¹⁸⁰ This is antithetical to Judaism in the sense that apocalyptic destruction violates the Noahic covenant in Genesis just as it denies God's providence over the constancy and permanence of creation.¹⁸¹ The act of creation itself, as mentioned previously, is absolutely integral

¹⁷⁶ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 202.

¹⁷⁷ Hermann Cohen, "Innere Beziehungen der Kantischen Philosophie zum Judentum," *Jüdische Schriften* Vol. I, ed. Bruno Strauß (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924), 294.

¹⁷⁸ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 172.

¹⁷⁹ Cohen, *Ethik*, 383-384.

¹⁸⁰ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 244.

¹⁸¹ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 245.

to Cohen's marriage of Judaism and the "principle of origin" in critical idealism, a concept not unrelated to Steinthal's own schematic interpretation of creation and the Humboldtian theory of the origins of language.¹⁸² While myth marvels at the emergence of the world out of chaos, it does not ask after the origins of the chaos as such. Moreover, myth remains unconcerned with the world's future.¹⁸³ By contrast, creation implies constant new beginnings and messianic renewal.¹⁸⁴ Lastly, Cohen opposes the concept of resurrection to the mythic immortality of the soul. Also arising from confrontation with death, the grave symbolizes indebtedness to the ancestors and the flight of the soul to the netherworld.¹⁸⁵ Yet while the immortality of the soul, inherited from Plato, gives priority only to the incorporeal aspect of existence while denying physicality significance, the resurrection of the body, understood of course in a figurative-philosophical sense, holds open the possibility for continued repentance and redemption.¹⁸⁶

Amidst rising antisemitism and calls to Jewish assimilation, conversion, and baptism across Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, Cohen's critique of myth had immediate bearing upon contemporary concerns. This comes to the fore in his critique of Christianity. As Cohen would write in a 1910 essay: "The chief difficulty for the concept of religion lies in its complication with myth. Now every linkage of a religion to a person exposes it to the danger embodied in myth. For the final meaning of myth is the personification of the impersonal."¹⁸⁷ Here the reference to personhood alludes not only to the anthropomorphizing of natural phenomena or euhemerist deification of historical figures, but specifically the notion of God becoming human in the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Beyond Steinthal and Lazarus who also criticized Christian ethics as otherworldly, egotistic, and hence

¹⁸² See Hartwig Wiedebach, "Zu Steinthals Theorie vom Ursprung der Sprache und des jüdischen Monotheismus" in *Chajim H. Steinthal: Sprachwissenschaftler und Philosoph im 19. Jahrhundert/Linguist and Philosopher in the 19th. Century*, ed. Hartwig Wiedebach and Annette Winkelmann (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 89-112. Also Guiseppa Veltri, "Ethischer Monotheismus und Prophetie: Zu Steinthals dynamischer Deutung der Schöpfung" in *Chajim H. Steinthal: Sprachwissenschaftler und Philosoph im 19. Jahrhundert/Linguist and Philosopher in the 19th. Century*, ed. Hartwig Wiedebach and Annette Winkelmann (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 171-188.

¹⁸³ Hermann Cohen, "Einheit oder Einzigkeit Gottes," *Jüdische Schriften* Vol. I, ed. Bruno Strauß (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924), 93-94.

¹⁸⁴ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 69-70.

¹⁸⁵ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 300.

¹⁸⁶ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 304.

¹⁸⁷ Hermann Cohen, "Die Bedeutung des Judentums für den religiösen Fortschritt der Menschheit," *Jüdische Schriften* Vol. I, ed. Bruno Strauß (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924), 31.

mythological, Cohen would give his Maimonidean critique of trinitarian personhood a metaphysical grounding in the *Ethics* and his 1907 essay “Religion and Morality.” Again, problems of death and suffering give rise to immortality and the gods of mythic polytheism. However, although Christianity is born of Jewish monotheism, it becomes infected with this mythic “striving for deification.”¹⁸⁸ As Cohen says, “a person is what God becomes in myth. And religion remains under the spell of myth insofar as it applies the concept of ‘person’ to the essence of God.”¹⁸⁹ The incarnation is “the inheritance of myth, which lives on in Christianity.”¹⁹⁰ *Pace* Spinoza, who both consider the incarnation a crucial moment in the progressive immanentization of God, Cohen regarded it as a regression. “Transcendence offers the protection against the myth of person: the myth of person, in modern thought, leads ineluctably into the metaphysics of pantheism.”¹⁹¹ Against this, the Maimonidean Cohen extolls the evacuation of God’s attributes and predicates including gender through a neutering of the divine.¹⁹² To recall, the application of gender to nouns and objects was important for the development of myth for the early Cohen. Ethically, it is precisely the category of “person,” so important for trinitarian thought, that poses a moral problem by ultimately foreclosing the kind of hyper-transcendence Cohen sees as the basis for ethics by identifying God with materiality. This again obscures God’s transcendence as a counterprinciple according to which the world should be correlated. Moreover, Christian ethics remains mythical in its prioritization of the relation between humans and God rather than one another.¹⁹³ This is reflected in its concern with eternal damnation, whereas Judaism remains unconcerned with one’s eternal fate by prioritizing life on earth.¹⁹⁴

The dangers of mythic pantheism also animated Cohen’s criticisms of rival philosophical traditions in Germany, namely the romantics and Hegelians he saw mired in materialism, pantheism,

¹⁸⁸ Cohen, *Ethik*, 289.

¹⁸⁹ Cohen, *Ethik*, 429.

¹⁹⁰ Hermann Cohen, “Religion und Sittlichkeit,” *Jüdische Schriften* Vol. III, ed. Bruno Strauß (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924), 137.

¹⁹¹ Cohen, *Ethik*, 440.

¹⁹² Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 41-42.

¹⁹³ Cohen, “Religion und Sittlichkeit,” 135.

¹⁹⁴ Cohen, “Religion und Sittlichkeit,” 144-145.

and mysticism. This was born out in Cohen's *Aesthetics of Pure Feeling* in 1912 where, in a departure from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, he refused the conflation of beauty and the sublime. Cohen's reasons for this were specific: the Kantian homology between beauty and the sublime had granted Hegel, the romantics, and Schopenhauer license to subordinate ethics to the latter, thereby idolizing religion and mysticism through the pantheistic "identity of nature and spirit" — what Cohen calls "mythology par excellence."¹⁹⁵ Romanticism is portrayed as a structure of thought that, like myth, "has not died out even in our age."¹⁹⁶ Elevating the sublime to the level of the infinite, Schelling and Hegel's dialectical completions of art by religion had betrayed not only the scientific and rationalistic character of Kantian aesthetics, but the force of Kant's ethics. For Cohen, religion's supersession of aesthetics nullified art's moral import in the name of mysticism. Schelling's identification of polytheistic mythology with revelation had obscured scientific reason as well as the singularity of monotheism itself.¹⁹⁷ Even in his "Easternism" armed with "magic spells," Schopenhauer participated in this same movement, "the lifeblood of his philosophy ... ly[ing] in his position on aesthetics."¹⁹⁸ By contrast, Cohen sought to rationally preserve the tension between the finite, human content of aesthetic works and the sublime infinite, avoiding the lapse into monistic pantheism by deifying art and artist. This resulted in a defense of Renaissance classicist humanism against romanticism's anti-modern and anti-scientific fidelity to the Middle Ages' "religious dogmatism."¹⁹⁹ Classicism, for Cohen, operated from the *a priori* "pure feeling" of the artist's "love of humanity" in correlation with God's own, the essence of true artistic production as a departure from myth. "But the entirety of nature would remain a subject of myth, if it did not gain its unity in man. And art discovers this unity. It discovers it in the love for man, for the nature of man."²⁰⁰ This can be seen across a variety of mediums reflecting, for Cohen, the ethical relation between human beings. Addressing more recent concerns, though, Cohen contends that truly *modern* poetry is non-mythical. Yet despite his

¹⁹⁵ Cohen, *Ästhetik*, 10.

¹⁹⁶ Cohen, *Ästhetik*, 11.

¹⁹⁷ Cohen, *Ästhetik*, 13.

¹⁹⁸ Cohen, *Ästhetik*, 15.

¹⁹⁹ Cohen, *Ästhetik*, 34.

²⁰⁰ Cohen, *Ästhetik*, 184.

distaste for the Romantics, Cohen's recuperation of classicism enlists none other than Goethe and Schiller. This can be read as a subtle critique of Wagner's late romanticism which was not only proximal to Cohen's own lifetime, but partly responsible for antisemitism in German aesthetics.²⁰¹ Wagner dismissed Goethe and Schiller's lack of musical accompaniment in his theory of art, claiming that only by combining all mediums is the "total work of art" possible. Against this, Cohen appropriates Schiller by contending that the latter is "won over to Kant" through his realization of the truth of the Kantian dictum that "no objective principle of taste is possible." This results in the dethronement of aesthetics over ethics and reason as well as the iconoclastic expungement of "all mythological superstition."²⁰²

In sum, then, Cohen's critique transposed Steinthal's psychological account of the origins of mythology into a more expansive, philosophical, epistemological, and heuristic one. In addition, Cohen retained Steinthal's thesis that mythology could serve as an explanation for anti-Jewish animus, indicting paganism, Christianity, and major strains in German philosophy at once as features of the same mythic barbarism leading to antisemitism. Just as Cohen's "return to Judaism" and critique of myth emerged in response to *Der Berliner Antisemitismustreit*, it also took shape against the background of the continued rise of racial antisemitism. Cohen tracked these developments, publishing essays on the Dreyfus Affair, Jewish Emancipation, and ongoing German calls for Jewish conversion to Christianity during his career. He explicitly characterized growing calls for baptism as an incursion of mysticism, pantheism, and myth upon German Jewry and a distraction from the truth of Judaism.²⁰³ At the same time, Cohen maintained a faith in the inner affinity between Jewishness and German culture—particularly the German Enlightenment and *Bildung* ideal—that would distance him from Zionism and prompt his support, however misguided, for German nationalism during the First World War. While later commentators would see this as naive in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Cohen's vision of a universalist, cosmopolitan, socialist society modeled on a uniquely Jewish ethics in opposition to

²⁰¹ Beiser makes this point in *Hermann Cohen*, 159.

²⁰² Cohen, *Ästhetik* 1, 85-86.

²⁰³ Hermann Cohen, "Religion und Zionismus," *Jüdische Schriften* Vol. II, ed. Bruno Strauß (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924), 324.

nationalist egotism would have lasting effect. In the image of Steinthal, Cohen's humanism was derivative of his Judaism. "Myth has nothing in common with mankind. At the most, it is interested in the sex, the tribe, the nation; no pagan myth has ever directed its gaze to mankind."²⁰⁴ By contrast, prophetic religion's universalism and socialist ethics countervailed a "nationalist egotism" still "afflicted with mythology,"²⁰⁵ as well as "the mythology of capitalism" promising "the redemption of the working person."²⁰⁶ As Cohen wrote in the *Religion of Reason*, "[m]yth is everywhere the sunrise of culture, but the sunny day of morality does not yet dawn with it."²⁰⁷

VIII. Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, Steinthal and Cohen rebuffed the anti-Judaism encoded in mythography, a trend that by their day had found resonance with the rise of modern racial antisemitism. Elaborating a theory of a pre-exilic Israelite polytheism in the face of Renan's treatise on Semitic monotheism, Steinthal sought to restore myth to the Jews while simultaneously positioning Judaism as the vehicle by which myth is overcome in history. Cohen would revise and expand this thesis while giving it a deeper philosophical foundation in the aftermath of *Der Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*, characterizing myth as a kind of pre-critical metaphysical structure of thought valorizing monism, immanence, materialism, pantheism, and mysticism. For each of them, then, the critique of myth was far more than a disinterested scholarly exercise. Disenchantment and the deployment of secular, scientific reason had become critical in an era when, in their eyes, romanticism was making common cause with bigotry. The upheavals of modernity, the Jewish Question, and the quest for German Unification had unleashed a latent mythic barbarism threatening to undo the fruits of an Emancipation that could only be salvaged in a rationally governed public sphere. As Paul Nahme has said, mythic "worldviews were unjustifiable because they presented themselves as the basis for a public culture without demonstrating

²⁰⁴ Cohen, *Religion und Sittlichkeit*, 140.

²⁰⁵ Hermann Cohen, "Die Messiasidee," *Jüdische Schriften* Vol. III, ed. Bruno Strauß (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924), 124.

²⁰⁶ Cohen, *Ethik*, 578.

²⁰⁷ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 249.

what Cohen and other Kantian-inspired intellectuals believed to be fundamental to this principle of German liberalism: namely, the fact that myths do not rely on the types of reasoning necessary for publicity, such as justification and evidence. Myths are instead assertions of intuition, imagination, and metaphysics."²⁰⁸

Nonetheless, despite the exigency of Steinthal and Cohen's antagonism toward myth, their position was still subject to a series of contradictions and problems. In the first place, both Steinthal and Cohen sought to dismantle a racial hierarchy that positioned Aryans as superior to Semites; however, in so doing they uncritically accepted the very existence of the Semites as an ethnic group yielding its own historically and biologically determined essential characteristics. Steinthal, for his part, attempted to circumvent the more distressing implications of this by underscoring the linguistic and spiritual components of the Semites' ethnic identity while Cohen wholeheartedly accepted a definition of Jewishness grounded in blood and heredity even as he stressed the inner cultural affinity between Jews and Germans as a surer basis for national inclusion. Rather than dismantling the racialized notion of Semitism itself, therefore, both attempted to rework it to ulterior ends. Moreover, these same racial theories were part and parcel of a colonial technology of knowledge production undergirding the study of mythography and comparative religion that, paradoxically, would contribute to the scholarly architecture doling out justifications for antisemitism. In the second place, Steinthal and Cohen both assailed romanticism and its valorization of myth, seeing it as a concession to the very mysticism they stood against. And yet, their theories of mythology as a primeval artifact of culture determining some of the most important features of a people's historical development was directly descended from romantic mythography. Although Steinthal and Cohen no doubt took up the mantle of the evolutionary-anthropological paradigm in mythography, they, like so many other partisans of Enlightenment, remained haunted by it. Finally, Steinthal and Cohen maintained a strict dichotomy between myth and religion, allying not only Judaism but science with the latter. However, they were often at pains to

²⁰⁸ Paul Nahme, *Hermann Cohen and the Crisis of Liberalism: The Enchantment of the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 199.

qualify this bifurcation, meaning that, especially for Cohen, myth ran the risk of becoming everything and nothing, a name for anything incongruent with the project of critical idealism. This also meant that the conflation of Judaism as a religious tradition based in revelation and science as an empirical method of investigation would require constant philosophical and historical justification.

It is perhaps for these reasons, among others, that Cohen's critique of myth would be dismissed by an entire generation of German-Jewish intellectuals in his wake. In particular, Rosenzweig would appropriate Cohen's criticism of mythic polytheism in his *Star of Redemption* only to attempt a reinvention of a Jewish mythology seemingly from the ground up. On the other hand, many would see the anti-mythic rationalism of Steinthal and Cohen as a naive attempt at assimilation to German culture and a failed solution to the Jewish Question. Yet again, for Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber and many others, Judaism remained a tradition immersed in mythology, a fact that could be harnessed through the study of Jewish mysticism. However, as the next chapters will detail, the critique of myth among German-Jews did not end with Cohen and Steinthal but was instead elaborated anew in the face of Nazism.

Chapter 3 | Illusion: Sigmund Freud and Erich Auerbach

“I am beginning to suspect that myth and neurosis have a common core.”

—Sigmund Freud

The Scripture stories do not, like Homer’s, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected, we are rebels.

—Erich Auerbach

I. Introduction

In Steintal and Cohen, the groundwork had been laid for a critique of myth from the vantage point of *Völkerpsychologie* and Neo-Kantianism spurned by scholarly controversies over the origin and value of monotheism and the rise of vulgar, racial antisemitism in the public sphere. Steintal and Cohen’s ideas would have lasting influence as theological debates over the historical purpose of Judaism and antisemitic violence were amplified with the rise of Nazism. Only a few decades after Steintal first formulated his ethno-psychological theories, Freud noted the similarities between mythology and dreams. Both were motivated by wish-fulfillment and instinct, a feature of both childhood development and the earliest stages of human culture. While he acknowledged that fantasies could continue to play a productive role in the adulthood of individuals and society, Freud feared that the flight from reality symptomatic of myth also had the potential to unsettle civilization through a regression to childish make-believe and primitive neuroses. Freud would understand Nazi antisemitism as one of these myths, this time enabled by Christian anti-Judaism’s triggering of instinctual aggression. In the aftermath of his dispute over myth with Carl Jung and amidst his London exile, this prompted him to argue for the “advance in intellectuality” brought about by Judaism as the very development that had made the renunciation of instinct and civilization’s “education to reality” possible in history.

In a similar vein, romance philologist Erich Auerbach turned to Vico’s philosophy of history as a methodological blueprint for the study of realism in European literature, the imitation of human

experience in all its sensuous complexity across genres and time periods. For the early Auerbach, Dante's otherworldly *Comedy* was ironically a prime example of earthly realism, activating the secularizing potential latent in medieval Christianity. This was because Christianity remained caught in the tension between immanent, historical reality and its transcendent spiritualization, a contradiction observable in the practice of Christian figural interpretation. Following his own exile to Istanbul to escape Nazism, Auerbach would demonstrate how figural interpretation necessitated the degradation of Judaism, relegating it to an archaic past superseded by Christianity. Turning to the Hebrew Bible, Auerbach opposed biblical narrative as a forerunner of literary realism to the illusory enchantments and simplicity of Homeric myth. This would also implicate, by extension, the Christian figural spiritualization of history as a deviation from Hebraic realism and a collusion with allegory. Written against the background of Nazi propaganda and conspiratorial thought, de-Judaization campaigns and mythography's Indo-European valorization of Hellenism, Auerbach would polemically champion Judaism against antisemitism and Christianity as iterations of mythic thought.

Freud and Auerbach understood myth as a departure from reality and history into the realms of fantasy and illusion that foster nationalism, racism, and antisemitism. Themselves forced into exile by the rise of the Third Reich and the Holocaust, Freud and Auerbach turned to specific figures in the Hebrew Bible to inveigh against antisemitism and argue for a fidelity to reality, humanism, secularism, and the Enlightenment. While Freud undertook a psychoanalytic reading of the Exodus to depict his Egyptian Moses as the creator of Judaism and its "ethical perfection," Auerbach approached the Hebrew Bible as literature to highlight its depiction of Abraham as an equally ethical figure subservient to the absolute truth of Jewish monotheism. In each case, this turn to the Hebrew Bible was highly significant amidst its castigation by Protestant theologians and the de-Judaization of Christianity in German churches.¹ Yet it was also important for their broader intellectual agendas, which expressed

¹ See Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996); Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

continued faith in the possibility of reason to reconcile humanity to reality despite its proneness to illusion, especially in the face of fascist barbarism. By advocating for the Hebrew Bible as a document of realism, rationality, and civilization, Freud and Auerbach countered the supersessionist notion that the Jews simply represented a stale fossil superseded by Christianity—a theological idea that lay at the root of modern antisemitism.

Freud and Auerbach would inherit many of the themes, figures, and conceptual apparatuses in their critiques of myth from Steinthal and Cohen. As Freud admitted, inspiration for the application of psychoanalysis to the humanities had come from *Völkerpsychologie* in the first place.² Although Freud recognized the similarities between dreams and myths, it was not until Karl Abraham pursued the subject further that his attention was drawn to its potential. Abraham did so by returning to Steinthal's comparison of Prometheus with Moses, a fact that would shape Freud's own reading of the Exodus. In addition, Freud understood myth and the animistic "omnipotence of thoughts" as the personification of nature in response to theodicy, again echoing Steinthal and Cohen. A professor of philology at Marburg in the Weimar period, Auerbach would no doubt cross paths with followers of Cohen's Neo-Kantianism even a decade after the philosopher's death. This perhaps accounts for the sharpness of the opposition between Judaism and myth in "Odysseus' Scar" as well as the thesis of his book on Dante, which had been anticipated by Cohen's *Aesthetics*. In addition, the speculative intuition facilitating the Viconian philosophy of history Auerbach employed bore traces of not only Hegel but *Völkerpsychologie*. Furthermore, both thinkers would again rely upon a colonial logic concerning the evolution of culture from "primitive religion" to secular modernity that, rather than dismantling the concept of race undergirding modern antisemitism, further reinscribed it. While this is of course famously explicit in Freud, in his early essays on Vico and passages in *Figura* Auerbach adhered to a similar framework. Finally, the German-Jewish rejection of myth would again entail the construction of a new one. In

² For more on the relation between psychoanalysis and *Völkerpsychologie* see Hermann Westerink, "Zum Verhältnis von Psychoanalyse und Mythologie," *Psyche—Z Psychoanal* 62 (2008), 290-311; David Rosenberg, "Patho-Teleology and the Spirit of War: The Psychoanalytic Inheritance of National Psychology," *Monatshefte* 100:2 (2008), 213-225.

Freud's case, this would be more pronounced as his *Moses and Monotheism* straddled the line between history and fiction. In the image of Schiller's *Legation of Moses*, Freud constructed an elaborate myth of the Egyptian Moses creating the Jews and their religion of reason from a variety of archaeological and literary sources.³ In Auerbach's case, one literary tradition was pitted against another, levying Abraham against Odysseus, Hebraism against Hellenism, Jerusalem against Athens—and Rome, too.

II. Dreams and Myths

Freud's concern with myth, religion, and Judaism has its origin—like the formative structures of the unconscious—in his childhood. In 1856 Sigismund was born to Jacob and Amalie Freud in Freiburg where the family would remain for only a few years before departing for Leipzig and then Vienna. Freud's parents were both *Ostjuden* from Galicia who had immigrated to Germany, and Jacob himself descended from a Hasidic community in Tysmenitz. Although he had received a traditional education in his youth, Jacob largely abandoned his heritage and embraced a secular Jewish identity in adulthood. Even so, Jacob still maintained affinities for Jewish texts and traditions, devoting himself to Torah study in the original languages well into old age. As is well known, Jacob read to Sigmund from the Philippon Bible from age seven and gifted it to him in his mid-thirties. A staple of German-Jewish Bible production, the Philippon was an interlinear translation juxtaposing the Hebrew and German texts that also included an array of literary, anthropological, and archaeological annotations.⁴ While the extent to which the Philippon represented a progressivist challenge to orthodoxy is disputed, it is clear that from the start Freud would have understood the Hebrew Bible from a historical-critical perspective.⁵ Moreover, as a result of Jacob and Amalie's influence, Freud had a smattering of Hebrew

³ For more on Freud's historical predecessors in the study of the Exodus see Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁴ For more on the Philippon Bible, see Abigail Gillman, *A History of German-Jewish Bible Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Richard Cohen, "Urban Visibility and Biblical Visions: Jewish Culture in Central and Western Europe in the Modern Age," *Cultures of the Jews*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken, 2002), 731-798.

⁵ Whitebook and Yerushalmi disagree here, with the former declaring the Philippon an affront to orthodoxy while the latter downplays it. See Whitebook, *Freud*, 21-24; Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses*, 64.

and Yiddish. After graduating from the *Leopoldstädter Kommunal-Realgymnasium* in 1873 with an interest in literature and noted proficiency in multiple languages, Freud enrolled at the University of Vienna. Here he pursued medical training under the tutelage of figures like Franz Brentano, Ernst Brücke, and Carl Claus as he worked in the areas of physiology, zoology, and biology. At the same time, Freud also engaged works of German philosophy, developing particular affinity for Ludwig Feuerbach.⁶ And yet, Freud would eventually abandon philosophy for empirical scientific work. After graduating in 1881, he took up a position as a physician at Vienna General Hospital the next year. In 1885 and 1886 Freud spent time in Paris, where he was heavily influenced by the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, an experience that shaped his discovery of the unconscious and development of psychoanalytic technique upon returning to Austria.

Although absent from Freud's early works on hysteria, neurosis, and sexuality, myth plays an understated but significant role in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899. "The dream," Freud famously wrote, "is the (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed, repressed) wish."⁷ Dreams censor, conceal, and distort one's innermost, childish desires by means of condensation, displacement, and other methods of defense deployed by the unconscious. Judged to be too discomforting for the ego or incongruent with the demands of reality, adulthood, and social existence, dreams prevent the irruption of wishes into waking, conscious life while giving cryptic expression to them in the dream-work's manifest content. Myths function for Freud in much the same way by expressing the infantile wishes of a primitive humanity in corrupted form. As he would later write in an essay on daydreaming and creative writing, myths are "distorted vestiges of the wishful fantasies of whole nations, the secular dreams of youthful humanity."⁸ Thus, not only are myths correlative to childhood fantasies and dreaming, but socially constitutive. "The relationships of our typical dreams to fairy-tales and other poetic materials are

⁶ Whitebook, *Freud*, 89.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung* (Leipzig: F. Deuticke, 1899); Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. Joyce Crick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 124.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Der Dichter und das Phantasieren," *Neue Revue. Halbmonatsschrift für das öffentliche Leben* 1 (1907/08), 716–724; Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Daydreaming," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), 442.

certainly neither isolated nor accidental.”⁹ Moreover, “[t]he depths of mankind’s eternal nature, which the poet invariably counts on arousing in his listeners, are made of those motions of our inner life rooted in that time of our childhood which later becomes prehistoric.”¹⁰ Like dreams, “all the myths of the world come to bear witness” to humanity’s childish attempts to contend with the reality of death through a naive optimism, unaware of the “horrors of decomposition, of freezing in the cold grave, of the terror of endless Nothingness which the adult’s imagination cannot bear to contemplate.”¹¹

To provide examples of the similarities between dreams and myth, Freud goes on draw correlations between the paradisiacal, Edenic desire for shameless public nakedness in “exhibition-dreams” and tales like the “Emperor’s New Clothes”¹²—a wish that becomes anxiety ridden in the legend of Nausicaa¹³—or long-repressed wishes and the blood-thirsty shades of the *Odysee*.¹⁴ This is also related to paternal dominance and competition, which has its mythical expression in Kronos’ devouring of his children or Zeus’ castration of his father as “dark tidings” from the “primeval days of human society.”¹⁵ The mythical relation between parents and children is of course principally illustrated in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* (as well as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in disguised form),¹⁶ which manifests the more acute and pervasive childhood desire to murder one parent in order to copulate with the other.¹⁷ A foundational concept in Freudian theory, the Oedipus Complex is eventually resolved through submission and identification with the father as well as a renunciation of the romantic wish to re-enter the mother’s womb. Within the structure of the Oedipus myth, however, this entails a rejection of the “submission to the will of the divinity” and an imagined powerlessness in the face of fate. Although born of unacknowledged childhood wishes lying at the base of culture, the Oedipus Complex is no doubt “offensive to morality and forced upon us by nature,” persisting in civilization only among

⁹ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 189.

¹⁰ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 190.

¹¹ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 195-196.

¹² Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 187-189.

¹³ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 190.

¹⁴ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 192.

¹⁵ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 197 and 410.

¹⁶ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 204 fn. 23.

¹⁷ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 201.

psychoneurotics.¹⁸ Myth is therefore already a feature of childhood, delusion, fantasy, primitiveness, or prehistoric archaism to be overcome for Freud in the course of maturation, adulthood, civilization, and the development of rationality.

The homology Freud established between dreams and myth would be taken up by his close colleague Karl Abraham in *Dreams and Myths* in 1909, the subtitle of which is *A Study in Völkerpsychologie*. Abraham sought to further elaborate the psychoanalytic account of mythology by appealing to Steinthal's analyses of Prometheus, Moses, and Samson almost sixty years prior, even urging Freud himself to look into Steinthal's work in 1908 as he was writing the book.¹⁹ Moreover, Abraham cited Cohen's "Myths of God and the Soul" from the *ZfVS* as an example of Steinthal's influence.²⁰ Abraham proceeded to rehearse Steinthal's theory of the mythic apperception of heavenly fire according to the earthly act of rubbing or boring to produce a spark and its primitive association with insemination and procreation. This trajectory yielded the Vedic "fire-bringer" Matarichvan, who was eventually transposed into the Greek Prometheus. Abraham also went on to note Steinthal's theory of comparison, which enables an identification of the race or nation with mythical characters in order to effect social cohesion.²¹ Further, Abraham cited Steinthal's interpretation of Prometheus as an example of condensation or compression reminiscent of the Freudian dream-work, charting the transition from Vedic religion to Hellenism. "According to the first [version of the myth] he is the fire god, according to the second he is the fire, according to the third he is man. From these ideas the saga of the robbery of the fire was condensed."²²

The eighth chapter of *Dreams and Myths* centers on the function of displacement in the myths of Prometheus, Moses, and Samson. The very name of Prometheus, on Abraham's reading, obscures the

¹⁸ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 203.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud and Karl Abraham, *A Psycho-Analytic Dialogue: The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Karl Abraham (1907-1926)*, ed. Hilda Abraham and Ernst Freud, trans. Bernard Marsh and Hilda Abraham (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), 31-32.

²⁰ Karl Abraham, *Traum und Mythos: Eine Studie zur Völkerpsychologie* (Leipzig: F. Deuticke, 1909); Karl Abraham, *Dreams and Myths: A Study in Race Psychology*, trans. William A. White (New York: Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 1913), 27-28.

²¹ Abraham, *Dreams and Myths*, 33.

²² Abraham, *Dreams and Myths*, 44.

original Vedic “Pramantha” which relates the myth of Matharichvan as a fire-bringer. Instead, the Hellenic bestowal of fire becomes an act of rebellion against the gods that emulates humanity’s sinful, habitual disobedience to them.²³ Noting the connection between fire and nectar, Abraham draws connections just as Steinthal had done between Prometheus’ transgression and Moses’ striking of the rock to yield water in defiance of God in Numbers 20, for which he is forbidden from entering the Promised Land. However, with the giving of the “fiery law” at Sinai, Abraham suggests, the disgust aroused by Moses’ disobedience is displaced by depicting him as a virtuous messenger in service to God. In this way, Moses’ own guilt is alleviated as well. The legal germ of Judaism itself becomes a result of an operative displacement that, for Abraham, can be observed elsewhere in the biblical text as monotheism gradually develops out of Ancient Near Eastern mythic sources.²⁴ Pivoting to Steinthal’s interpretation of Samson, Abraham argues that just as Mosaic humility is a displacement of Promethean criminality, the legend of Samson enacts a displacement of Herculean chauvinism that subordinates the rogue pagan sun deity to God’s will.²⁵ Therefore, immanent to Abraham’s own analysis, the historical emergence of Jewish monotheism becomes a renunciation of the wish-fulfillment born out in pagan myth through the same acts of displacement operative in the Freudian dream-work. Rather than simply mythologizing desires, the Hebrew Bible brings them into conformity with ethical precepts and the authority of God.

Like Abraham, Otto Rank undertook a psychoanalytic interpretation of the mythical Moses in the *Myth of the Birth of the Hero* also published in 1909. Here Rank famously laid out a universal typology of birth narratives that explained the appeal of heroic figures across ancient mythologies. According to Rank, the hero is born of high nobility, but his conception is preceded by sexual impotence and a revelation portending his rebellion against the father. As a result, the child is subject to death or exposure but is saved by lowly people or animals and, upon adulthood, takes revenge upon the patriarch

²³ Abraham, *Dreams and Myths*, 50.

²⁴ Abraham, *Dreams and Myths*, 52.

²⁵ Abraham, *Dreams and Myths*, 54.

nonetheless.²⁶ Much like Schelling, Rank suggests in his introduction that this interpretation countervails the widespread notion that myth originates in the personification of natural phenomena. Instead, Rank outlines a psychological explanation of myth as a product of the “imaginative faculty” derivative of the Freudian dream theory that Abraham had already applied. In fact, Rank goes so far as to claim that the infantile, incestuous wishes expressed in myths provoke such repulsion and embarrassment for mythographers that it leads them to postulate naturalistic theories.²⁷ In his analysis, then, Rank attends to the Mosaic myth as one heroic birth among others while also noting its outstanding features, specifically the sense in which the child is of low class and his exposure an act of rescue rather than murder.²⁸ Yet as Celine Trautmann-Waller has shown, Rank’s analysis of the Mosaic myth was, like Abraham’s, reliant upon *Völkerpsychologie*. Specifically, Rank made use of Ignaz Goldziher’s *Mythology Among the Hebrews*, a text largely inspired by Steintal’s repudiation of Ernest Renan. What Rank finds in Goldziher is a more concretized notion of “Semitic mythology” that can be compared with adjacent traditions.²⁹ In so doing, though, Rank (in concert with Abraham) would open the question of the relation between Judaism and mythology to psychoanalysis, all centered around the figure of Moses.

By 1909, then, Freud’s attention had been drawn to the fruitful application of psychoanalysis to comparative mythology and religion. As he wrote to a new up and coming psychoanalyst from Zurich named Carl Jung, “I am glad you share my belief that we must conquer the whole field of mythology. Thus far we have only two pioneers: Abraham and Rank. We need men for more far-reaching campaigns. Such men are so rare.”³⁰ The son of a Swiss Reformed pastor with an immense knowledge of comparative religion, Jung seemed the perfect candidate to advance the psychoanalytic study of myth. At the same time, Freud acknowledged that this would encompass a wider effort to be modeled on

²⁶ Otto Rank, *Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden* (Leipzig: F. Deuticke, 1909); Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, trans. Gregory C. Richter (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 47.

²⁷ Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, 5-8.

²⁸ Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, 75-76.

²⁹ Céline Trautmann-Waller, “Semites and Semitism: From Philology to the Language of Myth,” *Philological Encounters* 2 (2017), 346-376.

³⁰ Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, *The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung*, ed. William McGuire, trans. Ralph Manheim and R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 255.

Völkerpsychologie. This was the task of the new academic journal *Imago* founded by Freud and his colleagues in 1912, which began applying psychoanalysis to the humanities more broadly. In their preface to the journal, Rank and Hans Sachs invoked the basic thrust of *Völkerpsychologie*: “the task of the following pages should consist in briefly describing the path of development from the individual psyche to an understanding of cultural forms as the imprint of the collective work of countless individual souls [. . .] and in showing those places where, to our way of thinking, paths open up to the future.”³¹ Moreover, Freud is explicit in the introduction to his own article on incest: “From its beginnings psychoanalytic research has pointed to similarities and analogies between its results from the psychic life of the individual and the results of *Völkerpsychologie*.” Indeed, the time has come “to set a new goal for work that extends beyond the psychology of the individual. Not only should occurrences and correlations be traced in the psychic life of nations similar to those which psychoanalysis has brought to light in the individual, but an attempt should be made to illuminate through the insight of psychoanalysis that which has remained for *Völkerpsychologie* shrouded in darkness and doubt.”³² What’s more, psychoanalysis would further interrogate the “mass psyche” discovered by Steinthal and Lazarus, the spiritual and emotional interrelatedness of human beings, as well as the psychological traits inherited and modified over generations. However, Freud and his colleagues would pursue these goals without the nationalist bent or Hegelian overtones of *Völkerpsychologie*, instead peeling back the layers of the unconscious.

III. Jungian Fantasies

Freud enlisted Jung as his protégé in 1906 with the naive assumption that their intentions and theoretical underpinnings were largely aligned. Another reason, though, was Freud’s concern that psychoanalysis itself ran the risk of becoming a “Jewish national affair.”³³ Indeed, Freud, Abraham, Rank, and all of the members of the famous Wednesday night study group in Vienna were Jews, leading

³¹ Otto Rank and Hans Sachs, “Vorrede,” *Imago* 1 (1912), 1.

³² Rank and Sachs, “Vorrede,” 17. See also Rosenberg, “Patho-Teleology and the Spirit of War,” 219.

³³ Freud and Abraham, *A Psycho-Analytic Dialogue*, 34.

to the trope that the discipline constituted a “Jewish science.” By bringing Jung into the fold, Freud thought he could dispel these rumors and universalize psychoanalysis beyond its ostensibly Jewish provincialism. Internal to his own circle, Freud faced resistance as some—including Abraham—suspected Jung of harboring antisemitic sentiments, an accusation Freud worked to keep at bay.³⁴ As is well known, though, Freud’s hopes were sorely disappointed. Of the many reasons for their inevitable falling out, Freud and Jung would disagree sharply not about the nature of myth in a *descriptive* sense, but about its potential to effect improvement in the psychic life of human beings on a *prescriptive* level. Where Freud maintained a fidelity to the Enlightenment principles of reason and disenchantment, Jung romantically valorized myth in pursuit of re-enchantment. This stemmed, as Joel Whitebook has powerfully argued, from Jung’s prior experiences. By his own admission in his autobiographical writings, Jung became severely disillusioned with the Christianity of his father during adolescence.³⁵ This disappointment prompted a search to fill the remaining metaphysical and existential void, a longing expressed in vivid dreams and hallucinatory visions. This was combined with his mother’s immersion in the occult, his own attraction to medieval folklore and ancient myth, as well as a noted personality split between a rational and sociable self and another self characterized by unreason and “immeasurable darkness.”³⁶

Jung’s attraction to myth was also an outgrowth of his own psychoanalytic theories and his critiques of Freud, concerning sexuality and psychosis. From the beginning, Freud had suggested that sexuality played a more important role in the development of not only the individual psyche, but culture and civilization *writ large* than was usually acknowledged. This was fleshed out in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905, where he argued for the prevalence of perversion among otherwise normal individuals, the existence of sexuality in early childhood, and the reality of the Oedipus complex.³⁷

³⁴ Whitebook, *Freud*, 264.

³⁵ Whitebook, *Freud*, 242.

³⁶ Whitebook, *Freud*, 247.

³⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* (Leipzig: F. Deuticke, 1905); Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

Echoing a familiar criticism, Jung charged Freud with overreach, the simultaneous reduction of all phenomena to sexuality as well as an undue inflation of its explanatory power. Against this, Jung ironically expanded Freud's theory such that he could posit a desexualized "General Libido" encompassing a vast array of drives and "psychic energy" producing, among other things, higher cultural forms such as mythology as a creative departure from the painful realities of life. This was outlined in his *Psychology of the Unconscious* in 1912, which reverberated throughout the psychoanalytic community and contributed to the growing rift between Jung and his mentor.³⁸ Moreover, Jung's discussion of myth, like Abraham's, made use of Steinthal's essays on Samson and Prometheus.³⁹ Indeed, Jung had recommended Steinthal to Freud a year before Abraham.⁴⁰ Even as he cited Steinthal's emphasis on the importance of analogical thought approvingly, though, Jung overturned his predecessor's theory that analogy actually *released* humanity from the bonds of mythic thought: "We must agree thoroughly with Steinthal when he says that an absolutely overweening importance must be granted to the little phrase "*Gleich wie*" (or; just as) in the history of the development of thought. It is easy to believe that the carryover of the libido to a phantastic correlate has led primitive man to a number of the most important discoveries."⁴¹

Contra Jung, then, for Freud the libido remained a discrete phenomenon: "I am afraid there is a misunderstanding between us, the same sort of thing as when you once said in an article that to my way of thinking libido is identical with any kind of desire, whereas in reality I hold very simply that there are two basic drives and that only the power behind the sexual drive can be termed libido."⁴² This also meant that withdrawal of libidinal energy from the external world produced symptoms of neurosis, at times even leading to fully-fledged psychosis as a narcissistic departure from reality into the inward

³⁸ Carl Jung, *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido* (Leipzig: F. Deuticke, 1912); Carl Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious: A Study in the Transformations and Symbolisms of the Libido*, trans. Beatrice Hinkle (New York: Moffat, Yard and Co., 1916), 21-41.

³⁹ Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, 156. See also 508 n2, 512 n5 and n. 11, 537 n17, 554 n134.

⁴⁰ Freud and Jung, *The Freud/Jung Letters*, 49 and 53.

⁴¹ Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, 156.

⁴² Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, 469.

realms of the self.⁴³ Psychosis, as a complete divorce from the external world, constituted one aspect of the division Freud outlined in his 1911 essay “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” which posited a psychical division between a “pleasure/unpleasure principle” and a “reality principle.” This was the basic schema that would underlie his 1921 book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.⁴⁴ For Freud, psychosis was the result of wishes and pleasure run amok, unrestrained by reality, science, and truth. It was also, therefore, the domain of myth. As he had written to Jung in 1909, “I hope you will soon come to agree with me that in all likelihood mythology centers on the same nuclear complex as the neuroses.”⁴⁵ For Jung, however, because myth was derivative of a desexualized General Libido, the insights it provided into the irrational and the archaic should be celebrated and encouraged rather than critically apprehended. Further, this meant that psychosis was much more than an aberrant reversion to childhood fantasy.⁴⁶ This would lead him to formulate the famous theory of mythic “archetypes” as well as to imagine a new version of Christianity truer to what Jung claimed were its Dionysian, ecstatic origins.⁴⁷ Jung repeatedly wrote to Freud about his research in a manner revealing the “almost auto-erotic pleasure” he experienced while working on the subject, claiming that mythology “has me in its grip” and “swirls about inside me.”⁴⁸ Rationality itself, Jung seemed to suggest, was a fall from mythic enchantment. For Freud, the self-described “Godless Jew” whose science was an exercise in “de-occultization,” this was anathema.⁴⁹ The unchecked valorization of wish fulfillment, pleasure, fantasy, and myth could lead to nothing but psychotic delusion, narcissism, and what he would eventually call the “omnipotence of thoughts.”

⁴³ Whitebook, *Freud*, 284.

⁴⁴ Sigmund Freud, ‘Formulierungen über die zwei Prinzipien des psychischen Geschehens’ in *Jahrbuch für psychoanalytische und psychopathologische Forschungen III*, ed. Carl Jung (Leipzig: F. Deuticke, 1911); Sigmund Freud, “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning,” *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), 301-308. Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (Leipzig: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1921); Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961).

⁴⁵ Freud and Jung, *The Freud/Jung Letters*, 260.

⁴⁶ Whitebook, *Freud*, 290.

⁴⁷ Whitebook, *Freud*, 274.

⁴⁸ Freud and Jung, *The Freud/Jung Letters*, 308, 285, and 326.

⁴⁹ As Sándor Ferenczi would characterize it in a July 1915 letter to Freud, see *the Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi: Volume 2, 1914-1919*, ed. Ernst Falzeder and Eva Brabant, trans. Peter Hoffer (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 70.

The disagreement between the two analysts over the correct approach to myth is clear in a letter from December 1911, where Freud offers “an example of [his] objections” to Jung’s method of treating mythology.⁵⁰ Taking the story of The Fall, Freud suggests that “in all likelihood the myth of Genesis is a wretched, tendentious distortion devised by an apprentice priest, who as we now know stupidly wove two independent sources into a single narrative (as in a dream).” This accounts, Freud surmises, for the simultaneous existence of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge as well as the possibility that Eve was originally Adam’s mother, making the punishment for disobedience originally a punishment for incest. “Consequently, I hold that the surface versions of myths cannot be used uncritically for comparison with our psychoanalytical findings. We must find our way back to their latent, original forms by a comparative method that eliminates the distortions they have undergone in the course of their history.” For Freud, then, Jung’s affirmative approach to myth stemmed from not only his personal fascination with it but also his refusal to deploy the methods of modern textual criticism to decipher its innerworkings. Indeed, the biblical critic’s attempt to wade through the multi-layered history of textual composition and redaction mirrored the analyst’s attempts to discern how the latent content of a dream resurfaced in distorted form in the manifest content as a result of the dream-work. Thus, while Jung valorized myth as an irrational expression of the General Libido not unlike the Romantics’ view of myth as a product of artistic genius or national spirit, Freud took the approach of the disenchanting, rationalist critic inspired by the Enlightenment critique of religion.

The dispute with Jung spawned a number of Freud’s most important texts, among them his essay on the “Moses of Michelangelo” and *Totem and Taboo* in 1913.⁵¹ In the essay, Freud approaches Michelangelo’s portrayal of Moses aesthetically, independent of either mythical or historical concerns about the lawgiver himself. Further, he notes that the sculpture deviates significantly from the ancient text, which, from the perspective of “the modern criticism of the Bible,” is “clumsily put together from

⁵⁰ Freud and Jung, *The Freud/Jung Letters*, 473. See also Jung’s inquiry to Freud about specific criticisms on 470.

⁵¹ See also Abigail Gilman, *Viennese Jewish Modernism: Freud, Hofmannsthal, Beer-Hofmann, and Schnitzler* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 24-53.

various sources” and rife with “glaring incongruities and contradictions.”⁵² Freud maintains that Michelangelo intended to portray Moses’ indignation at the “clamor of the people” as he witnessed them worshipping the Golden Calf on his descent from Sinai. The sculpture imagines the “wrathful hero” turning to his left at the point where, according to Exodus 32, he would have smashed the tablets in anger. Instead, Freud thinks, Michelangelo positions Moses such that he exhibits immense restraint and, pressing the tables between his arm and his abdomen, saves them from violent destruction. Moses renounces his instinctual aggression to maintain composure in the face of iniquity. This, for Freud, illustrates Moses’ grandeur: “the giant frame with its tremendous physical power becomes only a concrete expression of the highest mental achievement that is possible in a man, that of struggling successfully against an inward passion for the sake of a cause to which he has devoted himself.”⁵³ Turning to Michelangelo, Freud suggests the sculpture as “a warning to himself, thus, in self-criticism, rising superior to his own nature.” Reading between the lines, Freud clearly empathizes with Moses’ plight. As Whitebook suggests, it is entirely possible to interpret the essay as an analogue for Freud’s repulsion at Jung’s celebration of myth and the occult.⁵⁴ Beyond this, though, it also demonstrates Freud’s growing admiration for Moses himself as an ideal hero worthy of imitation on account of his supreme power of judgement and hostility to idolatry. Indeed, Freud had already begun to identify himself with Moses and even perceive parallels between psychoanalysis and Judaism as he would do in *Moses and Monotheism*. As he said to Jung prematurely in 1909, “if I am Moses, then you are Joshua and will take possession of the promised land of psychiatry, which I shall only be able to glimpse from afar.”⁵⁵

Freud’s reaction against the Swiss doctor would continue in *Totem and Taboo*. Whereas Jung considered myth and religion products of the imaginative and creative “psychic energy” of the General Libido, Freud saw them as the result of a heinous crime motivated by Oedipal rage against the primeval

⁵² Sigmund Freud, ‘Der Moses des Michelangelo,’ *Imago* 3:1 (1914), 15-36; Sigmund Freud, “The Moses of Michelangelo,” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), 537-538.

⁵³ Freud, “The Moses of Michelangelo,” 538-539.

⁵⁴ Whitebook, *Freud*, 275-276.

⁵⁵ Freud and Jung, *The Freud/Jung Letters*, 196-197.

father. In his 1907 paper, "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices," Freud had already noted similarities between the compulsiveness of neurotics and cultic rituals, noting that both betray a strong need to guard against threatening wishes and desires.⁵⁶ This basic insight would fuel the correlation between neurotics, children, religious practitioners, and "savages" in *Totem and Taboo*. Freud's further immersion in comparative mythography and anthropology would become apparent in the book as he made extensive use of theories of totemism and sacrifice in Robertson Smith and Frazer, Tylor's theory of animism, and Darwinian evolution, drawing examples from ethnographic studies across Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Australia. Freud would also rely upon Wilhelm Wundt, the ostensible inheritor of Steinthal and Lazarus' *Völkerpsychologie*. Freud begins the text by asking after the source of prohibitions against incest in primitive societies, reasoning that the existence of such taboos speaks to the prevalence of Oedipal desire actively repressed through interdiction.⁵⁷ Taboo itself, Freud says, denotes the removal of a totem object or animal from common use, declared sacred and profane simultaneously. This contradiction produces a feeling of "ambivalence" among members of the devoted clan who view the totem with both "veneration and horror." For Freud, however, tolerance for emotional ambivalence is fundamental to the psychological and religious life of a people, since it is rooted in Oedipal love and hatred for the father. This is manifested more broadly in the clan's attitudes toward the dead, enemies, and even their own rulers.⁵⁸ Yet the uncomfortable "unconscious hostility" endemic to emotional ambivalence sometimes necessitates displacement, often taking the form of psychological projection of inner wishes onto the outer world. Striking a Feuerbachian tone, Freud argues that through projection the universe becomes peopled with innumerable spirits, souls, demons, and ghosts, birthing animism as a totalizing

⁵⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Zwangshandlungen und Religionsübung," *Zeitschrift für Religionspsychologie* 1 (1907), 4-12; Sigmund Freud, "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), 429-436.

⁵⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Totem und Tabu* (Leipzig: Heller, 1913); Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1950), 23.

⁵⁸ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 60.

cosmic system and the “omnipotence of thoughts” as its magical mechanism—the narcissistic belief that inner thoughts shape external reality.⁵⁹

For Freud, these features of the primitive savage similarly characterize the lives of children, as well as neurotics plagued by an immense guilt for repressed aggressiveness.⁶⁰ It is the origin of this guilt—as well as the complex system of totems and the taboos generating it—that Freud explains in the famous fourth chapter of the book. To retell a familiar tale, Freud posits a “historical” explanation beginning with an undoubtedly fanciful and anecdotal cannibalistic murder of a primeval patriarch by a horde of young males seeking to usurp his authority and gain access to the clan’s females.⁶¹ Upon completion of the “criminal deed,” however, the group is stricken with filial remorse for acting upon their hostility, a situation leading to the adoption of the totem as an object of worship in the Father’s place. It is this devotion to the totem Father, as well as fear of further irruptions of Oedipal violence and incest, that generates the social contracts and institutions that later define civilization. With the introduction of abstract deities and monotheism, Freud contends, the totem becomes synonymous with not only the Father but God himself, who demands sacrifices of the object or animal.⁶² Thus a series of rites, rituals, and ceremonies ensue that, by both prohibiting and permitting violence during festivals or sacrifices, further repress primeval, patricidal guilt and maintain admiration for God the Father. With the advent of Christianity, though, this Father-religion is supplanted by a Son-religion ironically reinscribing the original guilt by exalting the crucifixion. Through the self-sacrifice of the Son, the murder of the Father is atoned for. Moreover, the post-sacrificial totem meal becomes mirrored in the cannibalistic Eucharist.⁶³ Christianity, therefore, becomes a regression and repetition of infantile, mythical wish-fulfillment that not only facilitates the return of the repressed deed and its attending guilt, but reenacts the original crime on a larger scale and places it at the center of civilization. In short,

⁵⁹ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 93.

⁶⁰ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 107.

⁶¹ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 175-176.

⁶² Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 182.

⁶³ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 191.

Christianity signals the return of myth. Read in the context of a dispute between a Jewish Freud and a Christian Jung, *Totem and Taboo* comes to be about much more than sexuality, psychosis, and religion generally. Rather, Freud's critique of Christianity is born of his criticisms of Jung himself, especially his valorization of myth and the occult. Moreover, it also suggests that Freud, ever aware of increasing anti-Jewish fervor in Germany and elsewhere, had begun to slowly conflate antisemitism with psychosis, myth, and Christianity.

Freud's broader critique of religion would play itself out in the years following *Totem and Taboo* and be articulated in tandem with his turn toward mass psychology in the aftermath of the First World War. While his initial response to the war was patriotic, he soon became disillusioned with German nationalism. This was evinced in his wartime writings and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, which theorized the libidinal, instinctual ties between members of religious and political institutions contributing to the idealization of the leader, identification with the aggressor, and obedience to authority.⁶⁴ In *Ego and the Id*, he formally outlined the tripartite structure of id, ego, and superego as well as further developing the notion of the death instinct or Thanatos previously introduced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.⁶⁵ What Freud attempted to grapple with here was not only the effects of the war on society, but the psychological mechanisms driving individuals to devote themselves to objects, leaders, and causes that were ultimately destructive. Out of this matrix of concerns he would write *The Future of an Illusion* in 1927, his most sustained comment on religion no doubt also spurred by his conflict with Jung. Illusions, for Freud, are not simply fantasies or delusions generally but are specifically motivated by the same wish-fulfillment operative in dreams and myths, meaning that to call religion an "illusion" is to imply that its germ lies in the realm of instinct.⁶⁶ As in *Totem and Taboo*, infantile wishes generate the "omnipotence of thoughts" and "humanization of nature," yet here Oedipal, patriarchal deities serve to

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (Leipzig: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1921); Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1959).

⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Das Ich und das Es* (Leipzig: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1923), Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960).

⁶⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (Leipzig: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1927); Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961).

guard against the forces of nature, “reconcile” one to death and fate, and “compensate” for the repression of instincts necessary for civilization.⁶⁷ It is human weakness and an inability to transcend infantile helplessness, therefore, that draws one to religion as a source of comforting illusions. This means that, again like psychosis, religion represents an individualistic and asocial flight from reality into a delusional inner self. “Religion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity.”⁶⁸ The only cure, Freud thinks, is a scientific, *Bildung*-inspired “education to reality” achieved through psychoanalysis whereby the ego learns to sublimate wishes and drives in order to integrate into society.⁶⁹

The idea that civilization involves the renunciation of instinct had already been hinted at in *Totem and Taboo*, where remorse produced by the murder of the father became the basis for contracts, prohibitions, and social institutions. Freud further elaborated this idea in *Civilization and its Discontents* in 1930. However, he begins with the famous theory of “oceanic feeling,” a sensation of embeddedness in the universe symptomatic of a weak ego unable to mediate effectively between itself and the external world that is “seized upon by the various churches and religious systems.”⁷⁰ This is derivative of a disordered impulsivity continually frustrated by reality, evil, suffering, and death threatening the stability of society as such. Again, neurosis consists in cordoning oneself off, “build[ing] up instead another world in which its most unbearable features are eliminated and replaced by others that are in conformity with one’s own wishes.”⁷¹ In short, it involves the regressive creation of infantile, dream-like fantasies, meaning that the very same wishes responsible for the construction of myths constitute the “discontents” within civilization Freud seeks to allay. This results in a romanticism hostile to the advances of modern society idealizing the primitive and the archaic, a desire no doubt derived from the Oedipal wish to re-enter the womb. More specifically, though, Freud cites several instances where this dynamic comes to bear upon the history of Christianity and Judaism. Christendom’s devaluation of

⁶⁷ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 22.

⁶⁸ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 55.

⁶⁹ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 63.

⁷⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1930); Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 11.

⁷¹ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 31.

earthly life for the sake of otherworldly reward, for example, illustrates the departure from external reality indicative of psychosis.⁷² Moreover, spelling out the basic logic of supersessionism, Freud argues from the theory of ambivalence that the Pauline injunction to universal love prompted an instinctual aggression toward those falling outside the Christian community—namely, the Jews.⁷³ This lead, in the course of centuries, to an identification of the Jews with the figure of the devil as a wishful, mythical personification of evil and suffering.⁷⁴ Indeed, this unrestrained wishfulness and illusion in Freud’s era leads to Aryan supremacy, “the assertion made by certain nationalists that the Indo-German race is the only one capable of civilization.”⁷⁵ In view of his falling out with Jung, the critique of Christianity in *Totem and Taboo*, and an awareness of rising antisemitism in Weimar Germany and across Europe, this suggests that Freud had begun to grapple with anti-Jewish sentiment as a form of religious neurosis inextricable from the history of Christianity in particular. It is this phenomenon that he would attempt to explain in his final and most controversial text, 1939’s *Moses and Monotheism*.

IV. Moses the Promethean

Freud began writing *Moses and Monotheism* in the mid-1930’s, publishing the first and second parts in *Imago* in 1937. The third and most substantial part which, in his own words, “haunted me like an unlaid ghost” was written from March 1938 to the summer of 1939 amidst his exile in London following the Third Reich’s annexation of Austria. Although many tributaries contributed to *Moses and Monotheism*—a text that has inspired an endless proliferation of interpretations bordering on the absurd—it is impossible to read it apart from this context.⁷⁶ “It would be a mistake to think that Freud’s

⁷² Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 38.

⁷³ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 72-73.

⁷⁴ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 79.

⁷⁵ Freud, *Future*, 39.

⁷⁶ The secondary literature on *Moses and Monotheism* is vast and impossible to account for exhaustively here. Among the factors highlighted by various commentators are Freud’s concern with his own Jewishness, broader trends in the study of religion, the Bible, and psychology, interpersonal conflicts and relations, gender and sexuality, the history of race and antisemitism, and the political situation in twentieth century Europe. Most commentators will exploit only one or two of these, making *Moses and Monotheism* a veritable Rorschach test. See, for example, Marthe Robert, *From Oedipus to Moses: Freud’s Jewish Identity*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Anchor Books, 1976); Sander L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Moshe Gresser, *Dual Allegiance: Freud as a Moen Jew* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994); Emanuel Rice, *Freud and Moses: The Long Journey Home*

discussions of antisemitism and Christianity are somehow afterthoughts to Freud’s analysis of Mosaic monotheism,” Richard Bernstein has insightfully argued. “On the contrary, it is not an exaggeration to say that Freud’s intense concern with antisemitism—especially Christian antisemitism—set the problematic that he wanted to address in his *Moses* book.”⁷⁷ Freud wrote to Arnold Zweig in September 1934: “Faced with the new persecutions, one asks oneself again how the Jews have come to be what they are and why they have attracted this undying hatred.”⁷⁸ The answer, Freud would later argue, was the “advance in intellectuality” brought about by Moses and developed further by the Jews throughout their history. As Bernstein and—somewhat belatedly—Jan Assman have suggested, the renunciation of instinct heralded by this “advance” lies at the core of Freud’s agenda in *Moses and Monotheism*.⁷⁹ However, it is apparent that Freud’s thesis had been germinating for some time, at least since *Totem and Taboo* and his essay on Michelangelo’s Moses. Beyond this, though, it is also possible to understand the “advance in intellectuality” as a result of Freud’s reception of Steinthal and *Völkerpsychologie* mediated by Abraham and Rank, two scarcely mentioned figures who, among several others, loom large in the background of *Moses and Monotheism*.⁸⁰ This becomes especially clear when one reads *Moses and Monotheism* through a prior essay on the myth of Prometheus that Freud penned in 1931: “On the Acquisition and Control of Fire.”

In his extended discussion of the renunciation of instinct in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud had already argued that despite their history of suffering at the hands of their neighbors, the unwaveringly faithful Israelites had “produced the prophets, who held up their sinfulness before them,

(Albany: SUNY Press, 1990); Eliza Slavet, *Racial Fever: Freud and the Jewish Question* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

⁷⁷ Richard Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 75.

⁷⁸ Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. Elaine and William Robson-Scott (New York: Harcourt, 1970), 91.

⁷⁹ See Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, xi and Jan Assman, “Advance in Intellectuality: Freud’s Construction of Judaism,” in *New Perspectives on Freud’s Moses and Monotheism*, ed. Ruth Ginsburg and Ilana Pardes (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2006), 7-18. See also Richard Bernstein, “Why [the Jews] Have Attracted This Undying Hatred,” in *Freud and Monotheism: Moses and the Violent Origins of Religion*, ed. Gilad Sharvit and Karen S. Feldman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 27-45.

⁸⁰ Freud’s thesis that Moses was an Egyptian devotee of Akhenaten’s monotheistic cult was anticipated by an uncited article by Karl Abraham, “Amenhotep IV (Ichnaton): Psychoanalytische Beiträge zum Verständnis seiner Persönlichkeit und des monotheistischen Atonkultes,” *Imago* 1 (1912): 334-360.

and out of their sense of guilt they created the overstrict commandments of their priestly religion.”⁸¹ In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud excavated the origins of this guilt, applying the theory of myth and religion in *Totem and Taboo* to Jewish history. To again repeat a well-worn tale, Freud advances an etymological argument for Moses’ Egyptian identity, suggesting that he was a high priest in the monotheistic cult devoted to Aten founded by the Pharaoh Akhenaten as attested by recent archaeological findings at Tel-Amarna.⁸² Following the downfall of the Pharaoh and his heretical religion, Moses guided the *Habiru* out of their servitude in Egypt into the wilderness where he forced upon them a strict, exclusive, iconoclastic monotheism hostile to all superstition, magic, mysticism, polytheism, and mythology. Motivated by Oedipal aggression and the unbearableness of Moses’ regime, the Israelites murdered him and abandoned monotheism.⁸³ After a period of “latency,” they encountered the Midianite volcano god Yahweh. Haunted by inherited traces of their monotheistic “archaic heritage” and stricken with remorse for their criminal deed, the Hebrews rehabilitated the repressed Mosaic religion like never before, developing a neurotic obsession with rites, rituals, totems, sacrifices, and messianic hopes of Moses’ return. Further refined by the Prophets, Judaism thus became religion of “ethical perfection” based in the renunciation of instinct that would become central to Freud’s own psychoanalytic project.⁸⁴ Through their Oedipal crime and the subsequent renunciatory efforts to alleviate guilt for it, the Jews would become the harbingers of civilization, reason, education, and science. This would be their “advance in intellectuality.”

Freud explicitly contextualizes the third essay of *Moses and Monotheism* as written in exile, a time in which “progress has concluded an alliance with barbarism.”⁸⁵ This collusion is an outgrowth of Pauline Christianity. As he had already established in *Totem and Taboo*, the Son-Religion’s attempts to atone for the murder of Moses through the sacrificial crucifixion of Christ constituted a regression to primitivism.

⁸¹ Freud, *Civilization*, 88.

⁸² Sigmund Freud, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion: Drei Abhandlungen* (Amsterdam: Allert de Lange, 1939); Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1967), 27.

⁸³ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 42.

⁸⁴ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 63.

⁸⁵ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 66-67.

In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud pressed this further by arguing that in the process Christianity had opened itself to a reintroduction of polytheism, superstition, and “symbolical rites”—above all the cannibalistic Eucharist.⁸⁶ Moreover, whereas Judaism had successfully dealt with the murder of Moses, by returning to the repressed deed Christianity was forced to neurotically disguise its guilt for the murder of Jesus in the notion of “original sin” and displace blame onto the Jews through accusations of deicide.⁸⁷ Indeed, this condition had produced antisemitism and National Socialism itself. As Freud suggests, Jew-hatred is nothing other than hatred for Christian monotheism by those pagans—namely, Germans—who have been “badly christened,” remaining “barbarically polytheistic.”⁸⁸ Unable to handle the demands of renunciation and civilization made possible by Christianity’s mission to the heathen, they remain in “bondage to the senses.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, witnessing the “advance in intellectuality” brought about by Judaism, these Christians have developed a “grudge” against the Jews for supposedly forcing civilization upon them. Clinging to wishfulness, pleasure, and instinct run amok—the very domain of myth—Christianity has accrued centuries of jealousy and resentment for the renunciatory, civilizing achievements of the Jews. It is here, curiously enough, that the thesis of *Moses and Monotheism* converges with Freud’s earlier essay on Prometheus.

Although Freud had dismissed religion as an illusion, in *Civilization and Its Discontents* he admitted its role in the “encouragement of man’s higher mental activities.”⁹⁰ Some myths—such as the story of Prometheus—even narrate the civilizing process itself.⁹¹ Although Freud’s analysis of Prometheus was limited to a single footnote, he would take up the subject again a year later in “The Acquisition and Control of Fire.” Here Freud detailed the way Prometheus’ crime against the gods contributed to the founding of human civilization by subjecting fire to human control and mastery as a tool and technology

⁸⁶ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 112.

⁸⁷ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 115. As Gil Anidjar put it, the redemptive admission of guilt for the death of Jesus meant that, for Christianity, “the future of murder is innocence.” Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 255.

⁸⁸ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 118.

⁸⁹ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 147.

⁹⁰ Freud, *Civilization*, 47.

⁹¹ Freud, *Civilization*, 42.

rather than a terrifying phenomenon to be avoided and quenched out of instinctual fear.⁹² In this way, Prometheus signals humanity's maturation, especially since he rebels against deities otherwise concerned to keep humans in a submissive, infantile state. However, there is a price to be paid for the advance in civilization heralded by the hero. "The acquisition of control over fire presupposes an instinctual renunciation, at least it makes no secret of the resentment which the culture-hero could not fail to arouse in men driven by their instincts," Freud writes. "And this is in accordance with what we know and expect. We know that a demand for a renunciation of instinct, and the enforcement of that demand, call out hostility and aggressiveness, which is only transformed into a sense of guilt in a later phase of psychical development."⁹³ Prometheus's renunciatory act of mastery draws the ire of both the gods and humanity, who deem him a quasi-Oedipal figure of contempt condemned to eternal torture and mutilation.

The parallels between Prometheus and the Moses of both *Moses and Monotheism* and the Michelangelo essay are not hard to see, illustrating the clear influence of Steinthal upon Freud. As Hermann Westerink writes, "Moses is here a Promethean hero who descends to bring the mental and spiritual 'fire' to the people."⁹⁴ Freud's own remarks bear this out: "Whereas in all other cases the hero rises above his humble beginnings as his life progresses, the heroic life of the man Moses began by descending from his eminence to the level of the children of Israel."⁹⁵ Freud follows Rank in noting the significant divergences between the biblical Moses and myths of the hero and, emulating Steinthal and Abraham, uses this to draw further parallels between the Hebrew Lawgiver and the Greek Fire-bringer, both of whom descend from on high to endow humanity with enlightenment. "Moses had stooped to the Jews, had made them his people; they were his 'chosen people.'"⁹⁶ Moreover, as Steinthal emphasized,

⁹² Sigmund Freud, "Zur Gewinnung des Feuers" *Imago* 18 (1932), 8-13; Sigmund Freud, "The Acquisition and Control of Fire," in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1964), 188.

⁹³ Freud, "The Acquisition and Control of Fire," 189-190.

⁹⁴ Westerink, "Zum Verhältnis von Psychoanalyse und Mythologie," 308.

⁹⁵ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 13.

⁹⁶ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 55.

Moses descends from Sinai just as Prometheus descends from Olympus. Renouncing instinct, impulsiveness, and the very wishfulness responsible for myth and fantasy, both Prometheus and Moses herald an “advance in intellectuality” furthering the cause of civilization, reason, and science leading to Freud’s own psychoanalytic project as a vehicle for a further “education to reality.” Indeed, as the Michelangelo essay and his correspondence with Jung demonstrate, Freud at least partially identified himself and psychoanalysis with Moses and Judaism. Yet it is precisely this “advance” to the “ethical perfection”⁹⁷ of Judaism that spurs hatred from those who remain at the level of instinct, leading, in Freud’s view, to “Jew-hatred” as a hatred of civilization, rationality, and morality motivated by wishful, mythic instincts. Furthermore, Freud describes the “advance” as a “subordinat[ion] of sense perception to an abstract idea,”⁹⁸ echoing Steinthal and later Cohen’s notion that the development of Jewish monotheism entails a kind of scientific reason opposed to the pure sensuality, immediacy, and immanence of mythic thinking. This is not unlike the realm of instinctual wishfulness to which Freud also attributes myth, a cultural and religious stage overcome in history by Judaism.

V. From Vico to Dante

As in Freud, Erich Auerbach’s critique of myth would not be fully articulated until the 1940’s during his exile in Istanbul. However, the foundation would be laid over the course of his long career as a philologist and literary critic. Born in 1892, Auerbach was raised in an assimilated, liberal Jewish family in Berlin and attended the distinguished *Französisches Gymnasium* as a child where he was steeped in classical literature and quickly became fluent in French. In 1913, he completed a doctorate in law at the University of Heidelberg with a dissertation on German penal reform. Dissatisfied with his chosen field, Auerbach returned to Berlin to again devote himself to the study of Romance languages and literature at the School of Humanities, believing that romance studies had the potential to conceptualize a unified Europe in an era of increasing nationalism. Auerbach was undoubtedly aware of the ruptures

⁹⁷ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 152.

⁹⁸ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 144.

occurring in Germany from an early age, although he avoided devoting himself to either Zionism, Marxism, or other ideological movements gaining traction among his peers. During World War One, Auerbach volunteered as an infantryman in the German army in Northern France, was badly injured, and received the Iron Cross. After the war, he again returned to Berlin to complete a second doctorate in romance studies in 1921 at Greifswald with a dissertation on the early Renaissance novel. Beginning in 1923, he worked as a librarian in the Prussian State Library where he would meet the German-Jewish philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, with whom he would remain in contact for the next seventeen years. It was during this time that Auerbach also got his start as a translator of Giambattista Vico's *New Science* and completed his *Habilitation*, eventually published as *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*. Auerbach's translations of Vico and his book on Dante quickly garnered him enough attention to be appointed professor and chair of romance philology at the University of Marburg in 1929.⁹⁹

Auerbach's method of "earthly philology" was outlined in a pair of essays on Vico in the early 1930's. His abridged translations were intended to make Vico intelligible for contemporary German audiences. This agenda was apparent in "Vico and Herder," originally given as a lecture at the German-Italian Research Institute at Cologne under Leo Spitzer, whose place Auerbach had taken on the Marburg faculty. Contravening Spitzer's anti-historicism, Auerbach made the case for Vico's philosophy of history as a precedent for the methodology of Herder and a forerunner of both German romanticism and philology. Vico, Auerbach argued, was the first to grasp "the entire course of human history" as a "meaningful whole" independent of Christian theological notions of divine providence.¹⁰⁰ This was done by placing the historian himself at the center of a cyclical process of *corso-ricorso* understood only according to "intuition." Yet although the historian's insight is "speculative by nature," it remains acutely

⁹⁹ For more on Auerbach's early life see Kader Konuk, *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 23-49; Avihu Zakai, *Erich Auerbach and the Crisis of German Philology: The Humanist Tradition in Peril* (Cham: Springer, 2017), 19-26; Karlheinz Barck and Martin Treml, *Erich Auerbach: Geschichte und Aktualität eines Europäischen Philologen* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2007).

¹⁰⁰ Erich Auerbach, "Vico und Herder," *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 10.4 (1932), 671-86; Erich Auerbach, "Vico and Herder" in *Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach: Time, History, and Literature*, trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 11-12.

concerned with the vicissitudes of human life in all its complexity, the “practical and ethical needs” born of experiences of suffering and “injustice on a daily basis.” Still preserving a diminished conception of providence and transcendence, Vico “invest[ed] the individual human life with significance in a vertical scheme.” However, Vico would remain in obscurity until Herder who, unlike his Italian predecessor, romantically valorized pantheism, idyllic nature, fantasy and myth, and a patriarchal origin “directly opposed to Enlightenment beliefs in progress.”¹⁰¹ Despite this, Herder again grasped history in its fullness and, on the basis of his philological investigations into language, place, and race, conceptualized both the *Volk* in its particularity as well as a universal *humanitas*. Therefore, while Auerbach highlighted the similarities between the two thinkers, he ultimately sided with a more noble, humble, “unselfconscious,” and anti-patriotic Vico, who celebrated a universality opposed to the nationalist particularism foreshadowed in Herder.¹⁰²

Another of Vico’s achievements, Auerbach contends, was his discovery of “primitive humans” and their myths, laws, rituals, and customs. Portraying early humans as neither “tranquil beings nor raging animals,” Vico understood them as “lonely and fearful creatures” similar to children, who out of their poetic capacities and imaginations created irrational, sensuous, and fantastical stories that “endowed the powers of nature with personalities” and sought to “placate [these] gods’ desires.”¹⁰³ Although the “rationality of later civilization is foreign to them,” it was precisely these mythical creations that would become the foundations of society. Myths, for Vico, are much more than simply “beautiful lies,” instead bearing witness to the “true form” of primitives’ lives in the throes of unwieldy natural phenomena and turbulent political history.¹⁰⁴ Passing through the “heroic age,” which, “bereft of gods,” heralded monarchy, social contracts, property rights, and class war, civilization arrives at the “bourgeois age of reason.” Here the disintegration of democracy and the rise of self-interest reduces humanity to a Hobbesian state of nature, barbarism, and civilizational decay. “Culture declines, new barbarian nations

¹⁰¹ Auerbach, “Vico and Herder,” 13-14.

¹⁰² Auerbach, “Vico and Herder,” 23.

¹⁰³ Auerbach, “Vico and Herder,” 17.

¹⁰⁴ Auerbach, “Vico and Herder,” 21-22.

appear, and the cycle begins once again, with heroes, formal ceremonial cults, the *famuli*, and fiefdom.”¹⁰⁵ Vico positioned primitive humanity as his polar opposite, the origins of culture lying in “the poetic” or what he called the *universale fantastico* illustrated in the “fantastical-formulaic texts” prescribing “sacrificial acts or oracles” as well as “the magical ceremonial acts of conjuring.”¹⁰⁶ This means that the religion of Vico’s own day betrayed “the last remaining trace of the sensuous language of the primordial era.” In this sense, Vico recalled the past in order to grasp the present and the future, contradicting Enlightenment theories of myth “which were entirely mechanistic,” preferring to erase humanity’s primitive origins. By rediscovering the myths of Hercules and Cadmus or the works of Homer and Dante, Vico conceptualized the “dialectic of Becoming” in world history as a “development of Spirit.”¹⁰⁷ While Auerbach obviously demonstrates a proximity to Hegel in these lines, he also follows in the footsteps of Steinthal and Lazarus’ *Völkerpsychologie*, which emphasized the importance of intuition and pre-linguistic psychological states as a key for understanding cultural development through myth, primitive religion, and poetry.

In “Giambattista Vico and the Idea of Philology,” Auerbach goes on to characterize Vico’s method in his *New Science* as precisely philological, but a philology again uniquely concerned with a “history of thought, a history of morality, and a history of all human achievements all in one breath.”¹⁰⁸ By interrogating the earliest forms of language and literature, myth and religion, ritual and law, Vico’s “critique of texts” becomes “what we call interpretation, or hermeneutics; it is part of philology.”¹⁰⁹ Through this Vico is able to construct a universal humanity whose “essential characteristics of the individual stages of growth in the development of civilization are thus everywhere the same, untouched by all the differences caused by natural variation.”¹¹⁰ The common element here is what Vico calls the

¹⁰⁵ Auerbach, “Vico and Herder,” 19.

¹⁰⁶ Auerbach, “Vico and Herder,” 20.

¹⁰⁷ Auerbach, “Vico and Herder,” 22-23.

¹⁰⁸ Erich Auerbach, “Vico und die Idee der Philologie,” *Homenatge a Antoni Rubió i Lluch: Miscel·lània d’estudis literaris, històrics i lingüístics* Vol. I (Barcelona: [s.n.], 1936), 293-304; Erich Auerbach, “Vico and the Idea of Philology” in *Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach: Time, History, and Literature*, trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 27.

¹⁰⁹ Auerbach, “Vico and the Idea of Philology,” 29.

¹¹⁰ Auerbach, “Vico and the Idea of Philology,” 30.

sensu commune, a psychological disposition prior to and “not derived from reason.” This common sense is “already given ... in the human mind.”¹¹¹ Through this apparatus, Vico teaches us, we can understand “history as a possession that we have made ourselves.”¹¹² Thus, by grasping at this inner form or state we can come to self-consciousness by understanding the whole sweep of human history through the critical, reflexive interrogation of texts on an “empirical level.” This is what Auerbach means by what he would later call “*earthly* philology,” a method whose object is not the celestial realm and the gods but terrestrial existence and humanity. “Without a belief in this world, there would be no science of the human race in history, and thus no philology.”¹¹³ This method would therefore underlie Auerbach’s entire project from start to finish. As he would say later, his only wish was “always to write history.”

Auerbach’s Viconian method had already been deployed in his *Habilitation* on Dante. However, in the book he would also introduce the formative concepts of “mimesis” and “realism.” Two sides of the same coin, mimesis is defined most simply as the variable imitation of reality in narration that produces a more or less accurate representation of reality. In *Dante*, Auerbach makes the case for mimesis as a form of truth and reason, showing that although imitation, copy, and ultimately poetry are degraded by Plato in the *Republic*, his own myths ironically reproduce mimetic realism through the individuality of characters, movement of dialogue, and “sensuous color.”¹¹⁴ Here Auerbach, following the observed continuities between Dante and Homer in Vico, cites the Greek author as an exemplar of realism alongside Plato, pitting Homeric epic against Sophoclean tragedy in which one’s fate becomes overdetermined and hence illusory.¹¹⁵ The “rationalistic negation of fate” in Homer continues through Plato and Aristotle to Christianity which, despite its own mimetic efforts at expressing reality, is haunted by spiritualization. The Gospels, for example, narrate the immanent life of a historical Jesus while also bestowing upon him a transcendent supplement as the Messiah. It is due to this tension that Christianity

¹¹¹ Auerbach, “Vico and the Idea of Philology,” 31.

¹¹² Auerbach, “Vico and the Idea of Philology,” 33.

¹¹³ Auerbach, “Vico and the Idea of Philology,” 35.

¹¹⁴ Erich Auerbach, *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1929); Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 4-5.

¹¹⁵ Auerbach, *Dante*, 2-3.

becomes a “lamentable failure” unable to “actualize” itself in the world following his crucifixion. This is because although it seeks to become “purely spiritual,” it remains tied to historical reality and “earthly happening.”¹¹⁶ This self-destroying, contradictory split, tension, or anxiety dominates the European consciousness from this point forward, effectively stunting its development in the Middle Ages as the church achieves hegemonic power. Despite this, however, the seeds of realism are sown deeper than ever before: “The depth and scope of the naturalism of the story of Christ are unparalleled; neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity had the opportunity or the power to narrate human events in that way.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, for Auerbach, it is this tendency toward de-spiritualization and the valorization of earthly reality immanent to Christianity that is responsible for secularization. A “vanishing mediator,” de-Christianization is the product of Christianity itself.¹¹⁸ Interestingly, this thesis had been anticipated by none other than Cohen in his *Aesthetics*, giving further credibility to the possibility of his influence on Auerbach even before his arrival at Marburg. “Dante does not explicate the Christian spirit in its mythical primordial life,” Cohen writes, “but rather he explicates *in* it and *against* it the modern conscience and the modern spirit.”¹¹⁹

Although his early work remains under the spell of the “subjectivist mysticism” of the Italian Provençal poetry of his time, Dante activates Christianity’s secularizing potential in the *Comedy*.¹²⁰ This is a product, Auerbach surmises, of Dante’s own “impoverished exile” from Florence in 1302 following a fierce political conflict and crisis, after which “he remained almost totally isolated” and completely dependent upon benefactors. Because of this condition the poet was able to steep himself in the study of mythology, Scholastic theology, and philosophy, generating an “intense feeling for earthly existence.” Dante thus became “the most universal thinker of his day, unequalled in his knowledge of men,” whose

¹¹⁶ Auerbach, *Dante*, 12-13. For more on this point see James Porter’s argument in “Old Testament Realism in the Writings of Erich Auerbach” in *Jews and the Ends of Theory*, ed. Shai Ginsburg, Martin Land, and Jonathan Boyarin (New York: Form University Press, 2019), 201.

¹¹⁷ Auerbach, *Dante*, 15.

¹¹⁸ Porter, “Old Testament Realism,” 202.

¹¹⁹ Hermann Cohen, *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls*, Vol. II (Berlin: Dümmler, 1912), 19. Italics mine.

¹²⁰ Auerbach, *Dante*, 24.

“worldliness” inveighs against both medieval hermetic esotericism and the “Romantic withdrawal” from reality.¹²¹ As in Vico’s *New Science*, Dante’s *Comedy* seeks to grasp the full sweep of history and earthly reality, ironically transporting it to an otherworldly setting by fusing Ptolemaic cosmology with Thomistic theology, astrological models, and a “vast store” of mythological material in an “encyclopedic system.”¹²² Again following the Homeric rejection of Sophoclean tragic fate, Dante not only preserves but *intensifies* the depth, individuality, movement, and “sensuous concreteness” of his characters’ real, earthly lives in the hereafter.¹²³ “Thus, even though the *Comedy* describes the state of souls after death, its subject, in the last analysis, remains earthly life with its entire range and content; everything that happens below the earth or in the heavens above relates to the human drama in this world.”¹²⁴ This is because the traveler guided by Virgil is nothing less than Dante being guided by reason to ultimate truth, historical reality, and God.¹²⁵

Again, like Vico’s psychological apprehension of reality, Dante’s achievement is facilitated by his “own inner being” which both mirrors and is mirrored in human history.¹²⁶ This is a model that Auerbach clearly seeks to emulate. As is well-known, Auerbach’s text is inflected with Hegelian themes. “Over twenty years ago,” he would later write, “I used them as the basis of a study of Dante’s realism.”¹²⁷ The very concept of “literary realism” he invokes throughout his career is inspired by the Hegelian conviction that the “real is rational,” that sensible reality, the “thing-in-itself,” is accessible to human reason.¹²⁸ On a Hegelian reading, Dante becomes a catalyst for the further unfolding of *Geist* in history, progressing toward self-consciousness and the Absolute. However, Auerbach’s fidelity to Vico’s principle of cultural decline ultimately guards against Hegelian triumphalism. As he writes at the end of

¹²¹ Auerbach, *Dante*, 63-68.

¹²² Auerbach, *Dante*, 75.

¹²³ Auerbach, *Dante*, 88.

¹²⁴ Auerbach, *Dante*, 132.

¹²⁵ Auerbach, *Dante*, 94 and 98.

¹²⁶ Auerbach, *Dante*, 141.

¹²⁷ Erich Auerbach *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: Franke Verlag, 1946); Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 194.

¹²⁸ See Zakai, *Erich Auerbach*, 169-184.

Dante, the “modern mimesis” heralded by the Italian poet “created rich new possibilities” for the imitation of reality in literature as well as “grave dangers.”¹²⁹ In short, although Dante effects the secular valorization of universal humanity, concrete reality, and lived experience, the threat of mysticism and spiritualization symptomatic of the Christian tension between immanence and transcendence nonetheless looms large. It is this tension, contradiction, and anxiety that Auerbach will trace in his essay on figural interpretation in the history of Christianity approximately ten years later, drawing attention to its negative consequences for Judaism and the Hebrew Bible.

VI. Realism, *Figura*, Allegory

Although he had only ever described himself in neutral terms as a “Prussian of the Jewish faith,” following Hitler’s election as German Chancellor and the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 Auerbach would become designated as a “Full Jew.” Despite new laws barring Jews from liberal professions potentially impactful on German culture, Auerbach secured an exemption based on his status as a veteran of the First World War. This would be short lived, though, and he would be dismissed from his post at Marburg in October 1935, first fleeing to Florence—the very place from which Dante had been expelled in the fourteenth century. Moreover, just as Auerbach had replaced Spitzer at Marburg after his departure to Cologne, he would now be appointed in Spitzer’s place at the University of Istanbul as the latter left for the United States. At Istanbul, Auerbach would teach European literary history from antiquity to the present, including the history of Christendom. As many commentators have noted, Auerbach’s time in Istanbul would acquire legendary status—the myth of a lone intellectual in exile, bereft of books and scholarly materials, penning a masterpiece that would single handedly found the discipline of comparative literature.¹³⁰ However, the reality is significantly more complex. In Istanbul, Auerbach in fact found a thriving intellectual community of German and other European *émigrés* forced

¹²⁹ Auerbach, *Dante*, 178.

¹³⁰ James Porter draws attention to the trend of romanticizing the “enchanted narrative” of Auerbach’s exile in “Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Autumn 2008), 116. See also Konuk, *East West Mimesis*, 12-13.

out by the Third Reich that included Alexander Rustöw, Ernst von Aster, and Hans Reichenbach. Although they had escaped, they remained under periodic surveillance by Nazi spies and received constant news of atrocities committed against European Jewry. Moreover, Auerbach's status as a Jewish professor of romance literature was of interest to the Turkish government, which in the aftermath of war and colonization implemented widespread Westernization reforms under President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in order to reimagine the country as a cosmopolitan center at the crossroads of Occident and Orient. Indeed, because of both his marginalized status and his anti-nationalist intellectual agenda, Auerbach would be seen as instrumental for Turkish educational policy.¹³¹

The experience of exile would not only force Auerbach to confront his Jewishness as never before but also spur him to write two of his most important texts—*Figura* in 1938 and his 1946 magnum opus *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*—both of which concern the relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and myth.¹³² In many ways an outgrowth of the tension in Christianity between realism and spiritualization observed in *Dante*, *Figura* traces the method of figural interpretation deployed by Christian theologians from Saint Paul to Tertullian, Augustine, and into modernity. In brief, figural interpretation takes historical people, events, and symbols from the Hebrew Bible and, transforming them into spiritualized prophetic or messianic “figures” deficient in themselves, connects them with historical elements in the New Testament said to be their eschatological “fulfillment.” Figural interpretation posits Christianity as the historical and theological completion of Judaism, the very logic of supersession. As many commentators have noted, *Figura* was written against the backdrop of de-Judaization campaigns waged in Nazi Germany. Although this effort had its origins more properly in more ancient Christian movements like Marcionism—which was in fact being revived by theologians such as Adolf von Harnack—it was also undergirded by prior trends in mythography like the Indo-European hypothesis and the Aryan-Semitic divide which again located the supposedly true origins of Christianity in Hellenism or Vedic religion rather than Judaism. De-Judaization would lead, by

¹³¹ Konuk, *East West Mimesis*, 39.

¹³² Porter, “Erich Auerbach,” 116.

Auerbach's time, to the public burning of the Old Testament.¹³³ This fact alone—of which the author was undoubtedly aware—warrants a rejection of interpretations that read *Figura* as an endorsement of Christian figuration.¹³⁴ Rather, as James Porter has forcefully argued, Auerbach's attitude is marked by a deep Janus-faced ambivalence, if not outright contempt. Not unlike Marx, who viewed capitalism as simultaneously freeing humanity from feudalism and enslaving it to new masters, Auerbach sees Christianity as simultaneously effacing the historical realism of the Hebrew Bible while sowing the seeds of its own secular undoing.¹³⁵ Moreover, Auerbach's essay has the added effect of salvaging the Jewish origins of Christianity while reminding its readers that these origins—try as the antisemites may—can never be fully eliminated.

Auerbach begins the essay by chronicling the career of *figura* in Roman law, rhetoric, and poetry across the writings of Terence, Varro, Quintilian, Cicero, Lucretius, and others. Distinct from other closely related Greek and Latin terms, *figura* can broadly be defined as “formation, forming, and shape” implying a kind of plasticity. In Christian theology, *figura* would first be deployed by Tertullian, who linked Joshua's leading of the Israelites into the Promised Land to Jesus' leading of the church into “the Promised Land of eternal blessedness.”¹³⁶ This basic Joshua-Jesus pattern, Auerbach argues, is repeated in Tertullian several times over as the two sacrificial goats of Leviticus 16 prophesy Jesus' First and Second Comings, Eve becomes a figure of the church, Adam and Moses figures of Christ, the six days of Creation in Genesis figures of the six millennia leading to the New Jerusalem in Revelation, and so

¹³³ Zakai, *Erich Auerbach*, 23. See also Alon Cofino, “Why Did the Nazis Burn the Hebrew Bible? Nazi Germany, Representations of the Past, and the Holocaust,” *Journal of Modern History* 84:2 (2012): 369-400.

¹³⁴ While Zakai rightfully argues that Auerbach writes against “Aryan philology, völkisch mysticism, and Nazi historiography,” he neglects the sense in which Auerbach's *Figura* is descriptive and sharply critical rather than prescriptive and approving of the practice of figural interpretation. As Porter notes, this seems par for the course in the commentary on *Figura* in both theological or religious disciplines and literary studies with few exceptions until recently. See James Porter, “Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach's Theory of *Figura*,” *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Autumn 2017), 82 fn. 6. For another reading similar to Zakai see Malachi Haim Hacohen, “Typology and the Holocaust: Erich Auerbach and Judeo-Christian Europe,” *Religions* 3 (2012), 600–645.

¹³⁵ James Porter, “Auerbach, Homer, and the Jews,” in *Classics and National Cultures*, ed. Susan Stephens and Phiroze Vasunia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 250.

¹³⁶ Erich Auerbach, *Figura*, *Archivum Romanticum* 22 (1938), 426-39; Erich Auerbach, *Figura*, in *Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach: Time, History, and Literature*, trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 78-79.

on, culminating in Jewish Law *in total* as a figure of Christian salvation. Part of the motivation for figural interpretation, however, comes from early Christian theological controversies. By preserving the link between “historically real prophecy” in the Old and New Testaments, Tertullian inveighs against both the heretical Marcionite jettisoning of the Jewish roots of Christianity as well as the allegorical interpretations of Origen of Alexandria. “In no way does [Tertullian] want to understand the Old Testament merely allegorically. Rather, he believes that it was literally and really true.”¹³⁷ In this sense, Tertullian again demonstrates the tension in Christianity between realism and spiritualization. Although the elements of figural interpretation are “historically real,” the “act of understanding, the *intellectus spiritualis*, is spiritual.”¹³⁸ By the fourth century, the method of figural interpretation had become widespread throughout Christendom, triumphant over both the Marcionism and allegorical method threatening to sever Christianity’s link to “this-worldly concreteness.”¹³⁹ In Augustine, it would become particularly important as, again, Noah’s ark became a figure of the church, the priesthood of Aron a figure of the priesthood of believers, Hagar and Sarah figures of the Old and New Testaments, Jacob and Esau figures of Jews and Christians. “The entire Old Testament, or at least important figures and events, are universally interpreted in a figurative way.”¹⁴⁰

What are the implications of this for Jews and Judaism? “But when are Saul—or Moses, or Aaron, or Hagar, and so on” Porter asks, “ever themselves?”¹⁴¹ The answer is: never. As Auerbach notes, figural interpretation was integral to the *Adversus Iudaeos* literature of the Patristic period, which attempted to discredit the Jews as both blind to the truth of Christianity and resolutely opposed to it.¹⁴² As a consequence, *figura* allowed the Church Fathers to portray Judaism and real, actually existing Jewry as insufficient and inferior, a hollowed-out shell, or a shadow of something that once was. This basic movement is already present, for Auerbach, in the Pauline Epistles, where divisions between dead

¹³⁷ Auerbach, *Figura*, 80.

¹³⁸ Auerbach, *Figura*, 96.

¹³⁹ Auerbach, *Figura*, 95.

¹⁴⁰ Auerbach, *Figura*, 86.

¹⁴¹ Porter, “Disfigurations,” 91.

¹⁴² Auerbach, “*Figura*,” 87.

Letter and life-giving Spirit, justification by works and by faith, Law and Grace, are instrumental for theorizing Moses and Adam as figures of Christ and the church as a replacement of Israel. Not only this, but Paul's own quasi-figural method is deployed against his enemies in the early church, namely Jewish-Christians seeking to maintain fidelity to circumcision and the Law. In effect, this was "intended to strip the Old Testament of its normative status and to interpret it as a mere shadow of things to come."¹⁴³ This approach, Auerbach ensures us, was wildly successful beyond the Jews as well, particularly for Christianity's mission to the Gentiles beyond the Roman Empire. Opposed to the hyper-spiritual allegorical mode of understanding characteristic of pagan mythology, figural interpretation enabled Celtic and Germanic peoples to accept the historical truth of the Old Testament.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, figural interpretation is more advanced, a "product of late cultures" and "much more indirect, complicated and freighted with history than symbol or myth." It is this "youthful dynamism" that "invested figural prophecy with an unparalleled power of persuasion."¹⁴⁵ Figural interpretation became the principal vehicle in an effort to declare the ultimate truth and effect the final victory of Christianity, albeit an effort that would be continually frustrated by the continued existence of Jews and Judaism.

Beyond antiquity and even the medieval period during which it was "closely bound" with the "system of analogical thinking," figural interpretation "continued to play a role for most European peoples up through the eighteenth century" and beyond.¹⁴⁶ In one place Auerbach even seems to depict the very logic of the Hegelian dialectic—the basis of the modern philosophy of history, progress, and evolution—as figural and hence supersessionist: "Figural interpretation creates a connection between two events or persons in which one signifies not only itself but also the other—and that one is also encompassed or fulfilled by the other."¹⁴⁷ The very movement of *figura* as a fulfillment of a prior figure implies a kind of simultaneous abolition, preservation, transcendence, and sublation reminiscent of the

¹⁴³ Auerbach, *Figura*, 94.

¹⁴⁴ Auerbach, *Figura*, 95.

¹⁴⁵ Auerbach, *Figura*, 99.

¹⁴⁶ Auerbach, *Figura*, 102-103.

¹⁴⁷ Auerbach, *Figura*, 96.

Hegelian *Aufhebung*. However, Auerbach's observations about the enduring prevalence of figural interpretation beyond the early centuries of Christianity ultimately forced him to revise his thesis on Dante. Whereas in *Dante* the Italian poet was championed as a harbinger of secularization and the valorization of this-worldliness, concrete sensuousness, and literary realism, in *Figura* he becomes a practitioner of figural interpretation. "Figural forms are in principle the most ascendant ones" in the *Comedy*, "a vision that regards figural truth as already fulfilled and proclaims as much."¹⁴⁸ Auerbach maintains this new reading was possible only through the discovery of figural interpretation as a "historical foundation," a fact also expressed in *Mimesis*.¹⁴⁹ Although he expressed it as such without being aware of it in *Dante*, it is again the very split, contradiction, anxiety, or tension between the historical and the spiritual in Christianity that facilitates the poet's otherworldly vision.¹⁵⁰ This, therefore, raises the question: if fidelity to this-worldliness, sensuous concreteness, and the literary imitation of reality can no longer be pinpointed in Dante, where else can it be found? For this, Auerbach would turn to the Hebrew Bible in and of itself, devoid of its Christian figural supplement.

VII. Abraham Contra Odysseus

Auerbach's ambivalence toward *figura* and mythical allegory alike formed the basis for his critique of myth in "Odysseus' Scar," the first chapter of *Mimesis* counterposing the literary realism of the Hebrew Bible to the enchantments of Homeric epic. Although lacking a formal preface or introduction, Auerbach would write to Martin Buber that "the chapter on Genesis and Homer is conceived as an introduction" to the book, what he called a "theoretical polemic."¹⁵¹ This is confirmed by the epigraph—"Had we but world and enough time"—from Andrew Marvell's seventeenth century poem "To His Coy Mistress." "Read a few lines further into the poem, and you will see that the reference in these lines is not only to a mistress refusing the advances of a lover (the speaking I)," Porter writes,

¹⁴⁸ Auerbach, *Figura*, 105-107.

¹⁴⁹ Auerbach, *Figura*, 110. See also Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 195.

¹⁵⁰ Auerbach, *Dante*, 90.

¹⁵¹ Auerbach to Martin Buber, 12 January 1957, Martin Buber Archive, ARH MS. 350, National Library of Israel, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. As quoted in Zakai, *Erich Auerbach*, 93.

“but also to her refusing them with all the obstinacy of a Jew: ‘I would / Love you ten years before the flood: / And you should, if you please, refuse / Till the conversion of the Jews,’ which is to say, until the end of time. Auerbach’s *Mimesis* is thus inscribed with a Jewish refusal from the very first word before you turn to page one.”¹⁵² This is bookended as well by the epilogue penned after the book’s completion, in which Auerbach establishes its context by noting the criticism “that my presentation is all too time-bound and all too much determined by the present. That is also intentional. ... *Mimesis* is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940’s.”¹⁵³ In short, *Mimesis* is the work of an exiled Jewish scholar amidst the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust. As Avihu Zakai has said, “Odysseus’ Scar” should be read in its historical context as a polemic against “Aryan philology, *völkisch* mysticism, and Nazi historiography.”¹⁵⁴ More precisely, it should be read as a repudiation of the anti-Judaism inscribed within mythography, a discipline founded upon the Indo-European hypothesis, Aryan-Semitic divide, and de-Judaization of Christianity, one that relied upon an imagined inner affinity between Germanism and classical Hellenism. “I had to show,” Auerbach would later write, “what ancient literature does not possess.”¹⁵⁵ The book’s continuity with *Figura* and its sudden reversal of Auerbach’s prior take on Homer in *Dante* bear this out. Whereas in *Dante* the Greek poet was lauded as an exemplar of literary realism, here he becomes a purveyor of illusion. Moreover, by the time of *Mimesis*, Auerbach would arrive at a tripartite structure stretching from Hebraic realism to Christian *figura* and Greek allegory, a continuum essentially depicting the progressive spiritualization or abstraction from reality across literary genres. This would enable him to mobilize the Hebrew Bible against both Christianity and pagan myth as two sides of the same coin.

“Odysseus’ Scar” begins with a reading of the hero’s disguised return to Ithaca in book 19 of the *Odyssey*, where his identity is revealed to Euryclia as she washes his feet. Lifting them out of the bowl, she discovers the wound revealing his true person. At this point, Auerbach notes, the narrative is

¹⁵² Porter, “Erich Auerbach,” 121.

¹⁵³ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 573-574.

¹⁵⁴ Zakai, *Erich Auerbach*, 3.

¹⁵⁵ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 559.

interrupted in order to fully spell out the scar's origin during a hunting accident in Odysseus' youth. This exacts "such a complete externalization of all the elements of the story and of their interconnections as to leave nothing in obscurity."¹⁵⁶ This full "externalization" of narrative elements and the sudden moving back and forth between episodes constitute Homer's "retarding effect," in essence prohibiting any tactical elisions in the story otherwise procuring a "suspensive striving toward a goal." There is nothing amiss, no absence, nothing delayed, only fullness. Moreover, Homer's externalization is executed "in terms perceptible to the senses."¹⁵⁷ There is in Homer "never a lacuna, never a gap, never a glimpse of unplumbed depths." Seemingly unable to achieve multi-dimensionality and complexity, Homeric myth is all foreground and no background, suspended in "a local and temporal present which is absolute."¹⁵⁸ At this point it should be noted that Auerbach's characterization of classical Greek myth as simplistic and "make-believe" has the intended effect of both blasphemously caricaturing the sacred texts of Aryan philology and drawing subtle parallels between the epic form and antisemitism. Not unlike conspiratorial and apocalyptic thinking, myth enacts a flight from reality into ahistorical fantasy. Immanent to Auerbach's polemic, therefore, Homer stands for "Nazi propaganda and falsehood (legend, surface, and simplicity)."¹⁵⁹

Here Auerbach introduces the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22, where Abraham is commanded to offer his own son to God as a test of his faithfulness. From the start, Auerbach emphasizes the differences between the Hebrew Bible and Homer: "Where are the two speakers (Abraham and Isaac)? We are not told. ... Whence does [God] come? We are not told."¹⁶⁰ In stark contrast to myth's "retarding element," the biblical narrative is predicated upon absence and "overwhelming suspense," giving the text depth and complexity. Leaving prior events, descriptions of the setting, characters, and objects unsaid, the Hebrew Bible becomes "fraught with background."¹⁶¹ The characters' manner of speaking adds to

¹⁵⁶ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 4.

¹⁵⁷ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 6.

¹⁵⁸ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 7.

¹⁵⁹ Porter, "Auerbach, Homer, and the Jews," 241.

¹⁶⁰ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 8.

¹⁶¹ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 12.

this aura by creating a psychologically negative space: “The personages speak in the Bible story too; but their speech does not serve, as does speech in Homer; to manifest, to externalize thoughts—on the contrary, it serves to indicate thoughts which remain unexpressed.”¹⁶² Striking a Maimonidean tone, even God’s incorporeality stands opposed to the full embodiment of the pagan gods whose backstories, appearances, and character traits are explicated in detail. Whereas paganism is simplistic and fully revealed at all times, even the identity of the Jewish God is mysteriously expressed as “nothing but a name, a name without an adjective, without a descriptive epithet for the person spoken to” as in “every Homeric address.”¹⁶³ God is constantly hidden, out of reach, knowable only by his actions, his promises to Abraham, and his previous accomplishments. As Auerbach suggests, “the concept of God held by the Jews is less a cause than a symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things.”¹⁶⁴ Thus, from the start Auerbach depicts not only the Hebrew Bible as literary realism *par excellence*, but the Jews as supremely rational vis-à-vis German-pagan unreason. Recalling his early essays on Vico, this fidelity to historical reality in the Bible bestows upon it an “ethical significance” which relates the covenantal bonds between people such as Abraham, Saul, or David and God.¹⁶⁵ Homeric myth, on the other hand, “contains nothing but itself,” yielding “no teaching and no second meaning.” Even its anthropology is “comparatively simple” in its depiction of human life, often subject to capricious and devious deities. “Delight in physical existence is everything” in myth, its “highest aim is to make that delight perceptible to us.”¹⁶⁶ Myth makes no ethical demands upon its readers, as if to encourage egoistic, chauvinistic indulgence. On this point, Auerbach would again echo Steinthal and especially Cohen, who viewed myth as immoral and incapable of grasping an intersubjective ethics of obligation to the Thou or Fellowman.

¹⁶² Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 11.

¹⁶³ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 9.

¹⁶⁴ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 8.

¹⁶⁵ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 10.

¹⁶⁶ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 13.

“It is all very different in the biblical stories,” Auerbach writes. “Their aim is not to bewitch the senses, and if nevertheless they produce lively sensory effects, it is only because the moral, religious, and psychological phenomena which are their sole concern are made concrete in the sensible matter of life. But their religious intent involves an absolute claim to historical truth.”¹⁶⁷ This truth is exclusive, even “tyrannical—it excludes all other claims.” The universal history articulated in the Bible—from “the beginning of time, with the creation of the world” to the “end with the Last Days”—is not passively content with its own theoretical accuracy, but “insists that it is the only real world, is destined to autocracy.” Homeric myth is an object of enjoyment, entertainment, and even pacification intended “to make us forget our own reality for a few hours.” It is a flight from history and concrete existence foreign to the Bible which interrupts from beyond time, seeking “to overcome our reality.” The biblical narratives “do not, like Homer’s, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.”¹⁶⁸ As examples, the Bible is peopled with “great figures” who embody the “vertical connection” between humans and God’s “essence and will.” This fact lends the text its historical feeling through the development of characters who undergo momentous changes as individuals. They are concrete and sensuous, but also dynamic and emotive, subject to vacillation, multiplicity, and development in comparison with their static Homeric counterparts: “Adam is really cast down, Jacob really a refugee, Joseph really in the pit.”¹⁶⁹ Finally, whereas in myth it is the ruling class that dominates the narrative, the Bible purposely downplays class distinctions by depicting not only the royal court, but domestic settings and the working fields.¹⁷⁰ Taken together, these factors again lend more credibility to the Bible as a text where “the historical report predominates.”

The subsequent chapters of *Mimesis* proceed to trace the rise of figural interpretation in Western literature, demonstrating the enduring prevalence of characteristically Christian styles of thinking,

¹⁶⁷ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 14.

¹⁶⁸ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15.

¹⁶⁹ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 18.

¹⁷⁰ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 21-22.

writing, and reading throughout European history. “In this way I was able,” Auerbach would later say, “to disclose something of the influence of Christianity on the development of literary expression, and even to throw light on an aspect of the development of European culture since antiquity.”¹⁷¹ Auerbach details the legacy of the Christian tension between history or realism and spiritualization that constitutes figural interpretation beyond the exclusive confines of theological texts. In this sense, he would follow a variety of contemporaneous thinkers from the Nazi legal theorist Carl Schmitt to fellow German-Jewish philosopher Karl Löwith in interrogating the lingering Christian theological residues lurking beneath the disenchanted surface of secular modernity. Auerbach carries this out more or less systematically across the collection of twenty self-contained essays, with treatments of authors and texts ranging from Tacitus and Marcellinus to the New Testament and on to Augustine, Gregory of Tours, the medieval *Song of Roland*, the German epics *Hildebrandslied* and *Nibelungenlied*, Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Antoine de La Sale, Rabelais, Montaigne, Peter Lombard, Boccaccio, Schiller, Goethe, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, Jean Racine, Voltaire, Saint-Simon, Stendhal, Flaubert, Zola, Balzac, and, of course, Dante. As Zakai puts it, “*Mimesis* is ‘*Figura*’ writ large.”¹⁷² Yet in the last chapter, “The Brown Stocking,” Auerbach undertakes a reading of Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce. Here he would again take a Viconian stance contra Hegelian triumphalism by narrating—as he had done in *Dante*—the ultimate failure of Christianity, figural interpretation, and European literature to remain faithful to the literary imitation of reality, instead departing into the realms of spiritualization and allegory. Modern writing had all but abandoned “objective reality,” giving way to “a disintegration and dissolution of external realities.”¹⁷³ This is a “mirror of decline in our world,” a “hopelessness” and “hatred of culture and civilization.”¹⁷⁴ Given the “theoretical polemic” of “Odysseus’ Scar,” this can be

¹⁷¹ Erich Auerbach, *Literatursprache und Publikum in der lateinischen Spätantike und im Mittelalter* (Bern: Francke, 1958); Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 20.

¹⁷² Zakai, *Erich Auerbach*, 88.

¹⁷³ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 534 and 545.

¹⁷⁴ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 551.

read as nothing less than a deviation from the historicity and realism of the Hebrew Bible, which for Auerbach stood for rationality, culture, and a universal humanism.

It is therefore the historicity and realism of not only the Hebrew Bible but Judaism itself that is levied against myth, Christianity, and antisemitism at once in Auerbach. In the first place, even Auerbach's choosing of Genesis 22 from the whole breadth of the Hebrew Bible is telling, since the sacrifice of Isaac regularly serves as a figuration of Christ's crucifixion, a prophecy of the ultimate sacrifice for human sinfulness. By maintaining the validity and importance of the *Akedab* in and of itself along with the rest of the biblical narratives, Auerbach refuses Christian figural spiritualization. Moreover, the very habit of interpreting the sacrifice of Isaac as a figure of Christ's death had rendered it all the more odious to Nazi authorities, leading to the text's censorship in German churches and schools.¹⁷⁵ In the second place, although Christianity is marked by ambivalence for Auerbach, plagued by a tension between history and spiritualization eventually yielding de-Christianization and secularization, "Odysseus' Scar" reveals that Judaism has effectively achieved this valorization of earthly life and reality from the very start in contradistinction to mythic enchantment. This is evident early on in Auerbach's reading of Vico, who held that the Jews were exempt from pagan mythologization.¹⁷⁶ Immanent to the triadic continuum Auerbach establishes from Hebraic realism to Christian figuration and pagan allegory, this means that Christianity's spiritualization of the Hebrew Bible is nothing less than a collusion with myth. As Porter acknowledges, "*figura* cannot be radically distinguished from allegory. It is itself, after all, a species of allegory ... and in it 'purely spiritual elements are also involved.'"¹⁷⁷ Christianity, therefore, deviates from Hebraic realism by making common cause with paganism and allegory, abstracting biblical persons, events, and symbols from their historical realness in order to reinterpret them as figurations of itself. It is this very supersessionist movement that engenders de-Judaization and the degradation of actually existing Jews. This is to say, for Auerbach,

¹⁷⁵ Porter, "Disfigurations," 106.

¹⁷⁶ Auerbach, "Vico and Herder," 17.

¹⁷⁷ Porter, "Disfigurations," 95.

the phenomenon of antisemitism is the result not of Christianity in general, but its mythic tendencies in particular.

VIII. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that both Freud and Auerbach understood myth as a departure from reality and history into the realms of fantasy and illusion that foster nationalism, racism, and antisemitism. Freud understood this departure in terms of the psychotic's break from reality and retreat into the inward realms of the psyche. This constituted a regression to an infantile state governed by instinct very similar to the religion of the "savage" and primitive peoples in colonized lands. Thus, antisemitism could be understood as a species of mythological or religious illusion inhibiting an "education to reality." Auerbach understood the mythic departure from reality in terms of narrative abstraction from concrete, sensuous existence by means of allegorization. Through the practice of figural interpretation, Christianity had enacted a spiritualization of earthly reality very similar to mythic allegory by imbuing people and events from the Hebrew Bible with a significance that abstracted them from their historical reality. This meant that antisemitism could be understood not only as an extension of Christian anti-Judaism, but also, as in Freud, a species of mythic thinking that rejected the complexity and depth of reality in order to instead infuse it with simplistic enchantments—illusions.

When it came to Judaism, then, Freud interpreted its overcoming of myth as an "advance in intellectuality" heralding the renunciation of instinct and the birth of ethics, reason, science, and civilization. Likewise, Auerbach valorized the Hebraic literary realism of biblical narratives against both Homeric mythical enchantment and Christian figural interpretation. In this way, Freud and Auerbach both perpetuated the myth of Judaism's disenchantment of the world. However, despite their polemicizing against anti-Judaism and antisemitism, this myth was itself built upon an implied supersession of paganism and even Christianity by Judaism. This was again predicated upon prevailing theories of religion postulating an evolution of culture from the simple to the complex, superstition to science, and so on. Freud's theories were especially egregious in this regard as he made extensive use of

contemporary anthropological studies and ethnographies of supposedly primitive peoples. Although less explicit, Auerbach also subscribed to similar ideas in his discussions of Vico and the passages on paganism in *Figura*. This would at least partially undermine both Freud and Auerbach's own theological-political agendas by reinscribing a supersessionist paradigm at the very moment they sought to combat it. Moreover, Freud's thesis that the "advance in intellectuality" was responsible for "Jew-hatred" at least partially trafficked in a kind of victim blaming that would resurface in other post-Holocaust thinkers.

Freud's turn toward anthropology and his understanding of myth as a form of psychological regression would prepare the way for Cassirer and Adorno, who put the Freudian critique of myth in conversation with a philosophical one descended from Cohen as well as social theory, Hegel, and Marx. Although Auerbach's work was less influential upon these later figures, the opposition he established between Hebraic literary realism and Homeric enchantment not only further substantiated the imagined antagonism between Judaism and myth but had lasting effect in literary studies in the decades to come.

Chapter 4 | Totality: Ernst Cassirer and Theodor Adorno

“If Judaism has contributed to break the power of the modern political myths, it has done its duty, having once more fulfilled its historical and religious mission.”

—Ernst Cassirer

“Antisemitism and totality have always been profoundly connected.”

—Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno

I. Introduction

For Hermann Cohen, myth was a name for closed systems of thought: philosophies of immanence, monism, mysticism, pantheism, and so on. The essential problem with myth was its uncritical conflation of subject and object, a reconciliation sought by modern thinkers like Hegel as well as the Romantics, who harkened back to the lost immediacy of Being in its plenitude. Ethically and politically, the closed monism of mythic thinking foreclosed openness to the alterity of the Fellowman, Thou, or Other, resulting in a moral chauvinism or even a kind of Freudian narcissism seeing the world as simply an extension of the ego. Judaism’s insistence upon maintaining the gap between humanity and God was indicative of its critical power, correlative with the Neo-Kantian chasm between subject and object. God became for Cohen a prophetic counterprinciple inveighing against an unjust world, mirroring the subject’s critique of the given. This meant that Judaism could be understood as the religion of enlightenment *par excellence*, assailing the deterministic monism of myth underwriting the status quo. This was especially the case when it came to Christianity, which united God and humanity, subject and object, in the pagan logic of the incarnation.

A student of Cohen, Ernst Cassirer followed in his footsteps by transforming the Neo-Kantian critique of knowledge into the “critique of culture,” in many ways reviving the original spirit of Steinthal’s *Völkerpsychologie* in the process. As in Cohen, myth for Cassirer would be defined as pre-critical with the difference that Cassirer went to greater lengths to tease out the implications of this idea.

Looking to anthropological studies of “primitive religion” in colonized lands, Cassirer showed how the mythic worldview is based in the unity of microcosm and macrocosm, arbitrary systems of signification, a totemic social structure, and the immediacy of Being. Cassirer accumulated and synthesized the ethnographic data necessary to substantiate Cohen’s critique of myth as a closed system or totality. As in Cohen’s *Aesthetics*, Cassirer located myth in the present, mainly among the logical positivists and proponents of *Lebensphilosophie* and existentialism. This was apparent at the famous debate with Heidegger at Davos, where Cassirer defended the epistemological spontaneity and creativity of the subject against Heideggerian “thrownness”—yet another iteration of mythic fate. During his final wartime years in exile in Sweden, Great Britain, and the United States, Cassirer levied his theory of myth to characterize Nazism as a resurgence of pagan, “primitive” religion with its idolatrous devotion to race, nation, and leader as well as its Machiavellian cunning. Again like Cohen but also Steintal, Freud, and Auerbach, in his final essays Cassirer elevated Judaism to the level of a grand world-historical iconoclast breaking the power of mythic fascism. Contrary to commentators who see his writing on Judaism as a product of his exilic situation and derivative of Cohen’s lingering influence, Cassirer repeatedly distinguished Judaism as the moment of critical enlightenment in the history of religion in his early works.¹ Similarly, Cassirer’s critical attitude toward myth was by no means a later development spurned by the Davos debate and the rise of Nazism, as some have held.² Rather, Cassirer’s early investigations into the logic of myth were already framed critically and show remarkable continuity with his final texts.

Myth also played a major role in the thought of Theodor Adorno, who, like Cohen and Cassirer, conceptualized it in terms of totality. In Adorno’s first book, Kierkegaard’s bourgeois, objectless inwardness is construed in mythic terms. This extreme subjectivism is symptomatic of nineteenth

¹ See Almut Shulamit Bruckstein, “Practicing ‘Intertextuality’: Ernst Cassirer and Hermann Cohen on Myth and Monotheism.” *The Symbolic Construction of Reality: The Legacy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Barash (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 174-188.

² See Ursula Renz, “From Philosophy to Criticism of Myth: Cassirer’s Concept of Myth,” *Synthese* 179:1 (March 2011): 135-152.

century commodity society and the *intérieur* of the urban apartment, a safe haven from the modern world. Kierkegaard's conceptualization of anxiety and the salvific "leap of faith" is facilitated by mythic sacrifice: the crucifixion of Christ. By the time of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written with Max Horkheimer in exile in Los Angeles, Adorno had arrived at the famous thesis, "myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology." Adorno and Horkheimer drew correlations between the Homeric Odysseus and the instrumental rationality characteristic of positivism and capitalist modernity. For them, means-end thinking subsumed critically self-reflective thought within a totalizing sameness hostile to all difference. In this way, myth explained the rise of fascism and antisemitism insofar as Judaism represented the germ of enlightenment in the history of religion. However, Horkheimer and Adorno were also quick to show that even Judaism was not immune to the dialectic of enlightenment. In his postwar writings, Adorno set his sights on occultism as a particularly pernicious form of mythic unreason in culture further engendering passive obedience to the status quo. Astrology, for Adorno, reified the totality of capitalist modernity by abstracting moral responsibility from the individual and projecting it onto the stars. In his final lectures, Adorno's critique of myth took the form of a confrontation with Hegel and Heidegger, showing how both the former's dialectical reconciliation of subject and object and the latter's philosophy of Being resulted in totality. Against this, Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* insisted upon maintaining the gap between subject and object without reconciliation, identity, or totality—the very basis for immanent critique. In this respect, Adorno was more Neo-Kantian than Hegelian, following in Cohen's Maimonidean footsteps to articulate an iconoclastic apophysis that, in the manner of Nietzsche, endeavored to theologize with a hammer.

For both Cassirer and Adorno, then, myth is a totalizing form of thought born of either pre-critical thought's presumed access to Being in its immediacy or the dialectical reconciliation of subject and object. Following Cohen, both thinkers insisted upon preserving the productive chasm between subject and object, a gap that also facilitated an ethical openness to the Other and an indeterminate, messianic futurity pointing beyond the status quo. It was Judaism, above all, that exemplified the human capacity for enlightenment in history. In addition, both Cassirer and Adorno located mythical, totalizing

forms of thought in the present, principally in Heidegger. Totality, they suggested, explained the inner affinities between myth, the occult, and fascist barbarism.

II. *Animal Symbolicum*

Cassirer was born in Breslau in 1874 to an assimilated, liberal Jewish family. “This was a world intimately acquainted with philosophy, art, and science, only superficially with religion, and not at all with politics” —all facts that were surely to change.³ Cassirer entered the University of Berlin in 1892 to study with the sociologist Georg Simmel, a proponent of *Lebensphilosophie*, which stressed the primacy of elements of sensuous, lived experience against the alienating tide of modern society. Cassirer first encountered Cohen’s work in Simmel’s courses, setting him on a trajectory that would define his own work. Becoming engrossed in Cohen’s critical idealist reading of Kant as a transcendental thinker concerned primarily with epistemological problems in the philosophy of science, Cassirer transferred to the University of Marburg in 1896 to study with Cohen full-time. Cassirer completed a dissertation on Descartes in 1899 with Cohen before returning to Berlin to complete his habilitation in 1906 and take up a teaching post for the next fifteen years. Most of Cassirer’s early works remained within the realm of the philosophy and history of science, largely modeled upon Cohen’s own. These included Cassirer’s first book on Leibniz, a two-volume history of epistemology, and a biography of Kant.⁴ In this regard, the early Cassirer worked for the most part in Cohen’s shadow.

Cassirer’s career was jumpstarted after Cohen’s death in 1918 and his obtaining of a permanent chair in philosophy at Hamburg. Here he made the acquaintance of Aby Warburg, an art historian, philosopher, and archivist in the process of founding the massive Library of the Cultural Sciences in 1921. Attracted to the irrational and the mystical, Warburg took interest in the study of cult, ritual, magic, astrology, and myth from antiquity to the present. In addition, he accumulated rare primary

³ Edward Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 3.

⁴ Ernst Cassirer, *Leibniz’ System in seinen wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen* (Marburg: Elwert, 1902); Ernst Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit, Erster Band und Zweiter Band* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1906); Ernst Cassirer, *Kants Leben und Lehre* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1921).

sources and studies by anthropologists working in Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Americas. Intrigued by the wealth of sources available at the Warburg Library, Cassirer became a lifelong affiliate and spent years scouring its archives as he formulated his new “philosophy of symbolic forms” in a series of essays and lectures. Although Cassirer’s work in this period still bore traces of his mentor, it diverged from Cohen by foregrounding the historical necessity of irrational forms of culture for the development of rational ones. Adopting a quasi-Hegelianism, Cassirer saw modern science as the historical completion of ancient and medieval natural philosophy as well as esoteric sciences like astrology or alchemy. This was also a product of the Warburg Library’s classificatory system, where books on philosophy, science, and literature were catalogued adjacent to works on magic, myth, art, and religion.⁵ While for Warburg this conveyed the irrationality lurking within the rational, for Cassirer it signaled the dialectical necessity of irrationality for the emergence of scientific reason.

Cassirer’s critique of myth was a subset of his “critique of culture,” an outgrowth of the Neo-Kantian critique of knowledge and *Völkerpsychologie*. The groundwork for this project was laid out in his early 1922 essay “The Form of the Concept in Mythical Thinking.” As in Vico and Schelling, for Cassirer myth is a “peculiar organ of the intelligibility of the world” which is “grounded in a law of its own kind” and “based upon general principles that are grounded in the essence of the human spirit.”⁶ Cassirer demonstrated myth’s internal coherence or immanent logic by examining the syntactical structures of African and Native American languages.⁷ Both primitive speech and myth subordinate particular phonemes, objects, or phenomena to another word, thing, or process deemed universally powerful or meaningful. Phenomena are never apperceived as isolated, differentiated impressions but only in relation to the whole or totality of which they are a discrete part. In mythic thought, microcosm and macrocosm mirror one another: the cosmos is One. Drawing on Durkheim’s work on Australian aboriginal religion,

⁵ Peter Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 20.

⁶ Ernst Cassirer, “Die Begriffsform in mythischen Denken,” *Studien der Bibliothek Warburg* 1 (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1922). Ernst Cassirer, “The Form of the Concept in Mythical Thinking” in *The Warburg Years: Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology*, trans. S.G. Lofts and A. Calcagno (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 4-10.

⁷ Cassirer, “The Form of the Concept in Mythical Thinking,” 17.

this gives rise to totemism as a totalizing social form “captur[ing] everything, both animate and inanimate.”⁸ This configuration derives from myth’s precritical and un-reflexive conflation of sign with signified, representation with represented, and accident with causality.⁹ Mythical interconnectedness is demonstrated by festivals, ceremonies, and laws tied to natural phenomena and cycles endowed with divinity.¹⁰ Relatedly, myth prioritizes space over time as seen in myths of the “world organism” such as the Vedic Purusha or astrological “spatial consciousness.”¹¹

Cassirer’s burgeoning philosophy of culture inveighed against the logical positivism of Ernst Mach, Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, or Rudolph Carnap. Positivism sought to detach symbolic logic and the philosophy of science from questions of meaning, value, purpose, ethics, and aesthetics. This resulted in what Edward Skidelsky has termed “the alienation of reason,” an unchecked valorization of instrumental rationality, calculation, and technical knowledge at the expense of qualitative concerns.¹² Cassirer lambasted positivism for its de-historicizing of rationality and ethical agnosticism. Moreover, positivism understood the mind as a mere passive receptor, whereas Cassirer saw the mind as not only active in the process of knowing but engaged in the very *construction* of reality. For Cassirer, positivism’s scientific, ahistorical rationality took for granted the manifold cultural forms generated by the human spirit. This was also true of mythography, which under positivism’s spell had become a field concerned with “the mere matter of facts” or accrual of data for its own sake.¹³ Again like Schelling, Cassirer was more interested in myth as a “unified form of consciousness” derivative of questions of meaning. Yet pursuing the problem of mythic consciousness leads to a larger issue: “the task of a *general system of symbolic forms*.”¹⁴ Here Cassirer broadened Cohen’s Neo-Kantian critique of knowledge to argue that out

⁸ Cassirer, “The Form of the Concept in Mythical Thinking,” 19.

⁹ Cassirer, “The Form of the Concept in Mythical Thinking,” 22.

¹⁰ Cassirer, “The Form of the Concept in Mythical Thinking,” 25.

¹¹ Cassirer, “The Form of the Concept in Mythical Thinking,” 26.

¹² Skidelsky, *The Last Philosopher of Culture*, 9-21.

¹³ Ernst Cassirer, “Der Begriff der symbolischen Form im Aufbau der Geisteswissenschaften,” *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg* 1 (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1922), 11–39; Ernst Cassirer, “The Concept of the Symbolic Form in the Construction of the Human Sciences,” in *The Warburg Years: Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology*, trans. S.G. Loftis and A. Calcagno (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 73-74.

¹⁴ Cassirer, “The Concept of the Symbolic Form,” 75.

of the “free activity” of the mind and its “energies of forming” are generated “symbolic configurations” as valid as scientific knowledge in the realms of language, art, or myth.¹⁵ Rather than subordinating them to science or discrediting them, Cassirer understood them as distinct yet commensurable domains.

In the first volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer boldly claimed that “the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture.”¹⁶ Yet the notion of symbols as “objectivizations” of the human spirit in Cassirer’s thought harkened back to Steintal’s *Völkerpsychologie*, which understood “higher” forms of culture like myth, art, or literature as objective expressions of *Volkgeist*. As in Steintal, Cassirer evoked Humboldt’s theory of language: “In seeking the proper starting point for a philosophical study of language, modern philosophy has devised the concept of ‘inner language form.’ A similar ‘inner form’ may be sought in religion and myth, in art and scientific cognition.”¹⁷ These lines could indeed appear word-for-word in the pages of Steintal and Lazarus’ introduction to the *ZfVS* in 1860, which understood culture as a Hegelian unfolding of the Humboldtian “inner language form” beyond its linguistic confines. This suggests that the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, far from simply a revision and expansion of Cohen’s thought, actually inaugurates a partial return to the project of *Völkerpsychologie*.

In addition to positivism, Cassirer assailed the existential *Lebensphilosophie* of not only Simmel, but Bergson, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and, eventually, Heidegger. “In fact, the quest to return from mere signification to ultimate and original being, from mere representation and symbolism to the basic metaphysical certainty of pure intuition asserts itself more strongly today than ever before.”¹⁸ By speaking of “intuition” Cassirer alluded to the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, whose dictum “to the things themselves!” announced a revolt against Neo-Kantian ideality. This line of thinking was predicated upon a “‘subjective’ trend [that] has led philosophy more and more to focus the totality of its problems in the concept of *life* rather than the concept of being. ... The truth of life seems only to be

¹⁵ Cassirer, “The Concept of the Symbolic Form,” 76-77.

¹⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil: Die Sprache* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1923); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume One: Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 80.

¹⁷ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume One*, 81.

¹⁸ Cassirer, “The Concept of the Symbolic Form,” 99.

given in its pure *immediacy*, to be enclosed in it—but any attempt to understand and apprehend life seems to endanger, if not negate, this immediacy.”¹⁹ To the contrary, Cassirer declared that for true philosophy, which “finds its fulfillment only in the sharpness of the concept and in the clarity of ‘discursive’ thought, the paradise of mysticism, the paradise of pure immediacy, is closed.”²⁰ Here Cassirer’s critique of *Lebensphilosophie* mirrored Cohen’s theory of myth in the *Aesthetics* as a larger tendency of thought toward monism, pantheism, mysticism, and romanticism’s recourse to the immediacy of being without regard for its ideal conditions of possibility and the chasm between subject and object. In short, philosophies of *totality*.

This culminated in Cassirer’s two major works on myth in the mid-1920’s. In *Language and Myth*, Cassirer criticized Max Müller’s theory of myth as a “disease of language” for again presuming unmediated access to its object by consigning mythic ideas to mere illusion and failing to appreciate their historical-philosophical significance.²¹ Here again the Humboldtian “inner language form” shows myth to be an involuntary and unconscious “organ of reality” expressing the “totality of Being.” Reprising theories from earlier essays, mythic beings autonomously “confront” their creators like words in language as “something existent and significant in [their] own right, as an objective reality.”²² In this way they wield illusory power over their creators but are also gradually detached from their original referents, marking a nominalist advance beyond mimetic reasoning and analogical thought. Myth thus prepares the way for Cohen’s principle of apriority, where logical thought becomes characterized by a discursive field governed by functional symbols, relations, and laws generated in the mind. Truth is thus found in an ideal matrix of relations. This also means that “theoretical, practical, and aesthetic consciousness, the world of language and morality, the basic forms of community and the state—they

¹⁹ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume One*, 111.

²⁰ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume One*, 113.

²¹ Ernst Cassirer, “Sprache und Mythos: Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Göttern Namen,” *Studien der Bibliothek Warburg* 6 (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1925); Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Dover, 1953), 3-7 and 66-67.

²² Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, 36. See also Cassirer, “The Concept of the Symbolic Form,” 82-89.

are all originally tied up with mythic-religious conceptions."²³ It is only in the progressive abstraction of these concepts that the "free ideality" of logic and reason takes shape out of the sources of myth.

Here Cassirer centers the role of Judaism. In an interesting passage, he suggests that the monotheistic consolidation of polytheism results in a single conception of Being as beyond attribute, predicate, or language itself, an idea central to the theology of German mystics like Meister Eckhart. This set the stage for Kant's critical, "discursive," anti-metaphysical revolution establishing Being as a *relation*, as "no longer a 'possible predicate of a thing.'"²⁴ Yet for all its apparent modernity, this revolution was anticipated by Jewish monotheism. As he had already said elsewhere following Cohen, Judaism's critique of idolatry facilitates the transition from mythical modes of understanding to scientific knowledge. "Prophetic consciousness" reduces mythic ideas to a "nothingness" from which they continually threaten to rise again.²⁵ In *Myth and Language*, Cassirer echoes Cohen's Maimonideanism by suggesting that out of Egyptian and Babylonian religion Judaism arrives at a conception of divinity that "excludes from itself all particular attributes" and "cannot be described through anything else, but can be predicated only of itself." Contra myth, for whom "Being is not only a predicate, but ... the Predicate of Predicates," Judaism's logical ideality is expressed in the sentence "I am that I am."²⁶ Therefore, from the start Cassirer not only opposed Judaism and myth in the manner of Cohen, but understood mythic irrationality to be a lingering idolatrous force capable of resurgence.

In the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, devoted entirely to mythical thought, myth is described as properly pre-critical in the Kantian sense by remaining at the level of the immediate and the given.²⁷ This again leads to the arbitrary conflation of words and objects, sign and signified, representation and represented, accident and causality. In this totalizing world of micro and macrocosm,

²³ Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, 44.

²⁴ Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, 75.

²⁵ Cassirer, "The Concept of the Symbolic Form," 89.

²⁶ Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, 76-77.

²⁷ Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1925); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two: Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 29.

“anything can come from anything.”²⁸ As in Auerbach, myth lacks complexity, and, as in Freud, it erases the “dividing line ... between wish and fulfillment.”²⁹ Myth also establishes a systematic “hierarchy of gods and forces” generating a unity of the world “without distinction” in which the cosmos has been flattened into “one single plane of being” and “ceased to be a multiplicity.”³⁰ Unlike critical thought, myth blurs distinctions, every similarity assuming an “identity of essence.” This causal holism explains alchemy and astrology as “two different expressions of the same form of thought, a mythical identity-thinking in the form of substance.”³¹ In astrology, the cosmos is presented as a given whole simply in need of explanation, a totality determining individual and collective fates. Unity is also demonstrated by cyclical time, the “rhythm of human life.”³² In mythic numerology there are no “numbers as such” in a functional symbolic sense but only “particular numerable thing[s],” not unlike the crudeness of mythic spacetime and the conflation of sign and signified.³³ Put simply, the problem with myth for Cassirer is its lack of self-recognition, the fact that it fails to see mythic personifications as means, instruments, or tools for understanding a reality operating according to systems of relations, functions, and symbols. Only through an epistemological “crisis” in “unreflecting consciousness” placing the subject’s relation to the object in jeopardy can scientific knowledge arise.³⁴

In the latter half of the text, Cassirer names the intellectual movements driving humanity’s emergence from mythic thought. Judaism and Greek philosophy both play a major role here, especially the latter’s emphasis on “man’s moral responsibility for himself.”³⁵ However, only with the concept of the soul does a fuller conception of human agency come into view. Departing from Cohen and Steintal’s notion of the soul as the apperceptive personification of fire or wind, Cassirer understands the soul as a consequence of the epistemic crisis induced by the split between subject and object.³⁶ Widening the

²⁸ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 46.

²⁹ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 36.

³⁰ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 62-63.

³¹ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 66-67.

³² Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 105-109.

³³ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 142.

³⁴ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 35.

³⁵ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 198.

³⁶ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 155-157.

chasm between knower and known, the paradisaical illusion of immediacy is lost as the mind grapples with its own role in the construction of reality. Self-consciousness effects “the progress from the mythical to the ethical self” resulting in a new emphasis on the relation between the I and Thou — another concept inherited directly from Cohen.³⁷ Ethical responsibility thus arises through a simultaneously Kantian and quasi-Hegelian process of “subjectivization” whereby the subject is made aware of its creative power and the distance between subject and object, self and Other.³⁸ Contra Durkheim, for whom myth is merely indicative of social processes, Cassirer’s critical-transcendental theory illuminates the epistemological conditions of possibility of myth as such.³⁹ However, far from nullifying social concerns, for Cassirer the epistemic crisis of the individual constitutes its relation to the community by placing new emphasis upon ethical obligation to both the Other and the divine.⁴⁰ Towing a Maimonidean line, by consolidating the polytheistic pantheon and elevating Being beyond predication, God becomes known by his own actions rather than his attributes.⁴¹ Similarly, ethical considerations are made regarding tools and instruments, the “technical mastery of nature” which, contrary to mythic immediacy, recognizes the mediating, constructive role of subjective knowledge. Thus, through humanity’s progressive discovery of its own place in the cosmos, a system of symbols, laws, and functions gradually displaces mythic immediacy.⁴²

Turning finally to monotheism’s role in the transition from myth to science, Cassirer suggests that the progressive realization of the gap between subject and object or I and Thou extends to the chasm between God and humanity. This leads to a Cohenian “correlation” between the world and the divine derivative of his philosophy of Judaism, an ethical injunction to bring the cosmos into lawful conformity with God’s will as its regulative counterprinciple. As in Cohen’s schema, this process of abstraction from the given breaks the naturalistic cycles of mythic time by inaugurating an “ethical-prophetic idea of the

³⁷ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 167.

³⁸ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 176.

³⁹ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 193.

⁴⁰ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 198-199.

⁴¹ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 206.

⁴² Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 218.

future.”⁴³ Therefore, departing from mythic immediacy, religion, ethics, and reason become predicated upon the gap between God and humanity, I and Thou, subject and object—a tension “true monotheism does not seek to resolve.”⁴⁴ Mirroring Cohen’s critique of the incarnation, by attempting to bridge this gap, Cassirer maintains that Christianity reintroduces mythic ideas and constitutes a regression. Again echoing Freud, the Eucharist sensualizes the spiritual and incorporates it into bodily existence, thereby nullifying the division between humanity and God, subject and object.⁴⁵ The very idea of a dying and rising god who sacrifices himself effects a synthesis of the opposing divine and human poles, collapsing mediation into immediacy once again.⁴⁶ For Cassirer, “there is scarcely a single feature in the world of Christian faith and ideas, scarcely a symbol, for which mythical-pagan parallels might not be shown.”⁴⁷

In the final chapter, Cassirer details the “dialectic of mythical consciousness.” Adopting a Hegelian framework, Cassirer describes the process through which mimetic, analogical, and symbolic expression fulfill, transcend, negate, and absorb one another in cultural development.⁴⁸ In the history of religion, the “classical example of this great transformation will always be the form of religious consciousness in the Prophetic books of the Old Testament”—namely, Judaism’s critique of idolatry.⁴⁹ “The polytheistic world, the ‘pagan’ view combated by the Prophets, was not guilty of worshipping a mere ‘image’ of the divine, since for this view there was no difference between archetype and image as such. In its images of the divine the polytheistic world still held immediate possession of the divine itself—precisely because it took these images never as mere signs but always as concrete-sensuous revelations.” Thus, the cardinal error of paganism is not in its devotion to a foreign deity, but its conflation of representation and represented, its pre-critical and unreflective consciousness. Against this, “the Prophet must inject into the mythical consciousness an alien tension, an opposition it does not know

⁴³ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 119 and 171.

⁴⁴ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 225.

⁴⁵ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 228.

⁴⁶ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 230-231.

⁴⁷ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 248.

⁴⁸ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 235-237.

⁴⁹ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 240.

as such, in order to disintegrate and destroy it from within.”⁵⁰ Judaism therefore forces an iconoclastic, epistemological crisis inducing a split between the idol and the deity, representation and represented, subject and object, I and Thou, humanity and God. Following Cohen, Judaism shatters the totalizing monism of mythic paganism and orients it toward a rational, idealist conception of the cosmos. Shedding the trappings of myth, it attains to Steintal’s “imageless religion.” However, following the structure of the dialectic, the negation of the unreal and illusory mythic world—the “unmask[ing of] the lower demonic world as an absolute nothingness”—also involves its absorption. This means that, despite their apparent vanquishing, “images of the mythical fantasy keep rising to the surface even after they have lost their actual life, even after they have become mere dreams and shadows.”⁵¹

III. Heideggerian Mythos

In 1928, a review of the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* on mythical thought was penned by a rising star in German philosophy named Martin Heidegger. In the year prior Heidegger had published his groundbreaking magnum opus *Being and Time*, which effectively called into question the entire Western philosophical tradition by attending to what he termed the “question of Being.”⁵² For Heidegger, philosophy’s concern with particular beings and the split between subject and object resulted in a loss of Being in all its immediacy and concreteness. Rather than a “fundamental ontology,” or a proper analysis of *Dasein* or being-in-the-world, Western philosophy had become “ontic,” simply contenting itself with the study of facts and things. This would result in Heidegger’s later critique of instrumental rationality and technology, in many ways a rehashing of the old romanticism. Heidegger called for a renewed fidelity to the task of grasping *Existenz* in its finitude through a *Destruktion* of Western metaphysics. For him, grasping beings in their difference was penultimate to an unveiling of that Being that made apprehension of discrete beings possible in the first place. Inquiring after Being meant returning to the most primordial problem of philosophy itself, placing ontology at its irreducible

⁵⁰ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 241.

⁵¹ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two*, 245.

⁵² Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1927).

origin. Doing so yielded the conclusion that *Dasein* is, in the last instance, determined by its “thrownness” or existential situation. *Dasein* is always dependent on others, always a *Mitsein* or “being-with.” Thus *Dasein* comports itself through a primary disposition of “care” toward a larger social or ecological whole. One can therefore live forthrightly in the world only insofar as one is “being-toward-death,” acting in accordance with those circumstances into which one has been helplessly cast. Rather than being composed of autonomously and spontaneously thinking and acting subjects, the world is possible only on account of *Dasein*’s specific mode of temporality or “historicity.” Powerlessly thrust into the world without mastery over its own origin or “pastness,” *Dasein* can do nothing but project its ever-evolving present onto the future in full awareness of its final end or “futuraity.” The goal of philosophy is to seek out “authenticity,” to come to terms with one’s thrownness, finitude, and death. Rather than attempting to alter one’s circumstances, one should wholeheartedly and confidently consign oneself to fate. It is from this vantage point that Heidegger turned his attention to Cassirer’s philosophy, which by the late 1920’s had attained prominence not only in Germany but across Europe.

Heidegger frames the critical portion of his review of Cassirer as a response to three questions. What is the value of Cassirer’s philosophical interpretation of ethnographic studies of mythology for the study of religion? What are the methodological principles upon which his interpretation is based? And what is the function of mythic thought for *Dasein*?⁵³ On the first count, Heidegger is laudatory, praising Cassirer’s work as a “valuable achievement,” the “first attempt since Schelling to place myth as a systematic problem within the range of philosophy.”⁵⁴ In the spirit of Heidegger’s own thinking, Cassirer refuses to grant ethnography’s reduction of mythology to mere facts and objects ultimate explanatory power, instead asking after the epistemological conditions of possibility for mythic thinking as “an autonomously legislative form of the functioning of spirit.”⁵⁵ On the second question, though, Heidegger is reticent. As he notes, the very idea of myth as a “symbolic form” is impossible without the Kantian

⁵³ Martin Heidegger, “Book Review of Ernst Cassirer’s *Mythical Thought*” in *The Poetics of Thinking: Essays by Martin Heidegger*, ed. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 40.

⁵⁴ Heidegger, “Book Review of Ernst Cassirer’s *Mythical Thought*,” 45.

⁵⁵ Heidegger, “Book Review of Ernst Cassirer’s *Mythical Thought*,” 45.

critical turn toward subjective consciousness as interpreted not only by Cassirer, but his Neo-Kantian predecessors. It is precisely this interpretation that Heidegger finds suspicious, challenging the Neo-Kantian view that Kant's "Copernican revolution" is a purely epistemological affair. Instead, Heidegger suggests that what Kant was truly after in his critical philosophy was a "radical ontology of *Dasein*."⁵⁶ Thus, the "conditions of possibility" for knowledge in Kantian critique should be understood in an ontological rather than epistemological register. Kant himself, Heidegger ventures, was in pursuit of Being. Contra Cassirer, Heidegger argues on this basis that the true task of a philosophical interpretation of mythology out of the sources of ethnology is to discover the extent to which mythic representations are constitutive of *Dasein* itself rather than simply objectivizations of the mind or spirit. However, Heidegger is careful to note that it is not simply *Dasein* in general which is at issue, but rather "mythic *Dasein*" as determined by its "thrownness."⁵⁷ In its specific "thrownness" mythic *Dasein* is "delivered up to the world" and overwhelmed by the revelation of its interconnectedness with the totality of existence. It is this experience—the disclosure of reality in a mystical "moment of vision" in which *Dasein* transcends itself in passing through the world—that gives rise to mythic representations as modulations of Being.⁵⁸ For Cassirer, this is the principal falsehood of myth, its subordination of all existence to Oneness. For Heidegger, this is its cardinal achievement. Rather than a form of erroneous judgement or illusion that obscures reality, for Heidegger myth discloses *Dasein* in its wholeness and totality. Instead of autonomous objectivizations of the mind dialectically giving way to science and reason, myth reveals the subject's embeddedness in the world, the constitutive thrownness from which it cannot escape.⁵⁹

While Heidegger would leave the third question posed in his review unanswered, his larger critique of Cassirer's thought and the entire Neo-Kantian tradition would come into full view in a now-famous debate between the two philosophers in Davos, Switzerland in the spring of 1929. Although the debate concerned Kantian ideas of freedom and rationality, it was ultimately framed around the

⁵⁶ Heidegger, "Book Review of Ernst Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*," 41.

⁵⁷ Heidegger, "Book Review of Ernst Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*," 43.

⁵⁸ Heidegger, "Book Review of Ernst Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*," 44.

⁵⁹ Heidegger, "Book Review of Ernst Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*," 45.

question, “what is it to be a human being?” Were humans, as Cassirer held, autonomous subjects spontaneously constructing their own symbolic reality? Or, as Heidegger challenged, were they compelled by *Dasein*’s thrownness to authentically confront finitude and death? In the following decades the debate would accrue a certain mystique.⁶⁰ Cassirer appeared as the defender of the Neo-Kantian establishment, whereas Heidegger fashioned himself as a provocateur and purveyor of an entirely new philosophical approach opposed to the status quo. As the philosophical ramifications of Cassirer and Heidegger’s ideas grew in the years following, therefore, so did the personalities of the figures who espoused them. This was especially true in the postwar period as many were forced to grapple with the potential connection between Heidegger’s philosophy and his decision to join the Nazi party in 1933. Cassirer’s philosophy became emblematic of a cosmopolitan liberalism descended from the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras indicative of his position as a descendant of Jews advocating for Emancipation, while Heidegger’s philosophy became associated with a new strain of anti-modern reactionary thinking trending toward fascism.

Although it is unhelpful and inaccurate to retroactively project these caricatures back onto the event, it is important to note that Heidegger himself saw Neo-Kantianism as supremely modernist and superficial, symptomatic of Western philosophy’s “ontic” inability to investigate Being. This was laid out in his lectures at Davos preceding the debate itself, where he further elaborated the ontological interpretation of Kant glimpsed in his review of the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Again like Cassirer, Heidegger praised the Kantian “Copernican revolution” for calling attention to the ways in which reality is conditioned by the subject. However, whereas for Cassirer and the Neo-Kantians these conditions were epistemological, for Heidegger they were derived from humanity’s ontological embeddedness in Being, although he admitted that his interpretation of Kant implied a kind

⁶⁰ The most authoritative volume on the Davos disputation is Peter Gordon’s *Continental Divide*, which reproduces an entire manuscript of the debate from which subsequent citations will be drawn. Other important treatments include Michael Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger* (New York: Open Court, 2000) and, more recently, Simon Truwant, *Cassirer and Heidegger at Davos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

of hermeneutical “violence” implicated in the *Destruction* of the history of Western metaphysics.⁶¹ Rather than interpreting Kant through a “transcendental analytic” concerned with “mathematical, natural-scientific knowledge” as Cohen and the Neo-Kantians had done, Heidegger pursued an “existential analytic” that sought the basis for ontological knowledge of *Dasein* in its finitude and thrownness. Reading the first edition of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* against the second, Heidegger argued that Kant’s earlier acknowledgement of time as “the formal condition a priori of all appearance whatsoever” actually undermined the sovereign authority of reason insofar as it was predicated upon a “transcendental imagination” grounded in the more “original time” of Being’s historicity.⁶² Aware of the destabilizing potential of this realization, Kant “was brought to the brink of a position from which he had to shrink back,” revising the second edition of the text to efface this point.⁶³ Heidegger, by contrast, was prepared to courageously and authentically follow it through to its end and, in the process, undercut Neo-Kantianism as well as Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. By restoring his “fundamental ontology” to its rightful place as knowledge’s true condition of possibility, Heidegger effectively dethroned the very conception of reason upon which Cassirer’s philosophy of culture rested. This meant that instead of understanding the human being as an autonomous subject spontaneously constructing a symbolic reality, one should instead understand humanity in its thrownness and finitude.

This became even clearer during the staged exchange between Cassirer and Heidegger. However, for Cassirer, there was “no essential difference” between the two philosophers, even going so far as to claim he had “found a Neo-Kantian here in Heidegger.”⁶⁴ This was because Cassirer could accede to Heidegger’s reading of Kant while maintaining the integrity of his own interpretation. Heidegger’s reading was not wrong, just incomplete. While it may be true that knowledge is conditioned by Being, that did not negate the spontaneity and authority of reason which overcame its humble

⁶¹ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 131.

⁶² Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1973); Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Bloomington University Press, 1990), 87-138.

⁶³ Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 171.

⁶⁴ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 137.

beginnings. Cassirer even agreed with Heidegger on the issue of the transcendental imagination, although he conceived of it in terms of the mind's spontaneity.⁶⁵ For Heidegger, Kant had discovered the reality of the subject's finitude and thrownness. For Cassirer, it was precisely this discovery that served as the launchpad for reason's liberation of the subject from this condition of finite unknowing into the realm of "immanent infinitude" or objectivity, thereby making ethics possible.⁶⁶ By contrast, by dismantling reason's capacity to understand the world Heidegger had forfeited practical philosophy, consigning humanity to moral relativism.⁶⁷

In his final effort at a rapprochement with Heidegger, Cassirer appealed to the conditions of possibility for the debate itself: language. The fact that the two philosophers were even able to communicate at all, Cassirer held, was evidence of the universality and spontaneity of human symbolization.⁶⁸ Heidegger demurred, burrowing further into relativism, provincialism, and thrownness. Cassirer's endeavor to reconcile Heidegger's philosophy to his own extended to the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* in late 1929. In the footnotes Cassirer reiterated that Heidegger's philosophy was not necessarily wrong, but incomplete.⁶⁹ The two philosophers' ambivalence toward one another was sustained throughout the next four years even though they maintained a high degree of mutual respect. As Heidegger remarked, Cassirer was "the only one worth publicly responding to."⁷⁰ In 1932, Heidegger extended an invitation to Cassirer to lecture on Rousseau at Freiburg, an extension of his study later published as *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*.⁷¹ Cassirer's allusions to Heidegger were minimal to none in the Rousseau lecture, instead gesturing toward an Enlightenment critique of *Lebensphilosophie* and other forms of irrationalism. Heidegger's charity toward Cassirer is even more surprising given his review of the published edition of Heidegger's Davos lectures, *Kant and the Problem*

⁶⁵ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 147.

⁶⁶ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 183.

⁶⁷ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 155.

⁶⁸ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 204-5.

⁶⁹ Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1929); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume Three: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 149 and 163.

⁷⁰ Skidelsky, *The Last Philosopher of Culture*, 196.

⁷¹ Ernst Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1932).

of *Metaphysics*, only a few months after the event.⁷² Here Cassirer took aim at Heidegger's reintroduction of metaphysics back into the Kantian problematic. Where the Neo-Kantian interpretation marshaled transcendental knowledge in the service of Enlightenment, Heidegger's interpretation dragged Kant back down into the depths of onto-theology.⁷³

Even before the Davos event, Cassirer viewed Heidegger's thought as an extension of *Lebensphilosophie* and Christian theology. While writing the third iteration of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* in 1928, Cassirer simultaneously began working on a fourth, ultimately unpublished volume. The notes and drafts for this installment also served as a blueprint for Cassirer's own Davos lectures on philosophical anthropology as a counterpart to Heidegger's discourses on Kant. Interestingly, Cassirer neglected to air this critique of Heidegger at Davos, opting for a less combative tone. Peering into the pages of the fourth volume's preparatory materials, though, Cassirer's intense distaste for Heidegger's philosophy becomes apparent. In the first section titled "Spirit and Life," Cassirer again takes aim at the valorization of lived experience and immediacy in *Lebensphilosophie* as a rejection of intellect, objective knowledge, and symbolization. In its romantic endeavor to recuperate life, *Lebensphilosophie* fails to grasp the sense in which objective knowledge is not something foreign to life, but a product of Being's efforts to render itself intelligible. This means that a return to unmediated, formless life becomes utterly nonsensical.⁷⁴ Moreover, *Lebensphilosophie* yields to a "modern irrationalism" descended from myth that denies the power of knowledge and creativity to liberate humanity from its finitude and anxiety. This is especially true in the case of the occultist philosopher and noted antisemite Ludwig Klages, who, not unlike Heidegger in his review, takes myth not as an illusory form of thought from the vantage point of reason, but rather as an accurate representation of Being. Departing from the realm of freedom into occultist irrationalism, Klages speaks of the "demonically-living reality of the images," thereby

⁷² Ernst Cassirer, "Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik. Bemerkungen zu Martin Heideggers Kantinterpretation," *Kant-Studien* 36 (1931): 1–16.

⁷³ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 271.

⁷⁴ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume Four: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, ed. John Michael Krois and Donal Philip Verne, trans. John Michael Krois (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 15-17.

committing himself, in Cassirer's words, to "the sphere of mythical vision."⁷⁵ Ironically, despite his distaste for the instrumentality of knowledge and objectivity, Klages' mythic philosophy aims not at passive observation but technical mastery, domination, and subjugation grounded in a Nietzschean "Will to Power."⁷⁶

In his Davos lectures, Cassirer had suggested that Heidegger's philosophy veered closer to *Lebensphilosophie* than he would care to admit.⁷⁷ In the fourth volume this is born out in more detail. Following the philosophical anthropologists and philosophers of life, Heidegger approaches the problem from the philosophy of religion. In agreement with other commentators on Heidegger, Cassirer charges that the philosopher's thought is shot through with a Lutheran and Kierkegaardian (not to mention Augustinian) "individualistic tendency" in its meditations upon finitude, anxiety, and the fate of death.⁷⁸ Heidegger's "existential analytic" remains ensconced in Christian theology, refusing, like *Lebensphilosophie*, knowledge, objectivity, truth, and rationality as well as a "religious Gospel of salvation."⁷⁹ Thus, *Dasein* appears as nothing more than another iteration of the romantic return to "life," one whose theological content mirrors the mythic structure of *Lebensphilosophie*. Alluding to Heidegger's review, Cassirer notes myth's "overwhelming" nature, the sense in which it arises out of the ecstasy the purely receptive subject experiences upon realizing its thrownness in the totality of Being.⁸⁰ This fact, combined with Heidegger's valorization of the Kantian "transcendental imagination" at the expense of reason, brings him into close proximity with Klages. For both thinkers, the irrationalism and imagination symptomatic of myth serves as a more accurate representation of life's fullness and interconnectedness with the totality of nature, a fact surely not lost on Cassirer. This is to say, as early as 1928 Cassirer had begun triangulating Heidegger's thinking relative to other modern forms of thought such as *Lebensphilosophie* that bore traces of myth. After Cohen's example, myth had become a larger structure of

⁷⁵ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume Four*, 25.

⁷⁶ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume Four*, 27.

⁷⁷ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 119-120.

⁷⁸ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 203.

⁷⁹ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 206-207.

⁸⁰ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 30.

thought or romantic tendency valorizing monism, pure immanence, unity, and totality infecting the present.

As Gordon has noted, Cassirer's philosophy of myth largely anticipated Heidegger's philosophy in the sense that myth remains ignorant of objectivity and functional symbolization.⁸¹ The difference, however, is that Heidegger's thought takes the extra step of resolutely refusing it altogether, initiating a romantic return to that kind of metaphysics Cohen had already termed mythical in his *Aesthetics*. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger's discussion of "everydayness" all but admitted to being mythological despite itself. Drawing correlations between the "life of primitive peoples" and the quotidian comportment of Being, Heidegger went so far as to speak of "primitive *Dasein*."⁸² For Heidegger, myth is "one possible clue for the existential structure shared across all forms of human experience."⁸³ Far from being a stage in the dialectical development of scientific reason, in Heidegger myth's primordially discloses the fundamental ontology of Being in its totality and oneness that underlies existence as such. It was this fact combined with the philosopher's later profession of allegiance to the Führer that contributed in a major way to Cassirer's more negative evaluation of both Heidegger and myth during the Second World War.⁸⁴ Indeed, one can read Cassirer's remark at Davos—"Neo-Kantianism is the scapegoat of the newer philosophy"—as a coded acknowledgement that Heidegger's assault on Cohen's legacy concealed a latent antisemitism. On the coattails of his Davos characterization of Neo-Kantianism as not only "ontical" but exceedingly superficial, modernist, and hyper-intellectual, in a letter during his rectorship at Freiburg in 1933 Heidegger would portray his own philosophy as the stalwart guardian of German culture against the onslaught of this foreign ideology.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 236.

⁸² Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 238.

⁸³ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 258.

⁸⁴ The overall entwinement of Heidegger's philosophy with Nazism and antisemitism has inspired a vast literature of its own, especially in the aftermath of the publication of the *Black Notebooks*. For an overview and recent commentary on this issue see Richard Wolin, *Heidegger in Ruins: Between Philosophy and Ideology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

⁸⁵ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 264.

IV. Judeo-Anti-Fascism

Cassirer left his post at the University of Hamburg in early March 1933 shortly after the Nazi seizure of power. Although his thought had been largely devoid of political commentary, in 1928 Cassirer had defended the Weimar Constitution on the occasion of its tenth anniversary in an address to the university at Hamburg.⁸⁶ Combined with his persistent attention to the remarkable role of Judaism in the history of religion and culture, Cassirer's reasons for leaving Germany earlier than others were clear. However, even in exile Cassirer still avoided explicit political statements. First spending two years at Oxford and then six years in Sweden, Cassirer largely wrote on the Swedish legal philosopher Axel Hägerström and Rudolf Carnap's "physicalism," concerning himself almost exclusively with seemingly irrelevant philosophical issues. This would lead many commentators to dismiss Cassirer's philosophy on account of its perceived impotence in the face of fascism.⁸⁷ However, the same charge is scarcely levied against Auerbach, whose *Mimesis* appeared around the same time as Cassirer's *Myth of the State*, published posthumously in 1946. For Cassirer as for Auerbach, humanist scholarship was a worthy political endeavor.

In 1941 Cassirer left for the United States to take a position at Yale. After a decade of silence on myth, Nazism would again bring it to the fore of his mind in his first English-language publication intended for a new American audience, *An Essay on Man*. While the *Essay* appears on the surface as a summary exposition of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, it should be read more accurately as a direct response to fascism and a rejoinder to the debate at Davos. The *Essay* is staged as a response to the "crisis in man's knowledge of himself," a problem endemic to the history of philosophy and exacerbated by modern science. Cassirer understood the current iteration of this "crisis" in the context of *Lebensphilosophie*, Heideggerian philosophy, and Nazism's ascendance, taking it upon himself to argue for a universal humanism against this new "barbarism." In the *Essay's* discussion of religion, Cassirer again

⁸⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *Die Idee der republikanischen Verfassung* (Hamburg: Friedrichsen, 1929).

⁸⁷ See Skidelsky's skeptical treatment of Cassirer's liberalism in the last chapter of *The Last Philosopher of Culture*, 220-238.

alludes to the correlations between myth, *Lebensphilosophie*, and Heidegger. The “primitive man” of myth, Cassirer contends, subsumes the “empirical differences of things” in a “solidarity of life.”⁸⁸ This manifests as a “society of life” whose image of the world again becomes totalizing and homogenous. “Primitive religion is perhaps the strongest and most energetic affirmation of life that we find in human culture.”⁸⁹ Myth’s concern is the “origin of death,” orienting itself toward life’s final end in order to confront it in an authentic manner not unlike Heideggerian *Dasein*. Moreover, Cassirer connects myth’s valorization of life and Bergson’s *élan vital*.⁹⁰ Here again, though, this spell is broken by none other than Judaism, a topic that, similar to myth, had been absent from Cassirer’s writing for over a decade. Owing to the “inner tendency” and “ethical meaning” of prophetic religion, for example, Judaism enacts a “change of meaning” whereby the inherited taboos of primitive religion become concerned not with the misuse of sacred objects, but rather the “purity of the heart.”⁹¹ Here again Cassirer is heavily reliant upon Cohen’s Neo-Kantian philosophy of Judaism, bringing it to bear upon more recent ethnographic data. By interiorizing primitive, mythical religion’s external prohibitions and turning toward the subject in a proto-Kantian sense, Judaism emphasizes conscience and inner repentance, a movement replacing the negative ideal of taboo with the “new positive ideal of human freedom.”⁹²

Cassirer’s opposition between myth and freedom would become the basis for his final book completed in Spring 1945 just before his death, *The Myth of the State*. At once a philosophical defense of liberal democracy and a grand political history of myth, it was not only “primitive religion” but mythography itself that was responsible for fascism. “Perhaps the most important and the most alarming feature in this development of modern political thought is the appearance of a new power: the power of mythical thought.”⁹³ Indeed, “the defeat of rational thought seems to be complete and irrevocable.” Like Cohen, Cassirer immediately singles out the Romantics as “the first who had drunk from the magic cup

⁸⁸ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 82.

⁸⁹ Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 84.

⁹⁰ Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 88.

⁹¹ Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 103-107.

⁹² Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 108.

⁹³ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 3.

of myth,” effectively reintroducing it into the modern political imagination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And yet, by peeling back the layers Cassirer reveals the struggle between myth and rational thought to be endemic to the Western political-theological imagination. From Plato’s *Republic* to medieval Christendom’s struggle between reason and revelation, the powers of myth and mysticism are omnipresent. However, only with Machiavelli does myth become a tool of statecraft. “Just as Galileo’s Dynamics [sic] became the foundation of our modern science of nature, so Machiavelli paved a new way to political science.”⁹⁴ In an increasingly secularized world bereft of transcendence, myth is evacuated of its spiritual content and deployed in the service of earthly power. Unlike social contract theorists like Hobbes, Rousseau, or Locke, Machiavelli’s state is an absolute end in itself.⁹⁵ In this way the instrumental rationality characteristic of positivism again paves the way for a resurgence of the mystical and the irrational as myth becomes a tool of domination. *The Prince* is a “technical book” with the “coolness and indifference of a scientist.”⁹⁶ The prime example of Machiavelli’s instrumentalization of myth, Cassirer says, is his treatment of “fortune.” Inseparable from his enchanted Renaissance milieu, Machiavelli’s fortune is akin to astrological or divinatory determinism with the difference that fortune can be manipulated to one’s own ends. Convinced of humanity’s basic irrationality, Machiavelli harnesses the “half-mythical” power of fortune to achieve total authority.⁹⁷

Machiavelli’s influence, Cassirer argues, stretches from Shakespeare to Spinoza, Herder to Hegel. With the Romantics, the Machiavellian instrumentalization of the irrational takes center stage, albeit in benign preservationist form.⁹⁸ This all changes with Thomas Carlyle’s lectures on the hero in 1840, which celebrate his absolute power and install man in place of God. A “theological zealot,” Carlyle’s political theology takes aim at democratic rule and the Enlightenment.⁹⁹ What’s more, Carlyle’s

⁹⁴ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 130.

⁹⁵ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 141.

⁹⁶ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 153.

⁹⁷ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 156-162.

⁹⁸ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 183.

⁹⁹ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 221.

preeminent concern is the immediacy and authenticity of “life.”¹⁰⁰ Although Cassirer overstates the resonances between Carlyle’s hero-worship and Hitlerian devotion, Cassirer suggests that in Nazism specifically even worship of the charismatic Führer is penultimate to the idolization of Aryanism. This is only possible with the work of Gobineau.¹⁰¹ For him, race has a totalizing, “totalitarian” effect, functioning in a similar manner as the tribal totem. Identification with this seemingly arbitrarily chosen object becomes the basis for the social order. “It is an attempt to destroy all other values. The god of the race, as he was proclaimed by Gobineau, is a jealous god. He does not allow other gods to be adored beside himself. Race is everything; all the other forces are nothing. They have no independent meaning or value.”¹⁰² This explains, for instance, the German celebration of Aryanism specifically, since Gobineau valorizes the “honorable” Brahmins for establishing their caste as the structuring principle of ancient Indian society.¹⁰³ Where Carlyle seeks to unify under the banner of a single totalitarian leader, Gobineau’s racial idolatry divides, subordinating the peoples of the earth to a Moloch “entangl[ing] them in his own ruin.”¹⁰⁴

In a curious twist, the final chapters of *The Myth of the State* zero in on Hegel, whose *Philosophy of Right* is held responsible for the absolutization of the state in a manner similar to both Machiavelli and Carlyle. As if ripped from Cohen’s critique of Hegel in his *Aesthetics*, Cassirer charges that Hegel’s pantheistic, monist conflation of transcendence and immanence results in a mythic sanctification of the political. “No other philosophical system has done so much for the preparation of fascism and imperialism as Hegel’s doctrine of the state—this ‘divine Idea as it exists on earth.’ Even the idea that, in every epoch of history, there is *one* and only one nation that is the real representation of the world spirit and that this nation had the right to rule all the others was first expressed by Hegel.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed, beyond the Romantics’ preservationist efforts to “poeticize politics,” for Hegel the mythologization of

¹⁰⁰ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 197.

¹⁰¹ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 224.

¹⁰² Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 232.

¹⁰³ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 236.

¹⁰⁴ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 247.

¹⁰⁵ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 273.

the political results in an expansionist agenda. Acknowledging the crucial importance of Hegel's political philosophy for modern forms of democratic liberalism, Cassirer concludes that despite attempts to supersede myth through the rationalistic organization of the state, "myth has not been really vanquished and subjugated. It is always there, lurking in the dark and waiting for its hour and opportunity."¹⁰⁶ In modernity, myth has become a "demonic power" capable of being harnessed and instrumentalized at a moment of instability. Politics itself has become a kind of technical, scientific endeavor descended from magical thinking whose positivism lends itself to irrationality.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the Hegelian secularization of the transcendent sphere has yielded an enchanted immanence similar to paganism where the politician now plays the role of the fortune-teller, wielding the mythical "fate" of the nation as a weapon.¹⁰⁸ In the case of Nazism, Cassirer suggests, Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* fulfills this function, serving as a kind of apocalypticism or astrological soothsaying portending a civilizational breakdown and rise of a new fascist order.¹⁰⁹ Finally, these conditions would all too easily accommodate Heideggerian "authenticity" and "thrownness," since "to change these conditions is impossible." The correlations between Heidegger's philosophy and myth had only proven more true.¹¹⁰

Cassirer ends *The Myth of the State* by invoking the Babylonian legend of Timat and Marduk. Slaying the Timat and his allies, the god Marduk proceeds to create the cosmos from the pieces of the serpent's dismembered body. This, Cassirer ventures, illustrates the sense in which the world is constructed out of mythical materials.¹¹¹ A rational world composed of irrational elements is a world in constant tension. Beyond this theoretical point, though, Cassirer's choice of metaphor is telling in view of the last article he saw published in his lifetime, "Judaism and the Modern Political Myths" from 1944. Cassirer's own recourse to an Ancient Near Eastern legend to depict the vanquishing of myth was itself illustrative of paganism's supersession by Judaism. By acknowledging myth as myth and reinterpreting

¹⁰⁶ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 280.

¹⁰⁷ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 282.

¹⁰⁸ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 284 and 289.

¹⁰⁹ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 291.

¹¹⁰ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 292-293.

¹¹¹ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 298.

it in order to communicate their new “ethical religion,” the Jews had foreshadowed Socratic self-knowledge, Plato’s transformation of myth into a pedagogical vehicle, and the Kantian turn toward subjective knowledge. However, the otherwise “primitive” power of myth remained potent in modernity, a fact neither liberals nor Marxists had taken seriously. “The twentieth century is a technical century. It invented a new technique of myth and this invention proved to be decisive in the final victory of the National-Socialist party in Germany.”¹¹² As in Freud, Nazi antisemitism could be explained for Cassirer precisely on the basis of the Jews’ overcoming of myth through the critique of the graven image and anthropomorphism—again echoing a Cohenian Maimonideanism. This explained why the Jews were made enemies of the state, since “the deification of nations” themselves “is the same idolatry as that of natural things.”¹¹³ Turning to Frazer’s theory of the scapegoat in primitive religion, Cassirer argues that for the Nazis the Jews are not only to blame for suffering but actually become evil personified, folding into the historical conflation of the devil and the Jews in Christendom’s apocalyptic imagination.¹¹⁴ Also turning to mythographers like Jane Ellen Harrison, Malinowski, or Robertson Smith, Cassirer suggests the abolition of taboo and sacrifice as again a prelude to the development of inner conscience. By contrast, “[n]othing is so characteristic of the German political system as the denial and complete destruction of the idea of individual responsibility.”¹¹⁵ Overcome by the totalizing effect of fascism, all reality becomes consumed by its mythic structure. Judaism’s individualism, however, is only intelligible in light of prophetic religion’s universalism and its utopian desire for a proto-Kantian “perpetual peace.”¹¹⁶ Inverting the classic paradigm in which Christianity stands for universalism and Judaism for particularity, German nationalist chauvinism is now opposed to the Jews as harbingers and representatives of universality in history. “If Judaism has contributed to break the power of the modern political myths, it has done its duty, having once more fulfilled its historical and religious mission.”¹¹⁷

¹¹² Ernst Cassirer, “Judaism and the Modern Political Myths,” *Contemporary Jewish Record* 7:2 (April 1944): 116.

¹¹³ Cassirer, “Judaism and the Modern Political Myths,” 118.

¹¹⁴ Cassirer, “Judaism and the Modern Political Myths,” 125.

¹¹⁵ Cassirer, “Judaism and the Modern Political Myths,” 119.

¹¹⁶ Cassirer, “Judaism and the Modern Political Myths,” 124.

¹¹⁷ Cassirer, “Judaism and the Modern Political Myths,” 126.

V. Dialectic of Judaism

Shortly after returning to Germany from exile in the United States in 1949, Theodor Adorno wrote to Thomas Mann, “one no longer feels at home anywhere; but then, of course, someone whose business is ultimately demythologization should hardly complain too much about this.”¹¹⁸ From his first published work to his magnum opus *Negative Dialectics* in 1966, Adorno’s thought is shot through with the critique of myth. Born in Frankfurt in 1903, Adorno’s father was an assimilated German-Jew and successful wine merchant, his mother a prominent singer and Catholic of Italian descent. As an adolescent he began studying Kant with the sociologist and critic Sigfried Kracauer, thereby gaining a deep knowledge of German Idealism. Although Adorno was baptized Catholic and confirmed Protestant, he regarded himself an atheist. However, this would be overshadowed by the patrilineal Jewishness he eventually came to identify with in a secular register. In 1921 Adorno matriculated to Goethe University in Frankfurt where he studied music, sociology, and philosophy. Here he was also impacted by the mystical Marxism of Ernst Bloch and Jewish philosophers like Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig.¹¹⁹ This development was bolstered by a new friendship with the critic Walter Benjamin, who, like Bloch, was attempting a synthesis of Marxism and theology. Benjamin was heavily influenced by his friend Gershom Scholem’s groundbreaking work on the Kabbalah, which he conveyed to Adorno. Despite finishing his doctorate in 1924 with a dissertation on Husserl, it was not until 1931 that Adorno completed his *Habilitation* on Kierkegaard under Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. During these years he also became acquainted with Max Horkheimer and other intellectuals associated with the Institute

¹¹⁸ Theodor Adorno and Thomas Mann, *Correspondence 1943-1955*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Thomas Sprecher, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 46.

¹¹⁹ Susan Buck-Morss cites the impact of Rosenzweig’s critique of the Hegelian totality on Adorno in *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 5. See also Cohen’s impact on the Frankfurt School in John Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) as well as Paul Mendes-Flohr, “‘To Brush History against the Grain’: The Eschatology of the Frankfurt School and Ernst Bloch,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51:4 (1983): 636–40.

for Social Research in Frankfurt, an independent organization devoted to social theory, psychoanalysis, and Marxism. Here Adorno would carve out a home-in-homelessness.

Considering his early forays into musicology and aesthetics, it is no wonder that Adorno took an interest in myth. And yet, his fidelity to the Kantian subject, Hegelian dialectics, and Marxism prohibited him from its Romantic recuperation. Adorno's *Habilitation*, published as *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, intervened in the German reception of the Danish philosopher by foregrounding aesthetic elements in his thought minimized by other commentators and inveighing against the Romantic reduction of philosophy to mere poetry.¹²⁰ Drawing on the insights of social theory, Adorno suggested that Kierkegaard's philosophy of existential inwardness "falls to the mercy of his own historical situation, that of the *rentier* in the first half of the nineteenth century."¹²¹ Kierkegaard's attempt to cordon himself off from an inauthentic, "overwhelming capitalist external world" proves to be futile as his philosophy unwittingly reproduces the antinomies of that same society. Kierkegaard's discussion of the *intérieur* of the bourgeois urban apartment, for example, facilitates a romantic return to not only the lost immediacy of existence, but a subjective retreat from society and history into what Gordon terms "bourgeois interiority."¹²²

Despite his anti-Hegelianism, Adorno charges, Kierkegaard remains a dialectical philosopher circumscribed by the alienation of subject and object. However, rather than trying to apprehend the object, the Kierkegaardian subject oscillates between the self and its "relation" to its own meaning.¹²³ Adorno identifies this extreme subjectivism or "objectless inwardness" with myth. Like Cohen and Cassirer, in *Kierkegaard* Adorno deploys myth again as a name for philosophies of immediacy, immanence, and monism. Adorno even acknowledges the importance of Cohen's theory of myth in

¹²⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard, Konstruktion des Ästhetischen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1962); Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3.

¹²¹ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 48.

¹²² Peter Gordon, *Adorno and Existence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 4.

¹²³ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 27 and 30.

letters to Benjamin.¹²⁴ In Cohenian fashion, Adorno insists upon maintaining the gap between subject and object as the basis for critical thought. In *Kierkegaard*, the “totality” in question is both the horrifying totality of capitalist modernity as well as the Kierkegaardian totality formed by the solipsistic withdrawal of the subject. A retreat from the totality of the exterior simply yields a totality of the interior. Moreover, Kierkegaard’s “realism without reality” generates a return to and the false immediacy of Being and lived experience.¹²⁵ Kierkegaard’s “mythically self-enclosed subjectivity undertakes to rescue ‘fundamental human relations’ and their meaning, ontology.”¹²⁶ In this, Kierkegaard inadvertently annihilates the subject insofar as subjectivity is only possible as the negative, critical pole of objectivity. Paradoxically, he shares the same fate as Hegel, whose subject aspires to subsume all objectivity within itself.¹²⁷

Despite his inadequacies, Adorno appreciates Kierkegaard’s efforts to free himself from the mythical totality of modernity. Kierkegaard positions his philosophy of *spirit* as an escape from mythic nature and anxiety via a “leap of faith” and redemption made possible by the crucifixion of Christ. And yet, Adorno points out, it is precisely here that Kierkegaard undermines himself. “According to its intention, [Kierkegaard’s] interpretation of Christianity is directly opposed to any mythological interpretation. ... Blinded, however, it escapes him that the image of sacrifice is itself mythical and occupies the innermost cell of his thought.” Tacitly condoning worldly injustice and fate, “[t]he claim ‘that Christ came into the world to suffer’ ... transforms Christian doctrine of reconciliation itself into the mythical. ... Thus the dialectical refraction of subordination to nature, of the ‘crude passions of immediacy,’ is to become a danger for Christianity itself, is to break Christianity—with the result that Christianity reverts to subordination to nature.”¹²⁸ In this sense, Christianity is a “false hope” failing to emancipate the subject from the dross of existence, nature, and myth.¹²⁹ To put it another way, although

¹²⁴ Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 68.

¹²⁵ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 86.

¹²⁶ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 57.

¹²⁷ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 119.

¹²⁸ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 110.

¹²⁹ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 109.

Kierkegaard aims toward an enlightened release from existential anxiety, *he regresses to myth*. “Mythical dialectic consumes Kierkegaard’s god, as did Kronos his children.”¹³⁰

Adorno’s reading of Kierkegaard relied heavily on Benjamin’s *Origin of German Tragic Drama* to the point that Scholem accused him of plagiarism, although Benjamin was more conciliatory.¹³¹ Adorno’s discussion of the mythic *intérieur* as a repetition of sameness alluded to the plight of Sisyphus and Tantalus as well as Nietzsche’s eternal return.¹³² This would resonate with Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, which depicted nineteenth century Paris as a mythical hellscape, as well as his “Critique of Violence,” which counterposed the “divine violence” exacted by God upon the members of Korah’s rebellion in Numbers 16 to Greek myth and ritual sacrifice.¹³³ However, even as Benjamin critiqued myth he remained sympathetic to it, no doubt betraying the impact of Scholem’s view of myth as the productive yet volatile “demonic in history” upon him. For Adorno, Benjamin suffered from an “over-valuation of the archaic.”¹³⁴ In a review of *Kierkegaard*, though, Benjamin praised Adorno for unveiling the connections between idealism and existentialism, revealing them as two sides of the same coin.¹³⁵ This was an illumination facilitated by Adorno’s Cohenian critique of myth as a totalizing form of thought inherent to both Hegel and Kierkegaard as heirs to romanticism. As Benjamin also wrote, Adorno’s book was sure to bear upon the burgeoning field of existential philosophy in Germany. On this score, Benjamin was prophetic.

In 1934 Adorno left Frankfurt for London and New York along with the Institute for Social Research. As it did for many others, Nazism turned Adorno’s attention to the intellectual roots of fascism. As his Kierkegaard book demonstrated, ideas were inextricable from their social context even as they attempted to withdraw from it. As part of this effort, Adorno began a study of Richard Wagner,

¹³⁰ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 113.

¹³¹ Gordon, *Adorno*, 20.

¹³² Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 81-82.

¹³³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002); Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 2007), 299-300.

¹³⁴ Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence*, 110.

¹³⁵ Gordon, *Adorno*, 20.

published in 1952 as *In Search of Wagner*. Wagner's revolutionary conservatism resulted from "the changing function of the bourgeois category of the individual. In his hopeless struggle with the power of society, the individual seeks to avert his own destruction by identifying with that power and then rationalizing the change of direction as authentic fulfillment."¹³⁶ Here Adorno had in mind Wagner's youthful Feuerbachian radicalism that, with age, faded into a reactionary Schopenhauerian pessimism. This reflected Adorno's own moment as the liberalism of the Weimar Republic descended into totalitarianism. Moreover, Wagner's work played a major role in the emergence of racial antisemitism and National Socialism. By interrogating the social and intellectual trajectory of Wagner's own antisemitism, then, Adorno thought he could reveal something about the present.¹³⁷

Wagner's operas included a number of "caricatures" which "stirred up the oldest sources of the German hatred of the Jews." Yet although Wagner's antisemitism "advertises itself as a private idiosyncrasy" derivative of his dysmorphia and sadomasochism, Adorno suggests it is reflective of "what Marx called the German Socialism of 1848."¹³⁸ What Wagner mistakes as the essential nature of the Jews—"his fantasy of their universal power"—is in fact a "second nature" produced out of the entrails of capitalist society and medieval anti-Judaism. Paradoxically, just as Wagner's antisemitic caricatures reflect his own self-hatred, so the annihilation of the Jews is indicative of bourgeois society's own discontentedness.¹³⁹ Nonetheless, Wagner gives himself up to this society, a fact born out by his obsession with myth as a realm of sameness "where all is undifferentiated."¹⁴⁰ Like Heidegger, "who as a mythologist of language is not unlike Wagner," the composer is occupied by an "archaic idea of fate" governing a "seamless web of universal immanence."¹⁴¹ Wagner's antisemitism is thus a corollary of his longing for a pure past in the face of dashed revolutionary hopes. Where he once endeavored to break

¹³⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1952); Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso, 2005), 7.

¹³⁷ See Peter Gordon's treatment of Adorno's Wagner in "Wounded Modernism: Adorno on Wagner," *New German Critique* 129 43:3 (2016): 155-173.

¹³⁸ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 13.

¹³⁹ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 15-17.

¹⁴⁰ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 104.

¹⁴¹ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 107.

the mythical totality of society, he now succumbs to it. In this respect, Wagner anticipates even Freud and Jung's disputes over myth, Adorno observes. "Confronted with an exorbitant unapproachable world of things that casts its alien shadow over him, the individual feels an affinity for the world of myth."¹⁴² Like Kierkegaard, then, Wagnerian enlightenment too falls into regression.

By 1944 Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School arrived in Los Angeles. In California, Adorno encountered the mythical totality of capitalist modernity on an unthinkable scale, finding many of the same dynamics at work in America as in Germany: the homogenizing and alienating effects of commodity society, the suppression of critically reflective thought, and the individual's conformity to the unthinking collective. This experience informs the background of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-authored with Horkheimer and published in 1944. An Ur-text of critical theory, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* remains the most lucid elaboration of Adorno's theory of myth in continuity with his early studies. Here Kierkegaard and Wagner's regressions to myth appear as case studies demonstrating the book's overarching thesis: "myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology." For Horkheimer and Adorno, myth is already enlightened in the sense that myth serves "to report, to name, to tell of origins—but therefore also to narrate, record, explain."¹⁴³ And yet, myth's *modus operandi* is anthropomorphism, animism, and magical thinking predicated upon the naive immediacy of the object and a kind of "oceanic feeling" of cosmic oneness, unity, or totality. At the same time, the subject gradually discovers the power to change and control this world through the "omnipotence of thoughts," fetishism, and sacrificial exchange.¹⁴⁴ The patriarchal gods, visions of the seers, and totemic symbol lay the groundwork for the development of the Platonic *logos* and *idea*. Thus, as in Steinthal, Cohen, and Cassirer, the chasm between subject and object gradually appears.

¹⁴² Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 111-112.

¹⁴³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1947); Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 5.

¹⁴⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 7-8.

Although Enlightenment seeks the “extirpation of animism,” it succumbs to it.¹⁴⁵ Newly conscious of its own power, the subject attempts to overcome mythic thought by rationally apprehending, measuring, calculating, and dominating the object. However, this only yields yet another mythic form of thought insofar as instrumental reason, means-end thinking, and positivism reduce the world-totally to manipulable sets of facts and data without critical reflection or qualitative concerns. Thus, the immediacy and sense-certainty characteristic of myth reemerges.¹⁴⁶ “Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is nothing other than a form of universal taboo. Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the ‘outside’ is the real source of fear.”¹⁴⁷ The “all-encompassing economic apparatus” of commodity society therefore confronts individuals as a terrifying whole subsuming them within itself. In this sense the capitalist world presents itself as impenetrable, demanding absolute submission: “Enlightenment is totalitarian.”¹⁴⁸ The paradigmatic example of enlightenment’s dialectical intertwinement with myth is Homer’s Odysseus, “a prototype of the bourgeois individual” who levies his cunning and self-preservation against the mythic world. Odysseus’ sacrificial defrauding of the gods foreshadows the extraction of surplus value from the worker by the capitalist. “If exchange represents the secularization of sacrifice, the sacrifice itself, like the magic schema of rational exchange, appears as a human contrivance intended to control the gods, who are overthrown precisely by the system created to honor them.”¹⁴⁹

If Odysseus is a bourgeois capitalist, he is also a positivist, and, as James Porter has provocatively argued, a Jew. Like Auerbach, Horkheimer and Adorno’s Odysseus counters German philhellenism. By locating in Odysseus many of the traits attributed to Jews in antisemitic caricatures, Horkheimer and Adorno reveal the fantasy of the scheming, manipulating Jew to be endemic to one of

¹⁴⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2.

¹⁴⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 8.

¹⁴⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 11.

¹⁴⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4.

¹⁴⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 40.

the mythical heroes of Aryan civilization.¹⁵⁰ Homer's Indo-European, Occidental Odysseus is no different than the Oriental Semite, German no different than Jew. Indeed, the Genesis story's demonstration of humanity's dominion over the earth, mirrors Olympian religion's technical mastery over nature.¹⁵¹ In effect then, by portraying Odysseus as a Jew, Horkheimer and Adorno argue for the inclusion of Jews in Western culture, especially as they foreground Judaism's role in the transition from myth to enlightenment in the history of religion. "The demise of idolatry follows necessarily from the ban on mythology pronounced by Jewish monotheism and enforced against the changing objects of adoration in the history of thought by that monotheism's secularized form, enlightenment."¹⁵² Despite this, Judaism is by no means invulnerable to mythic regression. Effecting a nominalism dethroning the false gods, idols, and the magical thinking of paganism, Jewish monotheism simultaneously subjugates the world in a manner emulating enlightenment's mythical domination of nature:

In the Jewish religion, in which the idea of the patriarchy is heightened to the point of annihilating myth, the link between name and essence is still acknowledged in the prohibition on uttering the name of God. The disenchanted world of Judaism propitiates magic by negating it in the idea of God. The Jewish religion brooks no word which might bring solace to the despair of all mortality. It places all hope in the prohibition on invoking falsity as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as truth. The pledge of salvation lies in the rejection of any faith which claims to depict it, knowledge in the denunciation of illusion.¹⁵³

Even Judaism's "venerable customs, sacred actions, and objects of worship" run the risk of being "magically transformed into abominable misdeeds and terrifying specters."¹⁵⁴ Here one hears echoes of the "tyrannical" nature of monotheism espoused by Auerbach and even Freud. This is embodied in "the pitiless statement: 'I am who am,' which tolerates nothing beside itself, surpasses in its inescapable power the blinder and therefore more ambiguous judgment of anonymous fate. The God of Judaism demands

¹⁵⁰ James Porter, "Odysseus and the Wandering Jew: The Dialectic of Jewish Enlightenment in Adorno and Horkheimer," *Cultural Critique* 74 (2010), 205.

¹⁵¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 5.

¹⁵² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 89.

¹⁵³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 17.

¹⁵⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 72.

what he is owed and settles accounts with the defaulter. He enmeshes his creatures in a tissue of debt and credit, guilt and merit."¹⁵⁵ Thus, the dialectic of enlightenment is also a dialectic of Judaism.

By overstating the extent to which Horkheimer and Adorno underscore the commonalities between Jews and Germans, though, Porter glosses over the Jews' precarious position in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: they play a role in the development of Western civilization while at the same time serving as a site of negativity, disenchantment, and resistance to it. As Martin Jay has observed, Horkheimer maintained this link between critical thought and the role of the Jews in history well into the postwar period.¹⁵⁶ As in Freud, this configuration seems to explain antisemitism for Horkheimer and Adorno in some way. The Jews are "the antirace, negative principle as such" blocking fascism's goal: "to make everyone the same."¹⁵⁷ Indeed, "antisemitism and totality have always been profoundly connected."¹⁵⁸

Unlike mythic "primitive religion" and fascism, Judaism's "religious ban on graven images" guards against mimesis, projection, and anthropomorphism.¹⁵⁹ In continuity with Adorno's analysis of Wagnerian antisemitism, the authors go beyond Marx by revealing the trope of the Jewish financier as a failure to recognize the broader mediation of the Jew's position in society by the history of capitalism and medieval anti-Judaism.¹⁶⁰ This again suggests that, as in Adorno's interpretation of Wagner, hatred of the Jews derives from the self-hatred of the German or at least bourgeois society's unconscious acknowledgment of its own ruin. This is what Horkheimer and Adorno describe as the "false" or "pathic projection" of antisemitism, a kind of paranoiac, animistic superstition replicating the "omnipotence of thoughts" of primitive religious consciousness by "mak[ing] its surroundings resemble itself."¹⁶¹ Thus antisemitism is revealed as the same narcissistic idolatry encouraged by the serpent in the Garden of

¹⁵⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 145.

¹⁵⁶ Martin Jay, "The Jews and the Frankfurt School: Critical Theory's Analysis of Anti-Semitism," *New German Critique* 19:1 (1980): 137-149. For more on the Frankfurt Schools relation to Jewishness and its analysis of antisemitism see Jack Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Lars Rensmann, *The Politics of Unreason: The Frankfurt School and the Origins of Modern Antisemitism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017).

¹⁵⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 137-139.

¹⁵⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 140.

¹⁵⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 148.

¹⁶⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 142-143.

¹⁶¹ Porter, "Odysseus," 210. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 157-158.

Eden. Here the authors thus seem to synthesize the Jewish critique of pagan idolatry with a Feuerbachian-Freudian psychoanalytic critique of religion.

And yet, Horkheimer and Adorno again stress the “humanity” that Gentile and Jew “have in common” as not only the source of antisemites’ revulsion but also the reality principle they must reckon with.¹⁶² The Jew is therefore again simultaneously a site of negation and resistance as well as implicated in the West’s dialectic of enlightenment. The disenchantment characteristic of Judaism heralds universal humanism as such:

Only the liberation of thought from power, the abolition of violence, could realize the idea which has been unrealized until now: *that the Jew is a human being*. This would be a step away from the anti-Semitic society, which drives both Jews and others into sickness, and toward the human one. Such a step would fulfill the fascist lie by contradicting it: the Jewish question would indeed prove the turning-point of history. By conquering the sickness of the mind which flourishes on the rich soil of self-assertion unhampered by reflection, humanity would cease to be the universal antirace and become the species which, as nature, is more than mere nature, in that it is aware of its own image. The individual and social emancipation from domination is the countermovement to false projection, and no longer would Jews seek, by resembling it, to appease the evil senselessly visited on them as on all the persecuted, whether animals or human beings.¹⁶³

Therefore, like Steintal, Cohen, Freud, Auerbach, and Cassirer, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that by abandoning the Jewish roots of Western civilization enlightenment is consigned to its own forfeiture. For them, Judaism’s disenchantment of the world is both the harbinger of Western rationality and a negative principle resisting its mythic regression to totality.¹⁶⁴

Finally, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* also implies a critique of Christianity as mythological in continuity with *Kierkegaard*. Again following Cohen, Adorno and Horkheimer see Judaism as retaining its disenchanting function by preserving the tension between subject and object as well as God and humanity. Myth is “the false identity of universal and particular,” which for Horkheimer and Adorno explains Hegel’s relapse into mythic thinking just as Cohen argued in his *Aesthetics*.¹⁶⁵ Judaism thereby

¹⁶² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 152.

¹⁶³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 165.

¹⁶⁴ Interpretations of Adorno’s notion of totality have typically been overdetermined by the impact of Lukács. However, I argue that it is also uniquely influenced by Jewish philosophers like Cohen and Rosenzweig. For an example of the former tendency see Martin Jay in *Marxism and Totality: Adventures in a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

¹⁶⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 18.

refuses any “logic of reconciliation,” including “Christology, the monotheistic disguise of myth.”¹⁶⁶ In the incarnation, Christianity again reveals itself to be a pagan regression: “Christ, the incarnated spirit, is the deified sorcerer.”¹⁶⁷ This logic of identity at the heart of the incarnation also extends to Christianity’s vision of cosmological redemption: “The reconciliation of civilization with nature which it sought prematurely to purchase with the doctrine of the crucified God remained as alien to Judaism as to the rigorism of the Enlightenment.”¹⁶⁸

The totalizing tendency of Christianity shapes modern racial antisemitism, the secular heir to medieval anti-Judaism: “the religious hostility which motivated the persecution of the Jews for two millennia is far from completely extinguished. Rather, anti-Semitism’s eagerness to deny its religious tradition indicates that that tradition is secretly no less deeply embedded in it than secular idiosyncrasy once was in religious zealotry. Religion has been incorporated as cultural heritage, not abolished.” Allied with power and domination, “the unchanneled longing” characteristic of religion “is guided into racial-nationalist rebellion, while the descendants of the evangelistic zealots are converted into conspirators of blood communities and elite guards, on the model of the Wagnerian knights of the Grail. ... Among the ‘German Christians,’ all that remained of the religion of love was anti-Semitism.”¹⁶⁹ As in Freud, antisemitism is further explained by the rationality of the Jews, which draws the ire of an irrational, pagan Christianity. Striking a Maimonidean tone, Horkheimer and Adorno describe the process of pre-Christian Judaism’s “reshaping of heathen ritual” and sacrifice into a rationalized labor process and system of particular customs. “Christianity, however,” severing the covenant from the national life of the Jews and universalizing it, “wanted to remain spiritual even where it aspired to power” as the Gospel came into contradiction with the realities of earthly governance. This would become the central contradiction of Christian political theology. Yet this would also enable the Church, in the image of Odysseus and the swindling bourgeois capitalist, to cheat its earthly adherents by promising a salvation

¹⁶⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 42.

¹⁶⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 145.

¹⁶⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 89.

¹⁶⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 144-145.

it could never deliver. As a consequence, “Christianity ... becomes a magic ritual, a nature religion.” Fully aware of Christianity’s fraudulent nature, Christians nonetheless “believe only by forgetting their belief. They convince themselves of the certainty of their knowledge like astrologers or spiritualists.”¹⁷⁰

Thus, Christianity descends into ideology and becomes a totalizing system inflicting suffering upon not only its own devotees but its Jewish Others. Christians “who repressed that knowledge” of Christianity’s fraudulence “and with bad conscience convinced themselves of Christianity as a secure possession, were obliged to confirm their eternal salvation by the worldly ruin of those who refused to make the murky sacrifice of reason. That is the religious origin of anti-Semitism. The adherents of the religion of the Son hated the supporters of the religion of the Father as one hates those who know better.”¹⁷¹ In sum, Christians abhorred Jews for their refusal to submit to Christianity’s ideological mystification of the sources of suffering in its baseless promise of eternal salvation. This is because—as if taken from the pages of *Moses and Monotheism*—Judaism’s cardinal merit is its renunciation of instinct and emotion: “They are pronounced guilty of what, as the first citizens, they were the first to subdue in themselves: the susceptibility to the lure of base instincts, the urge toward the beast and the earth, the worship of images.”¹⁷² When it comes to theodicy, this revulsion toward suffering characteristic of paganism and Christianity produces ritualistic mystifications of evil. “Neither Moses nor Kant proclaimed emotion; their icy law knew neither love nor sacrificial pyres.”¹⁷³ In its renunciation of instinct, therefore, Judaism refuses the mythic theodicy endemic to Christianity, drawing Christendom’s ire: “What is vexatious for the Christian enemies of the Jews is the truth which withstands evil without rationalizing it, and clings to the idea of unearned beatitude in disregard of worldly actions and the [Christian] order of salvation which allegedly bring it about. Anti-Semitism is supposed to confirm that the ritual of faith and history [Christianity] is justified by ritually sacrificing those who deny its

¹⁷⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 146-147.

¹⁷¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 147.

¹⁷² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 153.

¹⁷³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 90.

justice.”¹⁷⁴ In a classic Nietzschean inversion then, Horkheimer and Adorno reveal Christianity to be a religion of works, law, and “worldly actions” rather than grace and love, an institution founded on charlatantry shrouding reality in mythical illusion much like the pagan priest, shaman, or astrologer.

VI. California Stars

Although Adorno’s fascination with occultism is well known, comparatively little has been written about it and even less on his writings on astrology specifically.¹⁷⁵ In *Kierkegaard* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno had singled out occultism and astrology as particularly pernicious forms of myth that mystify suffering and deceiving the masses. This was especially the case when it came to Christianity, which both capitulated to a mythical reconciliation of subject and object and instrumentalized the logic of sacrificial exchange to swindle the laity. Adorno would foreground these themes in his analysis of occultist elements in the American culture industry. However, Adorno’s interest in occultism was also shaped by his prior German context. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and stretching into the interwar period, data procured by mythographers served as sources for spiritualist revival. As Corinna Treitel has shown, in the face of disenchantment, Germans turned to occultist and theosophical movements *en masse*.¹⁷⁶ In this vein, Adorno became personally acquainted with Ludwig Klages. Similar to Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School, Klages was deeply critical of instrumental rationality, the domination of nature, and capitalism along with Christianity, patriarchy, and colonialism.¹⁷⁷ An heir to romanticism and *Lebensphilosophie*, Klages sought a return to a mythical neopaganism as a remedy to the ills of modernity. Klages would be a source of friendly disagreement among Adorno and Benjamin. While Benjamin praised various aspects of Klages’ work and cited him

¹⁷⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 147.

¹⁷⁵ The only focused treatment of Adorno’s views on astrology belongs to Cary J. Nederman and James Wray Goulding, “Popular Occultism and Critical Social Theory: Exploring Some Themes in Adorno’s Critique of Astrology and the Occult,” *Sociological Analysis* 42:4 (Winter, 1981): 325-332.

¹⁷⁶ See Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

¹⁷⁷ Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 213-215.

widely, Adorno was resolutely opposed to the occultist's refusal to rationally interrogate the mechanisms of society, drawing correlations between the "danger" posed by Klages and Carl Jung's turn to Christian-pagan mysticism.¹⁷⁸

Upon arrival in Los Angeles, then, Adorno was already critical of occultism, esotericism, theosophy, and astrology. This animus was only exacerbated by his confrontation with the "culture industry." Like Germany, California too was a land of re-enchantment where new forms of spiritualism predominated. For Adorno, however America was defined by a pure, unfettered capitalism where popular interest in occultism automatically translated into its commodification. Horkheimer and Adorno's theorization of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was heavily influenced by the concept of reification developed by Georg Lukács. Based in Marx's concept of the commodity fetish in volume one of *Capital*, Lukács understood reification as a process according to which the seemingly independent character of the commodity-form abstracted from concrete labor dominates the consciousness of the worker such that their "psychological attributes are separated" from their "total personality and placed in opposition to it" by productive forces characterized by ever increasing rationalization and instrumentality.¹⁷⁹ Thus, the totality of capitalist society presents itself to the subject as a rational, natural whole. This constitutes the basic mechanism by which the culture industry enforces conformity to the status quo upon its consumers through film, television, radio, and so on. "Culture today is infecting everything with sameness."¹⁸⁰ In this way, enlightenment's drive to calculate, rationalize, and instrumentalize results in mass deception, a web of illusion, and an annulment of a critical subjectivity that would otherwise resist capitalist modernity's totalizing structure.

Adorno's most famous piece on occultism is his "Theses on Occultism" appearing in *Minima Moralia*, a text written shortly after *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the late 1940's. A compendium of

¹⁷⁸ Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence*, 107. See also Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 227-236.

¹⁷⁹ Geörgy Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972), 88.

¹⁸⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 94.

“reflections from damaged life,” *Minima Moralia* reads as a series of disjointed Nietzschean aphorisms on everything from the mundanities of commodity society to the catastrophes that had driven Adorno into exile. On this score, *Minima Moralia* represents Adorno’s grappling with the mythic fascism lurking within the quotidian and the minute, the irrational within the rational. “The tendency to occultism,” he writes, “is a symptom of regression in consciousness” from an enlightened separation between “the unconditioned” and “the conditional” to their monistic, mythical conflation. “Monotheism is decomposing into a second mythology.”¹⁸¹ However, this mythology is again uniquely modern, a reaction against the alienating effects of disenchantment. “‘I believe in astrology because I do not believe in God,’ one participant in an American socio-psychological investigation answered.” Reiterating the thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the “judicious reason” of instrumental rationality has become “a false revelation” promising redemption from the catastrophes, disasters, and “total doom” it itself produces. In this sense, “the second mythology” of capitalist modernity “is more untrue than the first” of primitive religion. While primitive religion attempted to rationally apprehend the world, “reborn animism” appears as a “rationally exploited reaction to rationalized society” that “denies the alienation of which it is a product.”¹⁸² Rather than seeing commodities as the products of labor, occultism attributes to things the same “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” Marx spoke of in *Capital*. Thus, occultism reifies the animistic and fetishistic properties of the commodity as well as the overall structure of capitalist modernity where social relations become mediated by things.

Beyond this, though, occultism also enforces conformity upon its adherents by elaborating a rationalized, totalizing cosmic system. In this sense, it constitutes a mirror image of totalitarian rule and authoritarianism. As Adorno writes, fortune-tellers themselves become “toy models of the great ones who hold the fate of mankind in their hands. ... The hypnotic power exerted by things occult resembles totalitarian terror: in present-day processes the two are merged. ... The horoscope corresponds to the

¹⁸¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1951); Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 238-239.

¹⁸² Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 239.

official directives to the nations, and number-mysticism is preparation for administrative statistics and cartel prices.”¹⁸³ By presenting a system “which adduces the impenetrable connections of alienated elements,” occultism aggregates “knowledge about the subject” and incorporates it into a web of illusion and irrationality by means of “platitudinously natural content.” Thus, occultism becomes a means of “reinforc[ing] conformism” by justifying the world as it is through the mystification of real suffering and catastrophe. “Superstition is knowledge, because it sees together the ciphers of destruction scattered on the social surface; it is folly, because in all its death-wish it still clings to illusions: expecting from the transfigured shape of society misplaced in the skies an answer that only a study of real society can give.”¹⁸⁴

Again following Cohen, Adorno views occultism as generating a mythological, metaphysical monism. Unlike Judaism and “the great religions,” occultism relies on a conflation of life and death, the physical and the spiritual, subject and object.¹⁸⁵ Instead of preserving the productive dialectical tension between mind and existence yielding self-reflective, critical thought, occultism severs the mind from its material reality and elevates it to an abstract principle: “mind-in-itself.” As a result, by “attributing to [mind] positive existence,” it is “deliver[ed] up to what it opposes,” becoming simply another thing among many in bourgeois, commodity society. Mind therefore loses its power to think the negative against the present. “Such ideology explodes in occultism: it is Idealism come full circle.”¹⁸⁶ Again in continuity with *Kierkegaard*, both the transcendence of idealism and the pure immanence of existentialism result in a structure of thought similar to mythic monism. Occultism is thus the “*enfant terrible* of the mystical moment in Hegel,” the final dialectical unification of subject and object foreclosing a negative horizon either within or beyond the totality of existence.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 240.

¹⁸⁴ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 241.

¹⁸⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 242-243.

¹⁸⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 243.

¹⁸⁷ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 244.

In 1949 Adorno returned to Frankfurt along with the Institute for Social Research where he assumed the position of director as well as professor of philosophy at Goethe University. However, two years later he returned to Los Angeles to continue research in the field of social psychology. In the late 1940's Adorno had been involved in personality studies with a number of psychologists, sociologists, and theorists at the University of California, Berkeley including Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford. This led to the composition of *The Authoritarian Personality* in 1950. Although subject to a round of criticism after its publication, the "Berkeley Study" theorized the correlation between personality structure and fascistic tendencies according to the "F-Scale." As Adorno would later characterize it, "We were interested in the fascist *potential*."¹⁸⁸ This also dovetailed with a series of essays Adorno penned on far-right Christian radio inspired by his earlier participation in the Princeton Radio Project in New York in 1941. Upon returning to California in 1952, then, Adorno sought to continue this empirical sociological research agenda by conducting a two month, mixed-methods study of the *Los Angeles Times* column "Astrological Forecasts" to tease out its latent fascistic elements. "The method I followed was that of putting myself in the position of the popular astrologer, who by what he writes must immediately furnish his readers with a sort of gratification and who constantly finds himself confronted with the difficulty of giving people, about whom he knows nothing, seemingly specific advice suited to each individual. The result was the reinforcing of conformist views through the commercial and standardized astrology as well as the appearance in the technique of the column writer, especially in the biphasic approach, of certain contradictions in the consciousness of his audience, which in turn hark back to societal contradictions."¹⁸⁹

In "The Stars Down to Earth," Adorno defines astrology as an "ideology of dependence" making use of "pseudo-rationality" and "semi-erudition" derived from the hyper-rationalism of capitalist modernity. "Irrationality is not necessarily a force operating outside the range of rationality: it may result

¹⁸⁸ Theodor Adorno, "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America" in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 235.

¹⁸⁹ Adorno, "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America," 238.

from the processes of rational self-preservation 'run amuck.'"¹⁹⁰ A subset of occultism's "second mythology," modern American astrology is an "artificial rehash[ing] of old and bygone superstitions" presented again in platitudinous form to appeal to a wide set of personality types already open to authoritarian ideas.¹⁹¹ "The column attempts to satisfy the longings of people who are thoroughly convinced that others (or some unknown agency) ought to know more about themselves and what they should do than they can decide for themselves."¹⁹² Playing upon Freudian psychoanalysis, Adorno held that proneness to astrology was a consequence of a weak ego easily susceptible to civilization's superego injunctions toward well-adjustment to prevailing social norms in an irrational culture plagued by exploitation and alienation. A "metaphysic of dunces," astrology was one more aspect of the culture industry serving to keep society functioning as it should.¹⁹³ The column's advice is presented as "moderate" and "uncontroversial."¹⁹⁴ It is "down-to-earth," commonsensical, and even "overrealistic" such that it "make[s] the addressee forget the irrationality of the whole system about which one should not think too much."¹⁹⁵ A type of "naturalist supernaturalism," astrology works in the service of romantic re-enchantment covering over the antinomies of capitalism and liberalism: "the discrepancy between the rational and the irrational aspects of the column is expressive of a tension inherent in social reality itself."¹⁹⁶ Thus, astrology becomes a theodicy justifying the evils of capital rather than recognizing their social and historical contingency by mistaking the systemic for the personal through "pseudo-individualization"—"freedom consists of the individual's taking upon himself voluntarily what is inevitable anyway." Thus astrology enacts a kind of determinism that reifies the alien totality of capitalist society as the outcome of mythical fate.

¹⁹⁰ Theodor Adorno, "The Stars Down to Earth" in *The Stars Down to Earth: And Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. Stephen Cook (London: Routledge, 1994), 47.

¹⁹¹ Adorno, "The Stars Down to Earth," 51.

¹⁹² Adorno, "The Stars Down to Earth," 52.

¹⁹³ Adorno, "The Stars Down to Earth," 80, Adorno refers to the "metaphysic of dunces" in *Minima Moralia*, 241.

¹⁹⁴ Adorno, "The Stars Down to Earth," 56.

¹⁹⁵ Adorno, "The Stars Down to Earth," 89.

¹⁹⁶ Adorno, "The Stars Down to Earth," 58.

Despite the misogynist stereotype of astrology as an exclusively feminine interest, Adorno suggests that “the implicit picture of the addressee” of the column “is predominantly male.”¹⁹⁷ The column is geared toward the “technically minded,” urbane businessman of mid-century America. One looks to the stars just as one looks to Wall Street speculation and the stock market, replacing the cult of the totem with the “cult of facts” ruled by quasi-astrological, “mechanical laws.”¹⁹⁸ Again an extension of the Marxian commodity fetish, astrology reifies conditions under which human relations are mediated by animated things, or, in Kantian terms, where people become a mere means toward self-interested ends of profit and professional success. “Thus even humanness is treated as a means rather than an end.”¹⁹⁹ Relationships are structured hierarchically according to the corporate ladder, where the individual is encouraged to laud higher-ups and experts while also networking and making connections through friends and family. The reader is admonished to regulate fun, pleasure, and leisure such that “it serves ultimately some ulterior purpose of success and self-promotion.”²⁰⁰ The reader should strive to be well-integrated, cultivating a “rugged individual[ism]” that “never seriously interfere[s] with the smooth running of the social machinery.”²⁰¹ In sum, then, astrology is proto-authoritarian or fascistic in that its adherents avoid taking responsibility for themselves through critical self-reflection and assertion of their autonomy, instead looking to celestial rhythms as justifications for the given rather than rationally interrogating and, by extension, resisting it. This lays the groundwork, Adorno surmises, for passive obedience to the state.

The real danger threatening to activate this fascist potential, though, is astrology’s apocalypticism: “the astrologer ... in many respects resembles the demagogue and agitator” as well as the Christian radio host preaching fire and brimstone.²⁰² Already in *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno and his colleagues observed the tendency of those scoring highly on the California F-scale “to readily

¹⁹⁷ Adorno, “The Stars Down to Earth,” 82.

¹⁹⁸ Adorno, “The Stars Down to Earth,” 154 and 157.

¹⁹⁹ Adorno, “The Stars Down to Earth,” 131.

²⁰⁰ Adorno, “The Stars Down to Earth,” 101-103.

²⁰¹ Adorno, “The Stars Down to Earth,” 111.

²⁰² Adorno, “Scientific Experiences,” 238, “The Stars Down to Earth,” 62.

accept superstitious statements.”²⁰³ In fact, strong agreement with the statement, “[s]ome day it will probably be shown that astrology can explain a lot of things,” had been the most distinguishing characteristic of the authoritarian personality type.²⁰⁴ Because the astrologer presents himself as a “homespun philosopher” and “self-styled spokesman of social norms,” he is able to encourage hostility toward those deviating from the status quo.²⁰⁵ The astrologer reinforces the deployment of primitive psychic defenses like splitting and projection, creating simplistic binaries to explain social problems and personal misfortunes. Yet this itself speaks to the internal contradictions within the system, bourgeois society’s recognition of its own ruin generating self-destructive urges.²⁰⁶ Plagued by the contradictions of capital and impending doom, bourgeois society’s decline generates “insecurity and anxiety” as well as “paranoid tendencies.” Here Adorno draws connections between late capitalism and the apocalypticism of the feudal era, rife with flagellantism, apocalyptic fantasies, and witch-hunting.²⁰⁷ When it comes to the eschatological structure of astrology, this folds into an already-existing apocalyptic worldview portending a cosmic reckoning and realignment of society, one with historically negative consequences for outliers deemed aberrant enemies of the social totality—in this case, the Jews.

If astrology is a handmaiden to antisemitism for Adorno, this only further bolsters his thesis of Judaism’s disenchantment of the world. Adorno’s critique of astrology—like his Cohenian critique of sacrifice—has resonance with Maimonides’s *Letter on Astrology*, which also inveighed against the zodiac’s determinist abstraction of moral responsibility from the individual.²⁰⁸ Far more than mere superstition or pagan spiritualism, for both Adorno and Maimonides astrology is a theodicy, effacement of the ethical, and guardian of the status quo. Against this, Adorno’s own Neo-Kantian Marxism, maintaining the tension between subject and object without reconciliation or closure, fosters critical reflection on both

²⁰³ Adorno, “Scientific Experiences,” 239, “The Stars Down to Earth,” 163.

²⁰⁴ Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Verso, 2019) 241, 245, 249.

²⁰⁵ Adorno, “The Stars Down to Earth,” 71 and 88.

²⁰⁶ Adorno, “The Stars Down to Earth,” 121.

²⁰⁷ Adorno, “The Stars Down to Earth,” 165.

²⁰⁸ See Leon Stitskin, “Maimonides’ Unbending Opposition to Astrology,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 13:1 (Summer 1972): 131-142.

the self and society through the subject's negation of sense-certainty. Criticism itself, for Adorno, becomes a messianic vocation, an infinite task leveraging the power of the negative against an unjust and irrational present. As he would famously write at the end of *Minima Moralia*, "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light."²⁰⁹

VII. Theologizing with a Hammer

In his final works, Adorno's critique of myth took the form of a confrontation with Hegel and Heidegger. In particular, for Adorno the mythical character of Heidegger's thought explained his allegiance to the Hitler regime insofar as both harbored an inner affinity for the archaic. Across his Frankfurt lectures in the 1950's and 60's published as *History and Freedom, Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems, Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, Introduction to Dialectics*, and *Ontology and Dialectics* as well as texts like *The Jargon of Authenticity, Hegel: Three Studies*, and the monumental *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno elaborates again a Cohenian critique of philosophies of identity as the preeminent "mythological form of thought."²¹⁰ Indeed, "demythologization is division; myth is the deceptive unity of the undivided."²¹¹ Mythic identity here assumes twofold form as both the romantic, Heideggerian return to pre-critical Being in its immediacy as well as the Hegelian dialectical reconciliation of subject and object in Absolute Knowledge. Instead, Adorno maintains the critical power of the negative revealing thought's mediation as well as the mind's spontaneous, active role in the production of knowledge. In this respect he followed not only Kant and Cohen, but Cassirer. To miss this, for Adorno, is to lapse into a dangerous affirmation

²⁰⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

²¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966); Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1976), 203.

²¹¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 118.

of the status quo engendering a reactionary conservatism—in this case, National Socialism. Against this, Adorno preserves the Neo-Kantian tension between subject and object crucial for a critique of the inverted, topsy-turvy, damaged, and “wrong” society that is capitalist modernity.

While in his later works the connection between Judaism and demythologization is less explicit, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the split between subject and object, mind and existence correlates to the strict division between God and the world as it did for Cohen. To collapse one into the other results in pagan monism as well as the Christian logic of the incarnation. In this regard, critique is *de facto* associated with the Jews, who resist the totalizing effects of paganism, Christianity, and capitalism. Moreover, Adorno insists upon the importance of Judaism’s ban on graven images while also warning against the utopian idolization of an imagined post-revolutionary, messianic future.²¹² This point alone has generated a wealth of commentary on Adorno’s *Bilderverbot* in addition to his “inverse theology,” which makes use of theological categories in its immanent critique of society.²¹³ However, if Adorno’s iconoclastic philosophy is inflected with Maimonidean apophasis then it is also deeply inspired by a Nietzschean “twilight of the idols” as well as the Hegelian “struggle between enlightenment and superstition.” Adorno marshals as many German sources as Jewish ones, hammering the idols of Western philosophy, Christendom, and capitalist modernity with a tuning fork to reveal their hollowness. As he said in *Minima Moralia*, “Nietzsche’s attack on monotheism dealt a heavier blow to Christian than to Jewish doctrine.”²¹⁴ Moreover, “in one of the most powerful passages of his critique he charges Christianity with mythology: ‘The guilt sacrifice, in its most repulsive and most barbaric form: the sacrifice of the innocent for the sins of the guilty! What appalling paganism!’ Nothing other, however, is love of fate, the absolute sanctioning of an infinity of such sacrifice. Myth debars Nietzsche’s

²¹² “Demythologization, the thought’s enlightening intent, deletes the image character of consciousness. What clings to the image remains idolatry, mythic enthrallment.” Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 205

²¹³ See, for example, Sebastian Truskolaski, *Adorno and the Ban on Images* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Michael Rosenthal, “Art and the Politics of the Desert: German Exiles in California and the Biblical ‘Bilderverbot,’” *New German Critique* 118 (2013): 43-64.

²¹⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 90.

critique of myth from truth."²¹⁵ Although Nietzsche recognizes the pagan idolatry inherent to Christianity, his own regression to mythic irrationalism prohibits him from following this fundamental insight through. In this sense, Adorno's Hebraic critique of myth salvages the Nietzschean critique of Christianity.

Adorno already hinted at a critique of Hegel's philosophy as mythological in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the "Theses on Occultism." In his later works this line of thought concretized. However, the best inroad into grasping Adorno's critique of Hegel is by way of contrast with Kant: "Through his critique of Kant, Hegel achieved a magnificent extension of the practice of critical philosophy beyond the formal sphere; at the same time, in doing so he evaded the supreme critical moment, the critique of totality, of something infinite and conclusively given."²¹⁶ Indeed, "A philosophy like Kant's ... never simply repeats what goes on in society, but has the tendency to criticize existing society and to hold up to it an alternative image of the possible, or an imageless image of the possible."²¹⁷ Demythologization therefore begins in Kant and, although carried through to its dialectical moment in Hegel, ultimately regresses to mythology through the totalizing reconciliation of subject and object which reifies the given. Following not only Cohen but Steinthal, Adorno interprets Kant's demythologization as a kind of Maimonidean-Feuerbachian critique of idolatrous, psychological projection: "The broad thrust of this process of demythologization is, as has frequently been shown, to demonstrate the presence of anthropomorphism."²¹⁸ Kantian enlightenment "desires to rid itself of mythology, of the illusion that man can make certain ideas absolute and hold them to be the whole truth simply because he happens to have them within himself."²¹⁹ By turning toward the subject and demonstrating the spontaneous activity of the mind in the process of knowing, Kant reveals thought's

²¹⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 98.

²¹⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Drei Studien zu Hegel* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963), Theodor Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993) 86.

²¹⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996); Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 151.

²¹⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Kants 'Kritik der reinen Vernunft'* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995); Theodor Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 65.

²¹⁹ Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 66.

mediation in his critique of pure reason. This allows for a critical evaluation of thought's own representations. In Kant's world "we stand on our own two feet" and "inhabit a known world without dreading the intervention of demons, without magical and mythical anxieties." Indeed, "the world has ceased to be permeated by the ruins, by the surviving vestiges of a metaphysical meaning" taking the form of a "frightening and demonic visage." Cutting through all illusion, "this process of disenchantment strips the world of its uncanny aspect."²²⁰

And yet, what Adorno appreciates in Hegel is his radicalization of thought's subjective mediation, the key to demythologization. This is illustrated in Hegel's rejection of the Aristotelian doctrine of first principles: "Hegel destroys the very mythology of something 'first': 'That which first commences is implicit, immediate, abstract, general—it is what has not yet advanced; the more concrete and richer comes later, and the first is poorer in determinations.' Seen in terms of this kind of demythologization, Hegelian philosophy becomes the figure of a comprehensive commitment to a lack of naiveté; an early answer to a state of the world that incessantly participates in weaving its own veil of illusion."²²¹ From the *Phenomenology* to the *Logic*, Hegel's dialectical method cuts against the subject's sense-certainty, incessantly calling into question every representation's conditions of possibility. This is the basis for Adorno's conception of negative dialectics, revealing the non-identity at the heart of identity by maintaining the chasm between subject and object, a tension Hegel otherwise resolves. In this way, Adorno reiterates Cohen's criticism of romanticism and Hegelianism as circular structures annulling critical thought and foreclosing the future:

'The whole is the untrue,' not merely because the thesis of totality is itself untruth, being the principle of domination inflated to the absolute; the idea of a positivity that can master everything that opposes it through the superior power of a comprehending spirit is the mirror image of the experience of the superior coercive force inherent in everything that exists by virtue of its consolidation under domination. This is the truth in Hegel's untruth. The force of the whole, which it mobilizes, is not a mere fantasy on the part of spirit; it is the force of the real web of illusion in which all individual existence remains trapped. By specifying, in opposition to Hegel, the negativity of the whole, philosophy satisfies, for the last time, the postulate of determinate negation, which is a positing. The

²²⁰ Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 110.

²²¹ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 64.

ray of light that reveals the whole to be untrue in all its moments in none other than utopia, the utopia of the whole truth, which is still to be realized.²²²

Adorno therefore pits Hegel against Hegel, the demythologizing power of the negative against the mythic affirmation of the totality in order to leave open a messianic, utopian futurity: “positivity must be denied all the way down to the reason that is the instrument of demythologization.”²²³ For in Hegel “demythologization devours itself, as the mythical gods liked to devour their children. Leaving behind nothing but what merely is, demythologization recoils into myth; for myth is nothing else than the closed system of immanence, of that which is.”²²⁴

If Hegel’s metaphysics succumbs to myth, then, so does his philosophy of history. As Frederick Beiser has said, Hegel’s philosophy of history, by historicizing the whole, essentially introduces the Aristotelian notion of a teleological “final cause” into the Spinozist conception of “substance.”²²⁵ This is the basis of Hegel’s “cunning of reason” in history, the manner in which being arrives at its own adequate concept. For Adorno, the Hegelian ideal of progress is mythological insofar as it proceeds according to necessity. The beginning and end of history are contained within each other, one’s determinations only perceptible from the vantage of its opposite. Thus, Hegel’s idea of “progress” is really no progress at all, instead a kind of mythic fate disguised as teleology. “In the midst of history, Hegel sides with its immutable element, with the ever-same identity of the process whose totality is said to bring salvation. Quite unmetaphorically, he can be charged with mythologizing history.”²²⁶ In continuity with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, progress also entails a technological domination of nature yielding the subject’s identification with that very nature in its mythic regression.²²⁷ Progress becomes a product of bourgeois society negated in the “principle of exchange.” Although bourgeois society imagines itself the harbinger

²²² Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 87-88.

²²³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 145.

²²⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 402.

²²⁵ Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (London: Routledge, 2005), 67.

²²⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 357.

²²⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit (1964/65)* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001); Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 150.

of freedom, this is a freedom hampered by the commodity as “the rational form of mythical eternal sameness.”²²⁸ To recall, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* exchange was understood as a secularization of pagan sacrifice characterized by domination, manipulation, and fraud.²²⁹ However, rather than decrying progress as such, Adorno again pits Hegel against Hegel by championing a negative theory of progress that “absorb[s] the kernel of truth contained in those invectives against the belief in progress. It must do so as an antidote to the mythology from which the theory of progress ails.”²³⁰ Rather than the teleological realization of the given, true progress lies in a self-reflexive critique of the present.²³¹ “If progress is as much a myth as the idea of the path fate has ordained for the constellations, the idea of progress itself is the anti-mythological idea par excellence ... we might say that progress occurs where it comes to an end.”²³²

While Adorno’s criticisms of Hegel had the intended effect of salvaging the dialectic, the same cannot be said of his treatment of Heidegger. The central problem with Heidegger’s “philosophy of origins” is its valorization of “the archaic.” Whereas for Kant and Hegel enlightenment offered a release from the fear and anxiety “which assailed us in archaic times,” for Heidegger it is this very angst that is most constitutive of the individual’s primordial confrontation with Being.²³³ Adorno takes issue with Heidegger’s rereading of Hegel as an ontological thinker just as Cassirer had done with Heidegger’s reading of Kant at Davos. Adorno highlights as particularly egregious Heidegger’s reading of the *Logic* which correlates the Hegelian conception of being with Heideggerian *Dasein*, thereby deadening its demythologizing potential. “You will know that it has become common these days to return to the standard orthography of Hegel’s time and write *Sein* as *Seyn* or being as ‘*beyng*’, and thus effectively to remove the concept from the realm of discursive thought and turn it into a magical word that is precisely

²²⁸ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 170.

²²⁹ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 171.

²³⁰ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 159.

²³¹ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 158.

²³² Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 151-152.

²³³ Theodor Adorno, *Einführung in die Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2010); Theodor Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, ed. Christoph Ziermann, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 107.

meant to designate the Absolute in an immediate fashion.”²³⁴ Heidegger deliberately obscures the sense in which the totality of being is “internally contradictory” and beset by non-identity. Moreover, Heidegger refuses to recognize that even the individual’s perception or cognition of Being is mediated by its object, such that Being can never truly be apprehended. Only by coming to grips with thought’s mediation and being’s dialectical unfolding does knowledge become possible, meaning that Heideggerian philosophy ultimately lapses into relativism and irrationalist unknowing.²³⁵ “Myth is a world in which anything can also mean anything else, in which there is no absolutely univocal meaning.”²³⁶ Like Cassirer, Adorno leverages the dialectics against the mythology of Heideggerian irrationalism as a counterpart of unreflective positivism: “avoiding an orientation to ‘being’ certainly does not mean falling into an obstinate cult of the scientific facts.”²³⁷

In the *Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno again castigates Heidegger’s philosophy of language for its magical and mystical tendencies. “The jargon shares with positivism a crude conception of the archaic in language; neither of them bothers about the dialectical moment in which language, as if it were something else, wins itself away from its magical origins, language being entangled in a progressing demythologization.”²³⁸ While positivism refuses to recognize the entanglement of language in human social life, in their search for “the authentic” existentialism reverts to the opposite pole by imbuing language with the mythical power to disclose the immediacy of Being, rejecting the demythologizing effect of nominalism.²³⁹ “They don’t fail to notice that one cannot speak absolutely without speaking archaically; but what the positivists bewail as retrogressive the authentics eternalize as a blessing.”²⁴⁰ Heidegger’s valorization of the individual’s anxiety-ridden confrontation with Being—an extension of

²³⁴ Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, 112.

²³⁵ Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, 109.

²³⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Ontologie und Dialektik (1960/61)* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002); Theodor Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics 1960/1961*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 180.

²³⁷ Adorno, *An Introduction*, 113 and 108.

²³⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit: Zur deutschen Ideologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1964); Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 42.

²³⁹ Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics*, 48.

²⁴⁰ Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, 43.

Kierkegaard's own—relies on the same Odyssean logic of self-preservation described in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. “The findings of Heidegger's existential analysis, according to which the subject is authentic insofar as it possesses itself, grant special praise to the person who is sovereignly at his own disposal; as though he were his own property: he has to have bearing, which is at the same time an internalization, and an apotheosis, of the principle of domination over nature. ‘Man is he, who he is, precisely in testifying to his own *Dasein*.’”²⁴¹ In the Heideggerian Being-toward-death, “[t]he category of authenticity, which was at first introduced for a descriptive purpose, and which flowed from the relatively innocent question about what is authentic in something, now turns into a mythically imposed fate.”²⁴²

While Adorno's critique of Heideggerian myth is sprinkled throughout *Negative Dialectics*, it finds its clearest expression in his 1960-1961 lecture course *Ontology and Dialectics* where Adorno homes-in on the “anthropomorphic projection” inherent to *Dasein's* “destiny” or fate.²⁴³ Being in its historicity for Heidegger always implies a going-forth into authenticity. Rather than pursuing a spontaneous, demythologized freedom, Heidegger draws humanity back into the mythic determinism from whence it came: “The mediating processes of subjectivity which can never be eliminated from the activity of thought are here simply deleted,” a consequence of the Husserlian phenomenological dictum “that things present themselves to consciousness purely and simply as what they are.”²⁴⁴ However, here Heidegger's myth of immediacy reveals its fraudulence. “Thus it is the very anti-subjectivism of this theory, the very claim that it is not some subjective expression of thinking, which inwardly reveals, as I would say, the heinous arrogance of the subject which imagines its own thinking to be entirely free of subjective limitations and acts as if the Absolute itself were speaking through it.”²⁴⁵ Despite Heidegger's attempts to drown the subject in the ocean of Being, he can only do this from the standpoint of his own

²⁴¹ Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, 127.

²⁴² Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, 127.

²⁴³ Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics*, 175.

²⁴⁴ Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics*, 176.

²⁴⁵ Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics*, 177.

subjectivity. This is “Heidegger's mythical *hubris* ... his disguise of his own voice as that of Being.”²⁴⁶ Rather than embracing the subject’s spontaneity and the possibility of freedom through mediated knowledge, Heidegger burrows further into the self-deluded mythology of Being and its fate. In its futile “longing for concreteness,” the “constantly invoked and endlessly repeated formulae” of the Question of Being descends into pure abstraction, unable to say anything about the Real.²⁴⁷ Being cannot be thought without beings, the universal without the particular. So much prattle about ontological grounding dissolves into air: “a philosophy which began expressly as a doctrine of what is most concrete ends up as the most abstract kind of thinking.”²⁴⁸ Like shaman, the priest, or the astrologer, Heidegger too becomes a purveyor of mythic charlatanry.

Finally, the philosophy of Being entails a nativist denialism, a xenophobic refusal to see beyond the confines of the subject’s willfully limited view, to attend not only to Being but *beings*.²⁴⁹ Adorno connects Heidegger’s thought and pagan “nature religion,” the cult of the homeland devoted to local idols. Heidegger valorizes the provincial and the “dwelling” as the abode of authenticity. Yet it is precisely this aspect of Heidegger’s thought, in concert with his yearning for a long-lost whole of Being in its immediacy, that reveals an inner affinity with National Socialism. For Adorno, “it is impossible to write off what are often described as political eccentricities and aberrations simply as missteps of a thinker who has gone rogue, as it were, and imagine that we can then hold on to the unadulterated wisdom or the purified doctrine that remains.” Indeed, Heidegger would “identify the *Führer* with Being” during the Nazi period just as he would argue “that the power of being itself is manifest in the historical events of the time and that we are to submit to this power of being in the form of these historical events.”²⁵⁰ Thus, Heidegger’s philosophy and his politics become inseparable, both reactions against the

²⁴⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 88.

²⁴⁷ Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics*, 181-182.

²⁴⁸ Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics*, 183.

²⁴⁹ In a peculiar analogy demonstrating myth’s demythologizing potential, Adorno states: “Thus fundamental ontology relates to the domain of beings in like manner to the wicked stepmother in the story of Snow White.” Wracked with paranoia about the “fairest one of them all,” Heidegger’s fundamental ontology of Being must eliminate any last trace of ontical beings in their discreteness and difference. Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics*, 70.

²⁵⁰ Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics*, 180.

technical, “ontic” character of modernity—one increasingly identified with the Jews. According to a Heideggerian philosophical-political typology, Judaism becomes the opposite pole of Being, authenticity, historicity, and concreteness, instead typifying idealism, rationality, superficiality, and transitoriness.²⁵¹ The Jew is at home in neither Being nor *Reich*. “Heidegger obeys the law that the advancing rationality of the irrational society makes men reach farther and farther into the past.” Even beyond Klages’ occultist paganism, Heidegger “flees to a dusk in which not even such mythologemes as that of the reality of images will take shape any longer. He eludes criticism, but without letting go of the advantages of originality: the origin is placed so far back that it will seem extratemporal and therefore omnipresent.”²⁵²

As Peter Gordon has said, *Negative Dialectics* culminates in not only an iconoclastic, Maimonidean negative theology but a kind of Kabbalistic *tikkun olam*, illuminating a broken and fallen world in need of repair with the aid of a “messianic light.” “In Adorno’s view it is the task of criticism to expose the negativity of the world. One must break open the shells, or conceptual categories, that lend the world its illusory perfection. The imagery of the Lurianic Kabbalah here becomes an allegory for the critique of ideology. Adorno pays homage to the metaphysical concept of the messianic, but uses this concept for the sake of this-worldly critique.”²⁵³ This is no doubt in continuity with Adorno’s scattered allusions to Jewish messianism owing to the influence of Benjamin and even Scholem in the years after the former’s death.²⁵⁴ However, it raises the question, how is it that the arch enemy of myth finds himself espousing the very process of negative, critical demythologization as a kind of mysticism? Has Adorno, in the last instance, himself regressed to mythology? It appears the opposite is the case. For Adorno, Judaism too participates in a dialectic of enlightenment where myth and mysticism sow the seeds of their own

²⁵¹ This is what Donatella di Cesare has more recently termed Heidegger’s “metaphysical antisemitism” in *Heidegger and the Jews: The Black Notebooks* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 164-172.

²⁵² Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics*, 164-172.

²⁵³ Peter Gordon, *Migrants in the Profane: Critical Theory and the Question of Secularization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 129.

²⁵⁴ See Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem, *Correspondence 1959-1969*, ed. Asaf Angermann, trans. Sebastian Truskolaski and Paula Schwebel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

undoing. This could be seen in the case of Benjamin, Scholem, and even Franz Kafka. Despite his flirtations with the Kabbalah which inspired both curiosity and skepticism on the part of Adorno, Benjamin's "conception of 'dialectics at a standstill' emerged with increasing clarity."²⁵⁵ The same was true of Scholem, whose studies of mysticism remained resolutely secular and historical, themselves indicative of Judaism's disenchantment of the world. "He transposed the idea of the sacred text into the sphere of enlightenment, into which, according to Scholem, Jewish mysticism itself tends to culminate dialectically."²⁵⁶ Even Kafka, whose work was interwoven with mythical and messianic themes, ultimately strived for demythologization. "If, however, it is true that, in its late phase, Jewish mysticism vanishes and becomes rational, then this fact affords insight into the affinity of Kafka, a product of the late enlightenment, with antinomian mysticism."²⁵⁷ For Adorno then, the dialectic of enlightenment is, again, a dialectic of Judaism.

VIII. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that both Cassirer and Adorno understood myth as a totalizing form of thought hostile to all difference. Far from simply a relic of humanity's primitive religious past, mythic totality and its attendant forms of irrationalism recurred in the present, threatening a reactivation of fascist forces. Like myth, fascism was technological, calculative, and positivist as well as involving a valorization of the primordial, the origin, and the archaic. Nazism made use of the same types of signification and symbols, cultic devotion and obedience, and totalizing worldview as "primitive religion." Occultist practices like astrology, for instance, lay the groundwork for passive submission to the state and acceptance as the status quo. For both Cassirer and Adorno the intellectual roots of fascism could be traced to the philosophy of Heidegger who, on the heels of *Lebensphilosophie*, sought a return to the unmediated immediacy of Being in its plentitude. This in many respects was the culmination of

²⁵⁵ Theodor Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin" in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 233.

²⁵⁶ Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," 234.

²⁵⁷ Theodor Adorno, "Notes on Kafka" in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 268.

German Romanticism's revolt against the alienating tide of modernization. Heidegger's totalizing philosophy would find common cause with the Nazis' efforts to eliminate the Jews as representatives of not only racial or religious difference, but the superficiality, transitoriness, and technical aspects of capitalist modernity. Even beyond Hitler, myth still lurked beneath the glimmering surface of postwar society like a monster waiting to devour it. Unreason underlay reason just as barbarism underwrites civilization. Against this, both thinkers followed Cohen in maintaining the productive chasm between subject and object, the foundation for critically self-reflective thought and the subject's creative potential to imagine the world otherwise. This was a correlate of Judaism's strict division between God and humanity which provided a negating counterprinciple to an unjust society and a vehicle for the disenchantment of the world. In the history of religion, Judaism was the harbinger of demythologization wielding the iconoclastic power of the negative against an idolatrous acquiescence to the status quo. In this sense, Judaism's disenchantment of the world again took the form of a grand narrative, a story whose protagonist could proclaim victory over the mythic powers of evil, as if engaged in a cosmic, even apocalyptic, conflict. To this extent, the German-Jewish critique of myth itself participated in Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of Judaism.

Conclusion | An Age of Barbarism?

The challenge is to cease this abolition of the ethical and to restore the political history of ethical life: without the cynicism of violence, without the facetiousness of myth, but not without authorial irony—not without the anxiety of beginning and the equivocation of the middle.

—Gillian Rose

I. From the Critique of Idolatry to the Critique of Ideology

Beginning with Heymann Steinthal's critique of Ernest Renan in 1860 and stretching through the Wilhelmine and Weimar periods to Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* in 1966, the critique of myth wielded enormous explanatory power in German-Jewish thought for over one hundred years. Conceptualized as either the personification of nature, an illusion masking reality, or a totalizing form of thought, the critique of myth served as a thinly veiled critique of Western, Christian, secular society in its entirety that simultaneously sought to salvage an Enlightenment tradition entwined with it. Amidst Europe's regression to barbarism, the critique of myth championed a Judeo-rationalism infused with the scientific, utopian spirit of *Bildung*. Unlike any other paradigm in Jewish intellectual history, it made explicit the transformation of the ancient, biblical critique of pagan idolatry into the modern critique of ideology. Again, though, the critique of myth entailed the construction of a new one: the myth of the Jews as the sole inventors of reason, ethics, science, enlightenment, and civilization in world history. Although it sought a disenchantment of the world, the critique of myth soon became an exercise in mythmaking itself by constructing a grand narrative whereby the Jews single-handedly liberated humanity from sensuality, immediacy, and fantasy into the realms of reason, autonomy, and freedom. This speaks to the preponderant human tendency to construct stories to make sense of experience—in this case, the experience of rising antisemitism and Germany's descent into Nazism. Finally, the critique of myth is once more an instance of what Gillian Rose termed "Neo-Hebraism," an attempt on the part of modern Jewish philosophers to locate in Judaism the "sublime Other of modernity" as an ethical

counterweight to fascism. However, as recent events demonstrate, Judaism remains as entangled in the problematics of history, power, and politics as any other tradition.

The German-Jewish critique of myth was plagued by a number of internal contradictions and became implicated in a violent and problematic legacy. In the first place, the critique of myth implied the historical supersession of paganism by Judaism as the harbinger of reason and civilization in history. Inspired by the Hebrew Prophets, Talmudic Sages, and medieval Jewish philosophers like Maimonides, the critique of myth positioned paganism as a necessary stage on the way to an abstract, de-anthropomorphized conception of the Godhead purging religion of immorality, extravagance, and primitive notions of time and space. In this sense, paganism still functioned as a foil for Judaism just as Judaism functioned as a legitimating negativity for the triumph of Christianity. However, unlike its ancient and medieval forebears, the critique of myth grounded the Jewish supersession of paganism in reason rather than revelation, fusing the critique of idolatry with the Enlightenment critique of religion. In the second place, the critique of myth also participated in the construction of racialized theories of religion enabled by colonial technologies of knowledge production by conceptualizing Judaism as the apotheosis of reason's historical development. These theories postulated a necessary evolution from the simple to the complex, primitivism to civilization, superstition to science. Paradoxically, then, the critique of myth's effort to combat anti-Judaism undermined itself through its collusion with ideas no less responsible for anti-blackness and anti-indigeneity than antisemitism. Indeed, the colonial construction of religion could be understood as supersessionism writ large, expanded to encompass a global heterogeneity of peoples whose Oriental, primitive "religion" is surpassed by the achievements of European civilization. Just as the Jews are superseded by Christianity, the religions of Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Americas are superseded by secularism.

And yet, as the product of Europe's internally colonized Other, the German-Jewish critique of myth problematizes the outright dismissal of disenchantment and the enlightenment critique of religion as an ideological tool of Western domination. The critique of myth grew in the shadow of Jewish Emancipation and its failure to deliver on its promises as newly won civil and political rights for Jews

in Germany begat a reactionary antisemitism rooted in the long history of Christian anti-Judaism. Taking up the mantle of the German Enlightenment tradition, many German Jews championed the very foundation of German culture Germans themselves abandoned. Seeing both positivism and the irrationalism of German Romanticism, *Lebensphilosophie*, and Heideggerianism as two sides of the same coin, the critique of myth traced the lineage of fascism to these anti-modern tendencies of thought taken in by a longing for origins and concrete immediacy. Rather than a re-enchantment of the world or a ruthless scientism, then, the critique of myth placed disenchantment in service of a commitment to ethical life.

II. The Myth of the Twenty-First Century

In *Ontology and Dialectics*, Adorno draws correlations between Heidegger and the infamous Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg:

I believe that in a certain sense we do Heidegger an injustice if we simply try to class him, as he seems to have done himself, as a fellow traveler of National Socialism and regard the fact that he was so quick to follow Hitler as an unfortunate case of the profoundly naive Sage. Yet in that cult of the origin, in that belief in renewal, in that belief that the power of being would now triumph over the power of darkness—in this entire nexus of elements we actually find the very real nexus of National Socialist ideology—so that we might in a certain sense read Rosenberg, *cum grano salis*, as a key to *Being and Time*.¹

Here Adorno has in mind Rosenberg's 1930 book *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, which followed Arthur Gobineau, Ernst Haeckel, and Houston Chamberlain in constructing a grand myth of Aryan supremacy. In his analysis, Rosenberg drew on the Indo-European hypothesis, race science, Social Darwinism, and Christian theology as well as the myths of Atlantis, the Greeks and Persians, Norse and Germans, and Vedic religion. As George Mosse put it, "[r]acism substituted myth for reality; and the world that it created with its stereotypes, virtues and vices, was a fairytale world, which dangled a utopia before the eyes of those who longed for a way out of the confusion of modernity and the rush of time. It made the sun stand still and abolished change. All evil was blamed on the restless inferior races who lacked

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 169.

appreciation of the settled order of things.”² Following the romantic tendency in mythography while making use of methods deployed by anthropologists and ethnographers, Rosenberg celebrated the archaic and the irrational in reaction to the vertigo brought on by disenchantment, the scientific revolution, industrialism, capitalism, and so on. In this regard he simply followed romantic mythography’s tendency toward reactionary politics and anti-Jewish prejudice through to its end. For Adorno, this meant that Heidegger’s own attraction to mythic forms of thought could be read as an esoteric rendering of Rosenberg’s vulgar ideology. “Thus we actually find that *Being and Time* already contains at least something, on an incomparably higher level and with incomparably greater sophistication, of what another book on a far lower level once claimed to provide, namely the fiction of *a myth for the twentieth century*.”³

Surveying the present, we are by no means immune to allure of mythic thought as we too confront the myth of the *twenty-first* century. On the one hand, in an age of misinformation, vast inequality, alienation and depressiveness, climate collapse, police brutality, state violence, new apartheid, religious persecution, resurgent authoritarianism, and a global pandemic we have witnessed a regression to conspiratorial thought, racist and misogynistic fantasies, homophobia and transphobia, antisemitism, anti-intellectualism, and anti-scientific medicalization all rooted in a valorization of the archaic, the immediate, and the irrational. In this sense, contemporary theory’s dispensing with rationality and its affinity for re-enchantment appears not only incredibly shortsighted and naive but is delivered up as a handmaiden to incipient fascisms. On the other hand, the instrumental rationality levied by today’s technocracy in search of profit, power, and security is predicated upon a mythic positivism intent upon classifying, quantifying, and controlling virtually every sphere of human society. This is often based in an overly biologized model of human psychology that views people as mere things endlessly manipulable to ulterior ends, subordinating critical self-reflection on structures of meaning to

² George Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978) xxxvi–xxxvii.

³ Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics*, 173. Italics mine.

the tyranny of metrics. With its faith in the divine omnipotence of the algorithm and the messianic promise of Artificial Intelligence, the unthinking and unreflective technological utopianism of the contemporary moment threatens to exacerbate already existing crises and generate new ones.

Therefore, a fidelity to reason and the task of disenchantment conceptualized as truth-telling and ideology critique remains important as ever against the tide of new irrationalisms, positivisms, and the proposed re-enchantment of the world. Notwithstanding its shortcomings, the skepticism toward sense-certainty, grand narratives, and identitarian particularism expressed in the German-Jewish critique of myth makes it an apt basis for iconoclastic engagement with the hollow idols of the present. This again entails a commitment to what Gillian Rose called the “drama of misrecognition” in pursuit of ethical life, the endeavor “to know, to misknow, and yet to grow.” Rather than a post-critical defeatism consigning the tools of criticism to the dustbin of their difficult and mournful history, it involves their further refinement. This means harnessing the power of the negative to cut against the false pretenses of immediacy, sensuality, authenticity, and wholeness to perceive the mediated nature of our representations all too easily misrecognized as true. Indeed, misrecognition is the domain of myth itself, mystifying the causes of suffering through commonsensical justifications of the status quo. In this sense, the German-Jewish critique of myth beckons *a defense of reason despite itself*.

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