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Kafka's German-Jewish Reception as Mirror of Modernity

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Kafka’s German-Jewish Reception as Mirror of Modernity

by

Abraham Rubin

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

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This study explores the diverse and contradictory ways German-Jewish intellectuals identify what they commonly refer to as Kafka’s “Jewish essence.” Focusing on the commentaries of Margarete Susman, Hans-Joachim Schoeps, Gershom Scholem, and Max Brod, I claim that Kafka’s German-Jewish reception reflects a broader historical dilemma that grew out of the Jewish encounter with modernity: Are Judaism and Jewishness best defined through religious, cultural, national, or ethnic categories? It is precisely this ambiguity that forms the historical backdrop to Kafka’s Jewish interpretations. Situating the early phases of Kafka’s posthumous reception within the broader context of interwar German-Jewish culture, my dissertation examines the different ways critics conceptualize their respective notions of “Jewishness” through an encounter with Kafka’s writing and use it as a foil for the self-fashioning of their own Jewish identity. As the dissertation title is meant to suggest, my work builds on Gerson D. Cohen’s influential essay “German Jewry as Mirror of Modernity” (1975), which argues that German Jewry’s diverging responses to modernity exemplify the cultural and ideological alternatives available to any religious group faced with the challenge of redefining itself in the modern era. Extending Cohen’s thesis to Kafka’s early reception, I show how the critical response to his fiction mirrors the transformations that occurred in Jewish self-understanding throughout the first decades of the twentieth-century. On a broader level, this project seeks to
understand the ways secular Jewish identity is reconceived in the field of cultural production, and how it is translated into modern categories of nation, culture, and ethnicity.
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Introduction

1. In Pursuit of “Fluttering Shadows”: Kafka’s Critics as and Literary Lepidopterists

“When Brod states that Kafka’s vision was perhaps consistent with Buber’s, this requires us to seek the butterfly in the net over which it flies, casting its fluttering shadows.”
--Walter Benjamin (1938)

“Few things indeed have I known ... that could surpass in richness and strength the excitement of entomological exploration.”
--Vladimir Nabokov (1951)

“What have I in common with Jews?” muses Kafka in a diary entry from January 1914. “I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe” (D 252). Despite Kafka’s self-professed ambivalence, many of his interwar critics identified his prose as bearing a distinctly Jewish testimony. Poet and essayist Margarete Susman, historian of religion Hans-Joachim Schoeps, and renown scholar of the Kabbalah Gershom Scholem all chose to take Kafka out of his corner and place him at the center of their meditations on Jewish identity in the modern-secular age. Beginning with Max Brod, Kafka’s first biographer and the executor of his literary estate, critics have made imaginative, diverse and contradictory attempts to pinpoint the Jewish character of his prose. In so doing, these commentators came to articulate their own sense of Jewish identity through the process of literary interpretation.

In 1912, Hans Kohn, who was an avid Zionist in his youth, published a literary review of four Prague authors—Franz Kafka, Max Brod, Franz Werfel, and Oskar Baum—in the independent Jewish weekly Selbstwehr. Kohn opened his review noting,

Four books lie before me, all of which were written by Jews. The works make no mention of Jews, and yet one senses a kind of Jewishness in every one of them. It
is that recognizable Jewish something that one somehow and somewhere possesses in himself. (18)

Kohn never defines that “Jewish something” he senses in Kafka’s prose, yet his observations are characteristic of a whole generation of interwar critics, who shared his intuition. In contrast to Kohn’s vague assertion, Brod went to great lengths in order to elaborate the aesthetic and ideological contours of that “Jewish something.” He famously stated that although the word “Jew” never appeared in Kafka’s works, they were among the most Jewish documents of their time (“Literaten” 463). In a 1918 review of a public reading of “Ein Bericht für eine Akademie,” Brod explained that the “literariness” [das Dichterische] of the Jewish writer should not be forced into arbitrary categories but should be understood as loosely and naturally as his Jewishness (127). Despite this liberal proclamation, Brod’s reading of Kafka was politically programmatic and deeply influenced by his ties to Martin Buber and the Zionist movement.

Brod’s “realistically Jewish interpretation of Kafka, in which Zionism is accepted as a way of life” (FK 174) was strongly contested by Walter Benjamin. In an unpublished review of Brod’s Kafka biography, Benjamin sardonically noted, “When Brod states that Kafka’s vision was perhaps consistent with Buber’s, this requires us to seek the butterfly in the net over which it flies, casting its fluttering shadows” (318). Benjamin employs the poetic image of a failed butterfly catcher in order to characterize what he saw as Brod’s exegetical shortcomings—a lepidopterist who cast his net over the “fluttering shadows” of a butterfly flapping its colorful wings from a safe distance above. The appeal of Benjamin’s entomological metaphor lies not only in its sly allusion to The Metamorphosis. By drawing a parallel between literary criticism and lepidoptery, Benjamin also points to the complexities involved in identifying Kafka’s true
species, a caterpillar transformed into an ever-elusive butterfly in its afterlife. While Benjamin’s image was directed at Brod, it also applies to the other critics I discuss in the following chapters, who like Brod, seek to trap, catalogue, and mount Kafka on the wall, alongside the other Jewish specimens they have collected. Despite their shared interest, each of these butterfly catchers uses his or her own toolkit, and employs a different taxonomic method in the process of capturing Kafka.

Unlike his critics, Kafka never saw his prose as being “fundamentally Jewish.” Nor did he understand his stories to be allegorical narratives of the modern Jewish experience, as his critics often claimed. Yet in imagining his works as such, Kafka’s critics implicated his literary legacy in a broader debate about modern Jewish identity and cultural production that took place during the early twentieth-century. As Kafka himself observed in a letter to Milena, “The true, independent life of the book doesn’t begin until the death of the author… then the book is left all alone and has to rely on the strength of its own heartbeat” (LM 232-233). It is Kafka’s “independent” afterlife, or at least one of them—his Jewish Nachleben, between the years 1924 and 1939—that this project sets out to explore.

2. What is Jewish Criticism? Who is a Jewish Critic?

The respective efforts to classify the Jewishness of Kafka’s prose take place at a time when German Jewry was embroiled in a heated debate over the meaning of Jewish identity and culture. These debates found their direct expression in the early reviews of Kafka’s fiction. The recurring questions that loom over Kafka’s early Jewish reception are: can Kafka’s writing rightly described as “Jewish”? And if so, what does this designation refer to? Does his Jewishness consist of a particular theme, or is it a matter of literary form? More importantly, how
does one define the “Jewish essence” ascribed to his work? Is it a religious designation, a cultural category, or perhaps some inherited ethnic trait? In the modern European context, Jewishness has been perceived and represented through a variety of discourses—ethnographic, biological, economic and psychological. The contradictions that inhere from these multiple and often conflicting accounts of “Jewishness” are reflected in the critical reception of Kafka’s work. There is clearly no way to objectively determine whether Kafka’s writing is Jewish or not, because the defining parameters used to answer this question differ from critic to critic. Yet in posing this question, Kafka’s interwar critics seek to determine, or at least reflect upon, what it is that constitutes “Jewish writing.”

Not all reviewers from the period subscribed to the notion that Kafka’s prose drew its inspiration from the “inner and profound center of Judaism,” as Scholem believed (*Mysticism* 193). The critic Jakob Michalski, for example, vehemently argued that there was nothing inherently Jewish about Kafka’s art. In his 1935 review of *The Castle*, Michalski contended,

> The only thing incomprehensible to the author of this review is the excess of literary propaganda that dares to designate Kafka’s art as specifically “Jewish” and continues to celebrate him as a Jewish prodigy! His writings are as un-Jewish as the novels of his friend and editor Max Brod … One may celebrate Kafka as an artist, yet his accomplishments have nothing to do with Jews or Judaism, and we reject the notion that a Jewish essence [*jüdischen Wesen*] emanates from his work. (398)
If Michalski does not define the “Jewish essence” whose presence he rejects in Kafka’s novel, his review is nevertheless implicated in the same discourse underlying Scholem and Brod’s interpretations, whose principal concern is to mark the cultural boundaries that separate “Jewish” from “non-Jewish” literature. German-Jewish literature, claims Vivian Liska, “should indeed not be regarded as a fixed and definable category or essence, but as the result of a focus, a set of questions asked in the process of reading and interpreting individual texts” (6). The ongoing debates about Kafka’s Jewishness constitute just such a process—they express the cultural dilemmas that preoccupied German-Jewish thinkers in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The ideologically charged question motivating the German-Jewish reception of Kafka’s work—“What is Jewish literature?”—is one that I too had to tackle in the process of writing this dissertation. When selecting my primary texts, I was confronted with a methodological dilemma: what is Jewish criticism and who counts as a Jewish critic? My selection was based on two defining criteria. I chose critics who self-identified as Jews and were preoccupied with questions concerning Jewish identity. The same principle applies to my selection of critical works. I focus on those readings that explicitly defined Kafka’s writing as Jewish, and explicated his work as a mirror of what they saw as the “modern Jewish condition.” Consequently, there are several commentators who belong to this time-period, who remain on the periphery of my discussion. Figures such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Werner Kraft, and Günther Anders were all critics of Jewish ancestry who took a pronounced interest in Kafka and wrote about him extensively. While these critics recognized Kafka’s Jewishness and occasionally addressed Jewish themes in his works, classifying his work as “Jewish literature” and relating it to the “Jewish essence” were not among their top exegetical priorities.
It is worth adding that this study is not particularly concerned with the historical and biographical data concerning Kafka’s relationship to Jewish culture and Zionism, nor does it aim to provide a new “Jewish” reading of his work. In fact, it is not so much Kafka, the person or his prose, which is of interest here, but his critics. Insofar as I touch upon Kafka’s own relationship to Judaism, it is only to provide a certain contrast to the more curious claims made by his commentators. My attention lies not so much in Kafka’s prose, but what Milan Kundera calls “Kafkalogy.” Kundera coined the term when accusing Max Brod of fundamentally misreading Kafka, claiming that his interpretations placed undue emphasis on the religious and philosophical dimensions of his writing, which came at the expense of a literary and aesthetic understanding of his literary work. “Kafkology,” explains Kundera, is the discourse that “produces and sustains its own image of Kafka, to the point where the author whom readers know by the name Kafka is no longer Kafka but the Kafkologized Kafka” (42). By examining the different strains of Jewish “Kafkalogy” against their historical, cultural and intellectual context, I show how these interpretations respond to and operate within the prevailing discourses on Judaism and Jewishness of their time.

3. German-Jewish Modernity and its Literary Refractions

In a seminal essay entitled “German Jewry as Mirror of Modernity,” the historian Gerson D. Cohen argues that German-Jewish cultural history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries constitutes a paradigmatic case study of the diverse Jewish responses to modernity. In the process of reinventing their collective identity, German Jews adopted various cultural models from their non-Jewish environment. In so doing,
German Jewry … provided Jews everywhere with mature alternative models of the Jewish response to modernity, from radical assimilation to militant Zionism and neo-orthodoxy, as well as a fresh rediscovery of the Jewish past and reinterpretation and reformulation of the foundations of Jewish identity and commitment. (xi)

If modernity led to a sharp decline in ritual observance, it also triggered a process of cultural transformation and renewal, which allowed German Jews to reassert their collective identity in novel ways. As such, Cohen claims that German-Jewish modernity exemplifies the cultural and ideological alternatives available to a religious group faced with the challenge of redefining itself in a secular society.

In the spirit of Cohen’s argument, I argue that the critical response to Kafka’s work mirrors the transformations that occurred in Jewish self-understanding throughout the first decades of the twentieth-century. Situating the early phases of Kafka’s posthumous reception within the broader context of interwar German-Jewish culture, my project examines the ways critics conceptualize their respective notions of Kafka’s “Jewishness” and forge their own sense of Jewish identity through the act of interpretation. If these contradictory readings convey the profound ambiguity surrounding the modern notion of Jewishness, they also illustrate the richly imaginative ways by which Jews responded to the inherent challenges of the secular age.

“Is Judaism a religion? Is Jewishness a matter of culture? Are the Jews a nation?”—These are all distinctly modern questions that only arose with the Enlightenment and the subsequent emancipation of European Jewry (Batnitzky 1). The dissolution of the ghetto led to a decline in the age-old communal structures and religious laws that had previously distinguished
the Jews as a people and guaranteed their collective survival. By the early twentieth-century, the long-standing strategies that had guaranteed Jewish continuity had become mostly obsolete, and irrelevant to a predominantly secular population of German-speaking Jews. Hannah Arendt describes the consequences of the emancipation as involving a categorical shift from “Judaism” to “Jewishness.” Jews, she argues, went from being members of a religious and national group to bearers of specific spiritual and psychological character traits. While being a Jew in the premodern age meant belonging to a specific religious group and sharing certain beliefs and customs, after the emancipation Jewishness became a matter of origins, consisting in the idea that the Jew possessed innate qualities distinguishing him from the non-Jew. If assimilation had liquidated the Jews’ collective consciousness, it nevertheless engendered new categories of Jewish difference—transforming the “essence of Judaism” into the “essence of Jewishness” (Origins 74).

Arendt’s version of Jewish secularization is compelling for its formulaic simplicity—a narrative of how a collective identity rooted in shared religious belief was transformed into a biologically determined one. The problem with her account, however, is that it ignores the many creative attempts, undertaken by German Jews in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to redefine Jewish identity beyond the binary of belief and blood. Arendt claims that after the emancipation, “secular learning became identified exclusively with non-Jewish culture, so that it never occurred to these Jews that they could have started a process of secularization with regard to their own heritage” (Jewish Writings 299). This claim has been wholly refuted by contemporary scholars, whose work has shown that post-emancipatory Jewry rejected the idea that their immersion in European culture conflicted with their loyalties to Judaism. As Paul Mendes-Flohr notes,
Assimilation—“acculturation” is undoubtedly a better term—was a highly differentiated process in which Jewish identity, knowledge, and commitment were maintained in varying degrees. Acculturation thus cannot be facilely equated with an abandonment of Judaism. But by virtue of the adoption of Kultur and Bildung—grounded in the cultivation of universal values sponsored by enlightened, liberal German discourse—German Jews were no longer simply or unambiguously Jewish. Their identity and cultural loyalties were fractured, and they were consequently obliged to confront the challenge of living with plural identities and cultural affiliations. (Germans and Jews 3)

The challenge of living with “fractured,” “plural identities and cultural affiliations” led to the creation of new and distinct forms of German-Jewish culture, that while claiming to be authentic recuperations of tradition, were in fact the product of highly modern and secular European sensibilities. In his study of Jewish culture in Weimar Germany, Michael Brenner observes that religion no longer sufficed as the exclusive foundation for Jewish self-understanding. For those who rejected orthodoxy but also repudiated assimilation the fundamental question was “How to create a new form of Judaism, and what content to give it?” (4).

This generational dilemma found one of its canonical expressions in Kafka’s letter to his father, in which Kafka accused his father of passing down an “insignificant scrap of Judaism” that “dribbled away” in the act of transmission.
You really had brought some traces of Judaism with you from the ghetto-like village community… but it was too little to be handed on to the child; it all dribbled away while you were passing it on. It was also impossible to make a child… understand that the few flimsy gestures you preformed in the name of Judaism, and with an indifference in keeping with their flimsiness, could have any higher meaning.

Witnessing his father’s inconsistent and perfunctory observance of Jewish rituals, Kafka accuses him of preserving a hollow tradition devoid of meaning. In his rebellious conclusion, Kafka sanctimoniously suggests that getting rid of this superficial tradition as quickly as possible would be the most devout solution. If Kafka assumes a highly critical attitude towards Judaism in the letter, it is mostly directed at his father’s superficial form of practice rather than Judaism as a whole. Kafka did not dissociate himself from Judaism as such, but merely repudiated what he considered to be the inauthentic Judaism of his father’s generation. Far from disavowing his Judaism, Kafka actively sought to recover it, as his long-standing interest in Zionism and Yiddish theater demonstrate.¹

From 1911 and to the end of his life, Kafka’s maintained an ardent yet conflicted relationship to all things Jewish. While his conflicted attitude assumed the highly personal and idiosyncratic character we are familiar with from his diaries and letters, the desire they attest to—the wish to reestablish his connection to an ancestral heritage—was nevertheless highly characteristic of the time. Like Kafka, many of his readers were disillusioned with their parents’ secular liberalism and their unflagging belief in the ideology of assimilation. Kafka’s own enthusiastic discovery of Yiddish theater and Eastern Jewish folklore in the early 1910s parallels

the trajectory of other well-known German Jews born at the turn of the twentieth-century—such as Franz Rosenzweig, Gershom Scholem, and Max Brod who “rediscovered” their Judaism during the same period. Revolting against their parents’ desire to assimilate into mainstream German society, many of Kafka’s generation eagerly sought to reclaim their identity as Jews and revive Jewish culture.

Disillusioned with the promise of full social integration, this generation of post-assimilatory Jews sought to reassert the Jewish identity their parents and grandparents had abandoned in their enthusiastic embrace of all things German. If Jews since the time of Mendelssohn devoted themselves to fully assimilating into German culture, the beginning of the twentieth-century signaled a reversal in this trajectory, with the coming of age of a new generation of German Jews, who rejected the liberal assimilationist ideals of their elders. The growing interest in Kafka’s fiction coincided with the growing popularity of Cultural Zionism in Germany and Central Europe of the 1920s and 1930s. Only a minority of German-speaking Jews subscribed to the Zionist movement’s ideological program. However, its prominence in the public sphere seemed to be inversely proportional to its actual numbers. The increasing prominence of Zionist rhetoric strongly influenced the intellectual climate surrounding Kafka’s reception and played a central role in the interwar interpretations of his writings.

The Zionist awakening is often associated with the “Jewish Renaissance,” declared by Martin Buber, but this Jewish “rebirth” assumed many cultural forms, some of which were ideologically opposed to the rise of Jewish nationalism. Common to these disparate projects of Jewish renewal was the fact that their relationship Jewishness, to quote Michael Brenner,
was characterized neither by a radical break with the past nor by a return to it. Indeed, it used distinct forms of Jewish traditions, marking them as authentic, and presented them according to the demands of contemporary taste and modern cultural forms of expression. What might have appeared as authenticity was in fact a modern innovation. (5)

Each of the figures I discuss in the following chapters—Brod, Susman, Schoeps, and Scholem—represents his or her own unique understanding of modern Jewish culture and finds his or her own way to reinterpret Judaism in light of the contemporary moment. As children to assimilated Jewish families, none of the abovementioned thinkers had a traditional Jewish upbringing. Raised and educated in the German-speaking world, their intellectual formation bears the distinctive mark of high European culture. Their faith in liberal-democracy and scientific rationalism shaken by the catastrophic events of the First World War, they were all similarly disillusioned with the failed promise of assimilation. With political anti-Semitism and extreme nationalism on the rise, these intellectuals abandoned the cultural and ideological world of their parents, which they denounced as a form of assimilatory defeatism and liberal complicity. The predicament of this generation, according to Michael Brenner, was that it “could neither restore the Jewish traditions of the past … nor reverse the profound socioeconomic and intellectual transformation that the previous generations had experienced” (4). Disavowing orthodox observance on the one hand, and rejecting complete assimilation into German society on the other, they set out to redefine their Judaism, adapting it to their new historical circumstances, in what Shulamit Volkov has called German Jewry’s “invention of tradition.” Volkov hails German Jewry’s effort to reshape and modernize its religious heritage as its “most
comprehensive, and arguably most important ‘project of modernity’” (278). The process of cultural renewal described by Brenner and Volkov is similarly reflected in the interwar reception of Kafka’s literature, which I approach as a distinct arena for the negotiation of modern Jewish identity and culture.

The figures, whose work I discuss in the following chapters, belong to a class of thinkers whom Hebrew University professor Moshe Idel has recently described as “a new form of Jewish elite” (7). Idel refers to the emergence of a new class of twentieth-century secular intellectuals whose understanding of Judaism was shaped by their immersion in Central European culture and that bore little resemblance to the beliefs and views of their rabbinic predecessors. The questions that preoccupied this “speculative Jewish elite,” he argues, were mostly foreign to their contemporaries. As Idel explains,

Scholarly descriptions of Judaism from mandarin points of view bear no resemblance to the Judaism replete with anthropomorphism, superstitions, religious devotion, and popular magic practiced by those humble people, who may well have been typical of the majority of the Jewish population in that period, and not only in Eastern Europe. They would have found it difficult or impossible to relate their own beliefs and practices to the abstractions, universal missions, negativities, and religious paradoxes elaborated by a miniscule Central European Jewish intelligentsia. The latter recreated Judaism in their own image, just as the shtetl Jews did, though in the latter case less self-consciously. (10)
Although Idel claims that neither vision of Judaism is more authentic, the overall conceit of his study tells another story. Throughout his book, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors*, Idel repeatedly argues that the “mandarin point of view” on Judaism was shaped by foreign cultural influences. Even if they are not mentioned by name, figures such as Schoeps and Sussman serve as prime examples for what Idel derides as “the interwar Jewish cosmopolitan crepuscularity” (66). He accuses such “Jewish desolates” (66) of placing undue emphasis on themes of negativity, absence, and lost transcendence in their portrayal of Judaism.

Idel’s critique forms part of a longstanding tradition in Jewish Studies that seeks to demarcate the boundaries between “Jewish” and “non-Jewish” phenomena. It is this kind of logic that leads Idel to question the Jewishness of Scholem’s Kafka-like image of the Kabbalah. The oppositional model Idel employs is based on an implicit dichotomy between those features, which he considers to be authentically Jewish (such as Eastern European folklore and rabbinic culture) and those that are supposedly extrinsic to Judaism. It precisely this line of thought that intellectual historian Amos Funkenstein criticized in his 1995 essay, “The Dialectics of Assimilation.” Funkenstein attributes the “Jewish obsession with originality” to a deep-seated prejudice against assimilation, a bias that still pervades the study of Jewish history. The binary distinction between Judaism’s fixed “essence” and its transitory outward “appearance,” he argues, is itself a product of foreign cultural influence. And more problematically, it is a model that fails to grasp the different ways Jews came to articulate their particularity in the modern era—a task they often accomplished precisely by turning to European modes of thinking such as Romanticism and Idealism. Arguing against the distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic sources of contemporary Jewish culture, he suggests that scholars should “look for originality in
the end product, not in the origins of its ingredients. The end product, no matter which sources fed into it, is original in some respects if it is unlike anything in its environment” (10).

Most contemporary scholars in the field of German-Jewish Studies have internalized Funkenstein’s lesson regarding “the dialectics of assimilation and self-assertion” and regard the effort to demarcate the boundaries that set apart “Jewish” and “un-Jewish” cultural phenomena to be categorically untenable. In a recent article, Lisa Silverman emphasized the need for a “critical theory of Jewish difference” that would treat Jewishness as an analytic category, rather than a predetermined fact. Doing so would allow for a more complex understanding of the diverse cultural functions the constructed category of Jewishness played in the modern German context. The “boundaries between the constructed ideals of ‘Jew’ and ‘non-Jew,’” she contends, served as an invisible framework for the identification and self-definition of Jews and Germans alike (29). It is only by focusing on specific cultural articulations of difference invoked in the process of self-identification that these invisible boundaries come to light.

These observations provide the critical starting point for this study, which is meant to draw out the intricate relationship between literary, theological, and political discourses that come into play in the Jewish reception of Kafka. These attempts to articulate Jewish “uniqueness” do not draw on uniquely Jewish sources, as Idel protests, but it is precisely their rootedness in the philosophical discourses of modernity that allows them to reconceive the grounds for Jewish difference in a manner that is intellectually and existentially meaningful for the people who wrote and read these commentaries. Kafka’s Jewish commentators might easily be accused of employing a “jargon of authenticity.” They write in a language that might be suspected of essentialism by a contemporary reader. Yet as Willi Goetschel observes, formulations of Jewish identity are determined first and foremost by the discursive paradigms
available in a given historical context (149). The varieties of German-Jewish identity reflected in these literary-philosophical reflections on Kafka must therefore be understood as part of the cultural milieu in which they were produced.

4. Kafka’s Literary Reception as Ideological Battleground

According to Sander Gilman, Kafka’s “texts self-consciously generate a sense of their own ‘transhistorical’ nature” (2). In contrast Kafka’s stories, which produce an aura of timelessness, the Jewish responses to his writing reflect the historically specific concerns of his readers. The critic Heinz Politzer has likened Kafka’s stories to Rorschach tests, the formless inkblots onto which a patient will project his or her own mental imagery (Parable 21). Politzer’s analogy suggests that Kafka critics tend to discover precisely those things, which they set out to discover in his texts in the first place. It stands to reason that this phenomenon holds true for the “Jewish” readings of Kafka as well. In the spirit of Politzer’s observation, then, one might argue that the primary insight gained from Kafka’s Jewish interpreters is a better understanding of the cultural sensibilities that inform their readings. I refer to Politzer’s oft-quoted observation not because I seek to discredit Kafka’s Jewish critics, but because his refutation of the critical pretense to objectivity enables us to better grasp what Stephen Dowden describes as the “historical contingencies, critical predispositions, ideologically… motivated prejudices, and theoretical assumptions” that have shaped the reception of Kafka’s work (2).

Incidentally, Politzer’s own Kafka criticism helps illustrate his Rorschach argument. In the 1930s when the young Politzer co-edited Kafka’s Nachlaß with Max Brod, he described Kafka’s spiritual homeland as the “realm of the Jewish soul in its totality” [das Reich jüdischer Seele schlechthin], its “Asiatic” provenance hearkening back to the “stormlands of Sinai” and the “Jobian killing fields” of the Hebrew Bible (337). Yet when Politzer published his influential monograph Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox three decades later, the Jewish dimension that had previously played such a decisive role in his prewar interpretations had all but disappeared. In his revised postwar reading of the author, Politzer’s Kafka was transformed from a Jewish writer into a universal emblem of the alienated modern self.

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theorist Hans Robert Jauss note, a literary work is neither “an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period,” nor “a monument which reveals its timeless essence in a monologue.” A literary work, he explains, should be understood as facilitating an ongoing dialogue which “strikes ever new chords among its readers.” To understand the interpretative horizons that belong to a text’s historical reception one must first account for the question its interpreter seeks to answer (10-13).

Many of Kafka’s Jewish interpreters believed that his writing was an embodiment of the “Jewish spirit” [jüdischer Geist] or the “Jewish essence” [jüdisches Wesen]. These terms, however, meant something very different to each one of his readers. The various claims made upon the Jewishness of Kafka’s prose reflect the diverse ideological positions assumed by his readers, whose interpretations evoke the cultural and political dilemmas that preoccupied German Jewry in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. Alluded to in the Kafka criticism of the period are questions concerning Zionism and Jewish nationalism, theology, the social and religious significance of the Diaspora, the controversial notion of a “German-Jewish symbiosis,” the contemporary meaning of tradition and the enduring significance of rabbinic law. These readings also run a broad gamut of ideological affiliations, ranging from avid Zionism to full disavowal of Jewish nationalism. Despite the similarity in background and historical situation, these figures held radically opposed ideological positions and responded differently to what they considered to be the challenges of modernity.

In the analyses that follow, I show how the ideological differences among these readers of Kafka are mirrored in their conflicting interpretations. Combined, their readings constitute a representative matrix of the ways German-Jewish intellectuals thought about the dual problem of Judaism and modernity. Some of the positions I chart out emerge from a direct dialogue that took
place amongst these figures (Scholem-Benjamin, Scholem-Schoeps, Brod-Schoeps, Scholem-Susman). Other ideological differences come to view through my own attempts to bring these thinkers into conversation with one another.

Each of the chapters in this study explores a different site of interpretation and its corresponding conception of Jewishness. The following four case studies demonstrate the divergent approaches by which Kafka’s critics affirm their own distinct vision of Jewishness, which is alternatively conceived as an existential condition, national identity, ethnic trait, textual quality, ethical vocation, and dogmatic creed. The different interpretative approaches each represents a unique response to the contested question of what it is that defines Jewishness and Jewish identity in the modern era. Under the assumption that Kafka’s critics cannot be dissociated from the cultural and political environment in which they lived and wrote, each chapter foregrounds the dialectical relationship between critical text and historical context that produced these competing interpretations.

Chapter 2, “Narrating the Nation: Kafka Criticism in the Mirror of Cultural Zionism,” focuses on the work of Kafka’s Prague-based commentators—mainly, Max Brod, Felix Weltsch, Heinz Politzer, and Oskar Baum. It situates Kafka’s reception in the context of an ongoing debate about Jewish national creativity and the possibility of creating Jewish literature in a non-Jewish language. In his essay “Jüdische Kunst,” Felix Weltsch conceded that “To speak of a distinctly Jewish form of art [spezifisch jüdischen Kunst], or to try and describe what determines it as specifically Jewish is certainly no easy task” (Zionismus als Weltanschauung 92). I argue that it is precisely this challenge that is taken up by Kafka’s Prague critics, who assume the task uncovering what Weltsch called his “intrinsic connection to Judaism.” As committed members of Bar Kochba, the Prague-Zionist movement, Brod and Weltsch were deeply preoccupied with
questions of Jewish national identity and its aesthetic expression. Their contributions to early twentieth-century Zionist theory form the theoretical backdrop to their literary criticism and constitute a crucial—yet often unmentioned—reference-point in their commentaries on Kafka. Through Kafka, Brod, Weltsch and their contemporaries try to establish the fundamental categories that distinguish Jewish literature from its German counterpart. Paradoxically, their effort to articulate the linguistic, cultural and aesthetic dimensions of “Jewish literature” draw on the völkisch rhetoric of German romanticism, which hearkens back to the Herder.

Chapter 3, “Nihilism, Modernity and the ‘Jewish Spirit’: Margarete Susman on Kafka’s Affinities to the Book of Job,” argues that Margarete Susman’s reading of Kafka constitutes a critique of the völkisch rhetoric employed by his cultural Zionist readers, whose work is discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas Kafka’s Prague contemporaries designate his writing as exclusively “Jewish,” Susman rejects the idea that a unified conception of Jewish culture could be derived from his writing. In contrast to Zionist literary critics, such as Brod and Weltsch who sought to articulate the national and aesthetic contours of Jewish particularity in their interpretation, Susman believed that Kafka’s “unparalleled artistic achievement” consisted in having found “the form of nothing itself” [die Form des Nichts selbst]—a reflection of the “nothingness” Judaism had been reduced to in the modern era. Her reading arguably forms a polemical response to cultural Zionism, which sought to circumscribe the spiritual and national boundaries of the “Jewish spirit.” Susman’s refusal to isolate Kafka’s Jewishness contains the kernel for her subsequent reflections on German Jewry’s spiritual legacy, which she believed was a consequence of the Jews’ transnational and transcultural existence as a diasporic people.

Chapter 4, “Denationalizing Jewish Identity: Hans-Joachim Schoeps’s Confessional Kafka,” revisits the oeuvre of one of Kafka’s most prolific and historically controversial critics.
Schoeps coedited Kafka’s Nachlaß alongside Brod for a short while before a disagreement over Zionism soured the relationship. Like Brod, Schoeps emphasized Kafka’s Jewishness, claiming that his writings were “suffused with the central themes of Jewish religiosity,” and governed by an “acute religious predicament” (Im Streit 200). Yet in contrast to Brod’s line of interpretation, which celebrated Kafka as a poet of Jewish religious and national renewal, Schoeps’s commentary was marked by a profound cultural pessimism. Fervently opposed to what he saw as the Zionist appropriation of Kafka by Brod and other Prague-based commentators, Schoeps believed that the religious dimension of Kafka’s prose was exclusively negative in scope, conveying the “tragic position” of the modern day Jew, as the title of his unpublished manuscript, Der vergessene Gott: Franz Kafka und die tragische Position des modernen Juden, made clear. Despite asserting the unambiguously Jewish character of Kafka’s writings, Schoeps paradoxically relied on Protestant theological categories in order to make his case, describing Kafka as a “Barthian without an intermediary” [Barthianismus ohne Mittler]. This chapter explores the Judeo-Christian syncretism that constitutes Schoeps’s reading of Kafka as part of his greater effort to denationalize Jewishness and present it as a profession of faith. Schoeps’s confessionalization of Judaism, apparent in his religious writings and Kafka commentaries, reflect the desire to reconcile his own idiosyncratic sense of Jewishness with his staunch German nationalism that later came to haunt him after the war.

Chapter 5, “‘The Theological Secret of Perfect Prose’: Gershom Scholem and the Dialectics of Jewish Secularization,” looks at Gershom Scholem’s reading of Kafka as part of his ambitious attempt to formulate a philosophy of Jewish history that would account for the modern-secular break with tradition as a rupture occurring within that tradition. Scholem famously described Kafka’s writing as modern-secular expression of a “Kabbalistic world-
feeling,” which walked the “fine line between religion and nihilism.” According to Scholem, it was his ability to give the “most perfect and unsurpassed expression of this fine line,” which seemed “to wrap Kafka’s writings in the halo of the canonical.” What Scholem designated as Kafka’s “canonicity” corresponds to his own understanding of Judaism and its endless capacity to transform through the act of interpretation. I show how Scholem’s understanding of Kafka mirrors his own revisionary reading of Judaism and Jewish history, which recasts secularization as a dialectic process that unfolds within the legitimate bounds of tradition.

Overall, the objective of this project is to examine the diverging literary approaches to Kafka in relation to the broader cultural assumptions held by his critics. What do Kafka’s readers assume is Jewish about his writing—is it the form, the content, or some underlying philosophy they see in it? Since the critical “Kafka industry” was already quite prolific in the thirties, I had to limit myself to a select sample of critics. The point was not to cover everything that was written by Jewish critics during the interwar period, but rather delineate the representative strains in his reception. My goal is to determine what Kafka’s critics understood as “Jewish,” and how these a priori assumptions dictated their subsequent interpretations. To mention the key suppositions I examine in the critical reception of Kafka’s work: (1) assumptions about Kafka’s relationship to Judaism; (2) assumptions about the coded Jewish meaning of his texts; (3) assumptions about the relationship between Kafka’s texts and the experience of German-Jewish modernity, and the manner in which it represents the metaphysical and existential reality of the modern Jew; (4) assumptions about the inherent Jewishness of Kafka’s literary technique and the inspiration it drew from traditional Jewish sources.

These categories deal with the respective worldviews that Kafka’s critics express in the act of interpretation. When read alongside each other these commentaries show us how certain
modes of literary interpretation correspond, support, and construct varying visions of collective Jewish identity in the early twentieth-century. This episode in the early history of Kafka’s reception contributes to our understanding of secularization as a process by which religion is translated into the register of culture and the ways it is reimagined in the context of literary production and interpretation. As Benedict Anderson reminds us, “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6).
Narrating the Nation: Kafka Criticism in the Mirror of Cultural Zionism

1. An Aesthetic “Judenfrage”

“I am troubled by a burning question,” wrote Hugo Bergmann (1883-1975), in his contribution to *Das jüdische Prag* (1917), an essay anthology whose appearance marked the tenth anniversary of the Prague Zionist weekly *Selbstwehr*.

I ask myself whether we in the West are also already on the path to achieving a Jewish literature [*Sind wir... schon auf dem Wege zu einer jüdischen Literatur auch im Westen?*]. Are our writers the same as Mendele, Schalom Aleichem, Peretz and the other Eastern-Jewish authors? … I ask you dear friend, whether you could believe that our young Western-Jewish writers could be for us, what those authors are for their Eastern-Jewish public. (38)

Bergmann’s piece, entitled “Brief an einen Dichter,” raised a series of questions concerning the “national significance of the Western-Jewish poet” [*die nationale Bedeutung der westjüdischen Dichter*] (38). German Jewry, he believed, constituted its own national community [*Volksgemeinschaft*], one that required its own literature, that consoled, educated, and uplifted the spirit of the people in their time of need. The question was whether the Jewish poet was still capable of reestablishing this “innermost connection to the fate of the people.” As Bergmann saw it, the problem was that the assimilated Jewish poet addressed himself to the broadest circle of humanity, but in so doing had sacrificed his ties to Judaism. If the Jewish writer truly wanted to create a work of “world literature,” a poetic masterpiece that transcended its own time and place,
he would need to draw his inspiration from his own national tradition. The path to universalism lay in a return to Jewish particularism.

Bergmann’s piece exhibits a number of themes that recur in the prewar writings produced by members of Bar Kochba, the Prague Zionist movement, which he helped establish. Their pursuit of a Jewish-national aesthetic was premised on the following assumptions: (1) At its best, the poet’s work expresses the inner spirit of his people. True art is a product of the national spirit [Volksgeist]; (2) The Jews constitute a collective national entity—a fact that needs to be reflected in their cultural production; (3) Because the contemporary Jewish writer is isolated from his people, he is incapable of fulfilling his national calling; (4) It is only by tapping into his national past that the Jewish poet can reach the ranks of “world literature.” Transnational literary significance can only be achieved by fostering one’s national consciousness. A fifth motif, absent from Bergmann’s piece but key to this discourse, nevertheless, is the problem of “Jewish creativity.” As Felix Weltsch argued in *Judenfrage und Zionismus* (1920), the “Jewish question” transcended the threat of anti-Semitism. It represented a collective moral and spiritual dilemma, mainly, “How can one turn the Jewish people into a creative people?” [Wie kann man das jüdische Volk schöpferisch machen?] (3).

Bergmann and Weltsch, while addressing specifically Jewish concerns, couch their ideas in the language of German Romanticism. The notion that Jewish culture needed to reflect the spirit of the nation hearkens back to Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), who argued that the German *Volk* possessed its own distinct identity, just as each individual had his or her own unique personality. Herder’s appeal to young Zionists such as Bergmann and Weltsch lay in the fact that his conception of the nation was rooted in the idea of cultural unity rather than territorial
If the Jews did not have their own state to rally around, the second best alternative seemed to be a Jewish republic of letters.

As part of the Zionist dialogue on Jewish national identity, Kafka’s writings served as particularly fertile grounds for Prague thinkers such as Max Brod and Felix Weltsch to develop their respective conceptions of “Jewish literature.” The story of Kafka’s literary reception in prewar Prague is thus inextricably intertwined with the history of its small but vibrant Zionist movement. The critical response to Kafka’s writing in Prague provides a fascinating view of the diverse perceptions of modern Jewish culture, and the different ways they were articulated through literary interpretation. While the thrust to relate Kafka’s writing to the Jewish national cause already began during his lifetime, this tendency gained momentum after his death, when Kafka’s friends and acquaintances transformed him into the archetype of Jewish national creativity.

In a commemorative article published in Der Jude, Oskar Baum claimed that Kafka “yearned for the land that would bring about our national rejuvenation” and praised his devoted study of Hebrew, which he persisted at even through the harshest periods of his illness (44). In a 1926 essay entitled “Freedom and Guilt in Franz Kafka’s Novel The Trial,” Felix Weltsch sought to elaborate the “primeval-Jewish problem” [urjüdische Problem] that pervaded Kafka’s literature. He began by declaring:

Kafka was one of ours. He was a Praguer, he was a Jew, and he was a Zionist. His Zionism did not take on an explicit external form, but was expressed in his avid study of Hebrew and his firm intention to resettle in Palestine. Such was the case

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3 See “The Influence of the Volkish Idea on German Jewry” in George Mosse’s Germans and Jews.
with all his convictions, which lay beyond the scope of external form and action. The essence of his work touches upon the deepest element of the Jewish Weltanschauung… (“Freiheit” 122)

Baum and Weltsch both draw on Kafka’s biography in order to construct an image of a convinced Zionist, who was fully committed to the ideal of “national rejuvenation” [Volksverjüngung], as Baum called it (44). Weltsch, however, recognizes a certain difficulty in characterizing Kafka’s literature as Jewish, noting that the author’s identification with the Jewish national cause never manifested itself in any “explicit external form.” He concedes that Kafka never mentions Jews nor explicitly alludes to Jewish themes, but nevertheless claims that Judaism makes up a fundamental dimension of his work.

In an obituary for Kafka, published in Selbstwehr two years earlier, Weltsch noted that the author was best recognized for his command of the German language, but argued that “the soul that produced this language was Jewish through and through.” Kafka’s future readers, he declared, “have yet to uncover the intrinsic connection to Judaism that inspired the work of this great Western-Jewish poet of the German tongue” (27). 4 The task of “uncovering” Kafka’s

4 Felix Weltsch, who fled Prague and immigrated to Palestine on the eve of the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia, revisited this challenge in his 1956 article “The Rise and Fall of the Jewish-German Symbiosis: The Case of Franz Kafka,” which appeared in the inaugural volume of the Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook. In choosing Kafka, Weltsch explained that he did not seek to evaluate the author’s importance as “the portrayer of our time” (266), but instead, aimed “to show how Jewish consciousness revived in a certain Jew, gradually, spontaneously, as though flowing from some underground source” (255). He concedes that Kafka’s linguistic home was German and that his writing was enriched by his encounter with German culture, yet argues that it was ultimately Kafka’s “ethnic and religious consciousness” (267) as a Jew that nurtured his artistic creativity. Weltsch draws a distinction between the German outer-shell and the Jewish inner-kernel of Kafka’s prose, in order to claim him as an unequivocally Jewish writer. He concludes that Kafka’s path inevitably led to Judaism and the recognition that only the Zionist movement showed “the direction leading to a healthy national life and a correct relationship to the past and to history” (274-275). Weltsch’s recovery of Kafka’s writing for a Jewish-national agenda illustrates the ways in which a critic’s political and ideological convictions shape his literary analysis. For Weltsch, Kafka is a figure who demonstrates “the grandeur and the collapse of the German-Jewish symbiosis” (275). The “German-Jewish symbiosis,” Weltsch claims, was doomed to failure not only because the Germans feared and rejected mass-assimilation, but because it endangered the Jews’ collective existence as a people. He discounts the German-Jewish “cultural symbiosis” as
intrinsic connection to Judaism is the driving force behind much of the criticism written by Felix Weltsch, Max Brod and other Zionist intellectuals writing in the first two decades following his death. At the same time Kafka’s literature also served his Jewish readers in Prague as a kind of proof text, which they explicated in an effort to articulate the linguistic, ethnic, and aesthetic categories that defined Jewish national identity.

The ambiguous nature of this national-aesthetic project may help explain why other reviewers from that time period reached such different conclusions. In contrast to the posthumous image of Kafka constructed by his friends in Prague, the critic Jakob Michalski categorically denied that there was anything inherently Jewish about Kafka’s art. In his review of *The Castle* published in *Der Israelet* (1935) he contended,

> The only thing incomprehensible to the author of this review is the excess of literary propaganda that dares to designate Kafka’s art as specifically ‘Jewish’ and continues to celebrate him as a Jewish prodigy! His writings are as un-Jewish as the novels of his friend and editor Max Brod …, which stand in the starkest opposition to Jewish sensibilities and Jewish artistic perception. One may celebrate Kafka as an artist, yet his accomplishments have nothing to do with Jews or Judaism, and we reject the notion that a Jewish essence *[jüdischen Wesens]* emanates from his work. (398)

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transitory phenomenon that ultimately amounted to collective “self-mutilation” (263). The cultural politics of the essay are unmistakable. Weltsch’s piece accurately reflects the prevalent attitude in the study of German-Jewish history and culture in the early postwar era. His account of Kafka is marked by a Zionist sensibility that rejects the viability of a “German-Jewish dialogue.” The terms he uses to portray Kafka’s Judaism are meant to convey the idea that “Jewish” and “German” represent mutually exclusive cultural entities.
Brod’s prominent place in Michalski’s tirade reflects the extent to which Brod, from early on and even before he had published his 1937 Kafka biography, was already associated with the effort to canonize Kafka as a Jewish writer. Amongst the Prague critics of his time, it was indeed Max Brod who went to the greatest lengths to construct Kafka’s Jewish legacy. Brod’s position is distilled in his 1916 claim, “Although the word ‘Jew’ never appears in his works, they belong to the most Jewish documents of our times” [Obwohl in seinen Werken niemals das Wort ‘Jude’ vorkommt, gehören sie zu den jüdischesten Dokumenten unserer Zeit] (“Literaten” 463-464). This statement, which recurs throughout Brod’s criticism in different variations, reflects a fundamental dimension in Brod’s commentaries, which try to characterize Kafka’s literature as Jewish and demonstrate the author’s strong affinities to Zionism.

Brod’s interpretative efforts to “convert” Kafka constitute the cornerstone for all subsequent readings that seek to account for the Jewish dimension in Kafka’s literature. Whether it was Scholem, Benjamin, or Arendt, Kafka’s Jewish readers frequently related to Brod’s interpretations in order to validate their own ideas or construct their own position by refuting his. It was the latter, which was most often the case. Most of the literary critics writing outside of Prague during the twenties and thirties were less concerned with trying to understand Brod on his own terms, and more inclined to use him as a straw man for the sake of advancing their own critical views on Kafka.

“It is hardly possible to overlook the marks of journalistic slovenliness,” quipped Walter Benjamin in his scathing critique of Max Brod’s 1937 biography of Franz Kafka (“Review” 317). He considered the work’s hagiographic approach distasteful, observing that its beatification of Kafka amounted to no more than “ostentatious pietism.” “There is little chance that Brod’s Kafka will find a place among the great definitive biographies of writers,” noted Benjamin
before making his closing repartee: “It is all the more striking as testimony to a friendship which probably is not the least of the riddles in Kafka’s life” (319). Benjamin’s negative assessment of Brod resonates with a similarly acerbic response written by Israeli literary critic Baruch Kurzweil, who faulted Brod for his “pseudo-religious readings of Kafka.” In seeking to turn the author “into a prophet of redemption and Zionism (Novel 340), Brod systematically ignored the uniqueness of Kafka’s literary style and the specificity of his language. Kurzweil credited Brod with paving the way for all subsequent critiques that substituted textual analysis for philosophical homilies, and turned Kafka’s works into “the experimental grounds for various neo-religious ontologies” (341). The Czech writer Milan Kundera was no less critical, claiming that Brod’s exceptional efforts on Kafka’s behalf did nothing to make up for the fact that “he knew nothing of the passion for form,” and “understood nothing at all about modern art” (41). Kundera sees Brod as the progenitor of “Kafkology,” a field that “systematically dislodges Kafka from the domain of aesthetics” in its tireless effort to decode the religious messages it claims to find in his work (43).

The overwhelmingly negative reaction to Brod’s lifework as Kafka-critic is, of course, not entirely undeserved. In his idiosyncratic interpretations, Brod, a Prague-born German-speaking Jew and ardent Zionist, depicted Kafka in a manner that seemed to conform all too neatly to his own ideological convictions.  

Despite the apparent flaws in Brod’s Kafka criticism, it would be wrong to disregard his commentaries as literary hackwork. His portrayal of Kafka as a prophet of religious renewal is reductive and doctrinaire at times, yet many of his

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5 While Brod’s portrayal of Kafka’s Judaism and Zionist convictions is not altogether apocryphal, it has more to do with his own ideological inclinations than with the inherent worldview found in Kafka’s literature. At the same time, there seems to have been a kernel of biographical truth to Brod’s claim. As Ritchie Robertson notes in *Kafka: Judaism, Politics, and Literature*, “At first Kafka held himself aloof from Zionism… He was dubious about its secular and humanitarian ideals, and deplored the break-up of older communities through commercialism and the subordination of human beings to technology. In its place he wanted to see a genuine community established on a religious basis. From about 1916 on he sympathized strongly with Zionism, because he thought it could help to bring such a community into being” (viii).
interpretations have also proved compelling enough to withstand the close scrutiny of later critics. Moreover, any account of Franz Kafka’s early literary reception remains essentially incomplete without accounting for the figure of Max Brod. In his various capacities as self-appointed literary agent, editor, publisher, and critic, Brod assumes a central role in the story of Kafka’s literary afterlife.

While Brod’s definition of Kafka’s “Zionism” and “Judaism” changed over time, his use of those labels remained consistent and appears in his commentaries from the 1910s to the 1960s. Brod’s criticism, while perhaps not exemplary for its attunement to Kafka’s stylistics is highly imaginative in its efforts to incorporate his writing as part of the modern Jewish literary canon. One of the primary goals of this chapter is to reconstruct the intricate relationship between Brod’s prewar Kafka criticism and turn-of-the-century Zionist theory, which informs the intellectual and ideological aims of his commentaries. Brod’s writings on Kafka represent a mere fraction of his extensive oeuvre, which has fared even worse than his literary criticism, and has mostly fallen into obscurity. A well-known novelist in his day and prolific intellectual in his own right, Brod published extensively on topics ranging from religious philosophy and social

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6 Mark Gelber provides a nuanced account of the “hall of mirrors effect” created by Brod, who interwove his biographical, fictional and critical portrayals of Franz Kafka. In his examination of the multiple strategies Brod employed in shaping the posthumous image of his friend, Gelber traces the close correspondence between the various transformations Kafka’s image underwent over the years and Brod’s own shifting ideological convictions. Gelber’s concluding remarks about Kafka’s central role in the construction of Brod’s self-image are worth quoting at length: “… If Brod constructed a fictional image of Kafka in Zauberreich der Liebe which he designated or projected as Zionist, this fictional construct served to validate and complement a Diaspora-oriented variety of Zionism, with which Brod closely identified from the time of his conversion to Zionism. It seems that this particular fictive image of Kafka was usable in the sense of corroborating Brod’s own sense of self within the framework of Zionism, especially insofar as he was determined to live his life indefinitely in the Diaspora as a Jewish nationalist… A decade later, however… he presented a slightly different image of Kafka… at this stage, the image of Kafka as a Zionist could not be fairly equated anymore with the Erich Garta of Zauberreich der Liebe. He had undertaken the herculean task to create the living reality of the Yishuv in Zion… In Brod’s later works, Kafka’s religious significance, for Brod and for humanity, becomes paramount in Brod’s constructed image of him. Kafka is thus presented foremost as a renewer of Jewish belief, even of belief in the old Jewish religiosity, which for Brod was also universal, perhaps in the sense of the transition from lack of belief to devotion… this image, which has its roots in earlier formulations, conforms to different priorities in Brod’s late construction of his own self-image” (Kafka, Zionism and Beyond 280-281).
theory to cultural criticism. Shortly after hearing Martin Buber’s “Three Addresses on Judaism,” delivered in Prague between 1909 and 1910, Brod himself began to promote the cause of Jewish national renewal, and went on to publish numerous books on the ethical, political and utopian dimensions of Zionism. His contributions to early twentieth-century Zionist theory form the theoretical backdrop to his Kafka criticism and constitute a crucial—yet often unmentioned—reference-point for his Kafka commentaries.

As Jürgen Born observes, Brod did not hail Kafka as a paragon of Jewish national literature from the start. In his 1913 review of *Betrachtung*, Brod praised the “immediacy” ([*Unmittelbarkeit*]) of Kafka’s “unique linguistic form” and noted its close relationship to the “Expressionist direction taken in contemporary art.” By 1916, after Brod had turned to Zionism, he no longer praised Kafka for his affinities to Expressionism, but stressed the extent to which his work diverged from the isolationist tendencies of Jewish Expressionist writers, whose art he accused of lacking a true feeling for community. The radical shift that occurred in Brod’s perception of Kafka between 1913 and 1916 attests primarily to Brod’s own evolving worldview rather than any transformation that might be imputed to Kafka over that time period. One of the critics who noted Brod’s ideological conversion during those years was Robert Weltsch, who described Brod’s turn from Expressionist aestheticism to Zionism as a crucial juncture in his life and work. According to Weltsch, Brod “moved from an almost exclusive and deliberate preoccupation with aesthetic aspects to complete identification with the Jewish people” (5).

Weltsch neatly divides Brod’s writings into two distinct spheres: his political and religious works on the one hand and his literary-aesthetic production on the other. Scott Spector has challenged the clear-cut distinction Weltsch makes between Brod’s aesthetic pre-Zionist and

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politically engaged Zionist phases. According to Spector, the transformation Weltsch attributes to Brod—from apolitical aestheticism to “complete” national identification—is based on a dichotomy that obscures the strong continuities that manifest themselves in Brod’s turn from Expressionism to Zionism (Territories 60). In Brod’s case, the question of modern aesthetics and Jewish nationalism were intricately intertwined. His vision of the complementary roles that the aesthetic and the national play in the self-assertion of collective Jewish identity is expressed in his 1913 essay, “Der jüdische Dichter deutscher Zunge” [The Jewish Poet of the German Tongue], where he explains:

The issue is not merely that of the Jewish problem. For me the whole Jew is a poetic problem [der ganze Jude ist mir dichterisches Problem]. It should not be denied that for action and politics, all intermediary and hermaphrodite-like [Zwittrige] constraints, must, without further ado, be sacrificed for the realization of the great ideal of a pure nation. (VJ 263)

It might appear that Brod is appropriating art for the purpose of advancing Jewish-national identity. Aesthetics are not the handmaiden of nationalism, because in Brod’s case nationalism is an inherently aesthetic project. A similar principle is at work in his Kafka criticism. In “Tragödie der Assimilation: Bemerkungen zu Franz Kafkas Roman Das Schloß” (1927), Brod argued that

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8 Spector problematizes Weltsch’s image of Brod on two accounts, showing that neither was Brod’s “aestheticist phase” disengaged from politics nor was his “Jewish-national phase” devoid of an aesthetic dimension. Brod’s early aestheticism did not constitute a discrete and self-enclosed realm utterly removed from his historical and social reality in fin-de-siècle Prague. His aesthetic “Indifferentism,” in fact, was an artistic stance that corresponded directly to the political and national situation he faced as a marginalized member of a minority group in the Hapsburg Empire. Turning to Brod’s Jewish-national phase, Spector insightfully suggests that it too might be understood as a continuation of Brod’s earlier Expressionist preoccupations, in which “Jewishness provides for Brod an avenue for the aestheticization of life” (61).
the “Jewish spirit” that shaped Kafka’s writing was “practically tangible.” Praising The Castle for its poetic treatment of the “Jewish fate,” Brod claimed that “In one simple story he says more about the general situation of contemporary Judaism than may gleaned from reading a hundred learned treatises” (178-179).

Four decades later, Brod’s vision of Kafka as moral-religious luminary remained steadfast. In his memoir, entitled The Prague Circle (1966), Brod launched a fervent defense of Kafka’s “true legacy”—yet another round in an ongoing battle hearkening back to the mid 1920s. Strongly opposed to the growing faction of critics who took Kafka for a post-Nietzschean nihilist and literary forebear of French Existentialism, Brod reaffirmed his longstanding conviction that Kafka “was not devoted to annihilation but to flourishing” (PK 84). He was not the pallbearer of religion nor was he a prophet of Europe’s cultural and moral dissolution. On the contrary—“Kafka’s teachings,” he maintained, “were the complete opposite of decadence, nihilism, or the Neo-Romanticism of decay” (PK 89). The phrase “Kafka’s Lehre” [Kafka’s teachings] epitomized the tenor of Brod’s interpretations, as the title of one his books, Kafkas Glauben und Lehre (1948), suggests.

As he had already proclaimed in his 1937 biography of the author, Kafka’s writings transcended the mere category of “literature.” According to Brod, Kafka’s life and literature provided a model for Jewish religious and national renewal. His work was not symptomatic of the ills of modernity, but an antidote to its menacing consequences. The memoir, published two years before Brod’s death, concluded five decades of Kafka criticism. It was Brod’s last chance to defend his image of Kafka, regarded by many as ideologically suspect. Putting the final touches to Kafka’s legacy, and by extension his own, Brod reaffirmed the formative role Judaism and Zionism played in Kafka’s life and their central significance to his work:
Kafka and Zionism—that is an inexhaustible topic of central importance to the understanding of his work, but which contemporary Kafka-scholarship often steers away from. Scholars often devote themselves to two or three of Kafka’s statements that express some kind of skepticism regarding Zionism and its goals. In response to these attempts I answer that there was no one amongst the consciously responsible Zionists, who at certain points in their lives did not experience doubts and weakness. (PK 98)

The inherent link Brod drew between the national and the aesthetic dimensions of Kafka’s work throughout his career are similarly apparent in much of the criticism written by his Prague contemporaries throughout the 20s and 30s.

As such the image of Kafka produced during the years prior to the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia closely corresponds with and draws on prewar cultural Zionist discourse. In their criticism, Kafka’s commentators respond to an ongoing Zionist debate concerning Jewish cultural creativity in the German-speaking world. The relationship between the two allegedly discrete cultural and national entities called “Deutschtum” and “Judentum” was a heated topic of debate amongst early twentieth-century Zionists in Central Europe. Was it possible to create Jewish art in a non-Jewish cultural sphere? Could Jewish literature exist in a non-Jewish language and if so what made it Jewish? In his comprehensive study of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century cultural Zionist efforts to define a theory and practice of Jewish-national art in the German speaking world, Mark Gelber observes that this endeavor was motivated by “a firm belief in the possibility of creating a Jewish-national culture in non-Jewish languages and
within non-Jewish cultural milieu” (*Melancholy* 12). Similar convictions are crystallized in the
Prague reception of Kafka, in which Brod plays a crucial role.

Many of the essays and articles that Brod and his Prague contemporaries wrote between
the 1910s and the 1930s were devoted to the task of articulating the ways “Jewish difference”
manifest itself in literature. This challenge also informed their subsequent understanding of
art [*spezifisch jüdischen Kunst*], or to try and describe what determines it as specifically Jewish is
certainly no easy task” (*Zionismus* 92). It is precisely the challenge of determining the character
of “Jewish art”—spearheaded by Max Brod—that was undertaken by Kafka’s readers in the
years following his death.

2. Buber and Beyond: Cultural Zionism in *fin de siècle* Prague

“And incidentally, won’t you tell me what I really am,” pleaded Kafka in a letter to his
fiancée Felice Bauer from the seventh of October 1916 (*LFB* 542). In the letter Kafka shared two
competing literary reviews of his work. The two contradictory reviews encapsulated the identity
impasse that preoccupied Kafka throughout his life and found its poetic expression in his writing.
Kafka described how Max Brod had hailed his writing as one of the “most-Jewish documents of
our times,” whereas the critic Robert Müller celebrated *The Metamorphosis* as “fundamentally
German” [*Urdeutsches*]. Kafka, who sensed that the two endorsements were mutually exclusive,
believed that this conflict emblematized his own ambivalent position as a Jewish author writing
in German.

For Kafka, who described himself as “nothing but literature” (*D* 230), questions
concerning literary lineage, individual identity and collective belonging all converged. In a letter
to Max Brod from 1921, Kafka wondered why so many Jews were irresistibly drawn to German literature. He speculated that it had something to do with their troubled relationship to Jewishness, suggesting that it reflected the “frightful inner predicament” of a generation that wanted to leave its Jewishness behind but never fully managed to extricate itself from it. “With their posterior legs they were still glued to their father’s Jewishness and with their waving anterior legs they found no new ground. Their despair became their inspiration” (LFF 288-289).

While Kafka believed that his generation’s conflicted sense of Jewishness was the driving force behind German-Jewish literary creativity, his friends proved far less eager to celebrate the ambiguities of Western-Jewish identity for its artistic merits. Many of his Prague contemporaries, who joined the ranks of Zionism, saw Western Jewry’s cultural duality as a sign of its inevitable decline. Western Judaism was sinking into spiritual decay and communal dissolution because it had succumbed to cultural influences foreign to its spiritual and national legacy. The belief that acculturation had perverted Jewish authenticity is reflected in Felix Weltsch’s essay “The Individual and Judaism” [Der Einzelne und das Judentum], which lamented the loss of the “ideal Jewish type”:

One of the most tragic aspects of our spiritual and cultural situation in Galut [exile] is that we have lost our ideal type [Idealtypus]—that ideal type that would correspond to our own spiritual character. We view ourselves through foreign eyes. We no longer recognize our own beauty. We no longer perceive it as beauty.

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9 The groundless condition Kafka attributes to Jewish-German writers is a recurring image in his letters and diaries, one that he often uses to characterize his own ambivalent relationship to Judaism. In response to Max Brod’s suggestion that he take over the editorship of Martin Buber’s Der Jude, Kafka writes, “As far as I am concerned, it is unfortunately only in joke or in semi-comatose moment that my name should come up in connection with the vacant editorship at Der Jude. How could I think of such a thing, with my boundless ignorance of affairs, my complete lack of connection with people, the absence of any firm Jewish ground under my feet? No, no” (LFF 349). In his reflections Kafka commonly associates the question of Jewish identity with the figures of territory and writing. See Spector, Prague Territories (190).
We are disgusted with ourselves because we have lost the capacity to assess our Jewishness according to its own measures. This is the lowest point of our assimilation, the assimilation of values [Wertassimilation]. (Zionismus 17)

Many of Kafka’s friends and contemporaries shared a similar sentiment. They too perceived their “Western Jewish age,” as Kafka called it, in utterly negative terms—an age in which European Jewry had lost its roots, its collective memory and ancestral tradition. Hugo Bergmann, Felix Weltsch, Oscar Baum, Leo Hermann and Max Brod believed that Zionism provided a solution to “The Decline of German Jewry.” They faced a challenge similar to the one, which Kafka, who called himself “the most Western-Jewish of them all,” described in his letter to Milena, “Nothing has been granted me, everything must be earned, not only the present and future, but the past as well” (217-218).

In an effort to earn back the Jewish past they had never received from their assimilated parents, Kafka’s contemporaries sought to revive Judaism as a national culture. Many of them played a central role in the Bar Kochba Zionist student union, a group highly influenced by the ideas of Ahad Ha’am (1865-1927) and Martin Buber (1878-1965)—the leading representatives of cultural Zionism at the time. The label “cultural Zionism” was meant to distinguish it from an earlier stage in its ideological evolution, known as “political Zionism.” The aims of political

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10 In a letter to Brod from January 1918 Kafka described Dr. Askonas, a character in one of his novels called Das große Wagnis, as “a representative of our Western Jewish age” [westjüdische Zeit]. Kafka praised Brod’s novel, calling it a “magnificently candid statement” which he had successfully captured the sociological reality of its Jewish readers. Kafka’s sensed that the novel reflected the spirit of the times—so much so, that he and Oskar Baum discussed it “as if it were a historical document that was being used to provide evidence for this or that” (LFF 189). Giuliano Baioni has noted that the term “westjüdische Zeit” is the only historical category Kafka ever consciously used in his letters and diaries. Baioni argues that it was an expression Kafka employed in order to characterize the lost historical consciousness of his generation of Prague Jews (1).

11 The quote refers to the title of a book written by Kafka’s Hebrew teacher, Felix Theilhaber, Der Untergang der deutschen Juden: eine volkswirtschaftliche Studie (1911).
Zionism corresponded to Theodor Herzl’s proposed solution to the persistence of European anti-Semitism, which called for the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state in Palestine. Cultural Zionism, an ideological current that grew in the wake of political Zionism, moved past the practical scope of Herzl’s program by redefining the aims of the nascent Jewish national movement to include the task of spiritual and cultural regeneration—or “the Jewish Renaissance” as Buber called it. Convinced that a territorial solution to the Jewish problem would not suffice, Ahad Ha’am and Martin Buber shifted Zionism’s ideological emphasis to the revival of the Jews’ “national consciousness.”

Martin Buber, who maintained a close relationship with the leading figures of Bar Kochba, played a particularly important role in the development of the Prague Zionist movement. He delivered his famed “Three Addresses on Judaism” [Drei Reden über das Judentum] in front of the Bar Kochba student union between the years 1909-1910, where he stressed the need to recover the Jewish people’s “inner unity.” The problem of modern Jewish existence, Buber argued in the first of his three lectures, “Der Sinn des Judentums,” was a result of the Jews’ physical and spiritual homelessness.

All the elements that might constitute a nation for him [the Western Jew], that might make this nation a reality for him, are missing; all of them: land, language, way of life. Neither the land he lives in, whose nature encompasses him and molds his senses, nor the language he speaks, which colors his thinking, nor the way of life in which he participates and which, in turn, shapes his actions, belongs

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12 See Spector (Prague Territories 135-159); Mendes-Flohr (Divided Passions 77-132); Capkova (Czechs, Germans, Jews 181-186).
to the community of his blood; they belong instead to another community. (OJ 16-17)

The true mission of Zionism, Buber proclaimed, consisted of revitalizing Jewish existence by reclaiming the Jews’ “national consciousness.” In order for the Jews to retrieve their lost national character, they needed to break away from their “inner Galut,” the spiritual shackles of exile, which had estranged them from their heritage.

In the Drei Reden Buber repeatedly referred to the Jews as constituting a “community of blood” [Gemeinschaft des Blutes]. In his effort to define the spiritual, cultural and psychological elements that made up the Jewish-national Gemeinschaft, Buber made frequent use of such terms as “blood” [Blut], “soil” [Boden], “nationhood” [Volkstum], and “rootedness” [Wurzelhaftigkeit]. Subsequently, Buber’s rhetoric appears to confirm Hannah Arendt’s account of the transformation that occurred in Jewish self-understanding over the nineteenth and early twentieth-century, which she described as the shift from “Judaism” to “Jewishness.” Once religion ceased to be the determining factor in the collective reality of Western Jewry, the Jews were “transformed into a social group whose members shared certain psychological attributes … the sum total of which was supposed to constitute ‘Jewishness’” (Origins 66). This “transformation of a national religion into a confessional denomination,” argued Arendt, “engendered a very real Jewish chauvinism,” creating a “perverted nationalism” that was based on a racialized version of “choseness,” now drained of its religious origins. “From now on, the old religious concept of chosenness was no longer the essence of Judaism; it became instead the essence of Jewishness” (Origins 74).
In her critique of the reinvention of Judaism as Jewishness, Arendt does not refer directly to Buber, even though his early Zionist writings epitomize the racialist rhetoric she denounces in the book. With Arendt’s critique in mind, it is important to note that while it would be difficult to discount Buber’s rhetoric as merely metaphorical, it was not intended to promote an ideology of Jewish racial superiority, but was meant rather to define the contours of Jewish difference at a time when secularization had undermined the religious framework that had previously facilitated Jewish communal solidarity and collective self-understanding. Buber’s effort to define the makeup of post-traditional Jewish identity by eclectically drawing on German neo-romantic and völkisch rhetoric is similarly apparent in the Kafka-criticism written by those who were deeply influenced by his Three Addresses.

Buber’s rhetoric of Jewish self-determination and spiritual renewal made a particularly strong impression on his attending audience in Prague. One might speculate that Buber’s appeal had something to do with the fact that his listeners had been sensitized to the issue of national self-determination after witnessing the ethnic and national strife raging throughout Bohemia at the time. In his memoir Streitbares Leben, Brod recalled how the political and social unrest in Prague at the turn of the century prompted his generation of assimilated, German-speaking middle class Jews to recover their own national heritage. Amidst the growing animosity between the German and Czech populations, Prague’s Jewish youth confronted its own challenge in the need to find a “conceptual definition for Judaism” [Begriffsbestimmung des Judentums] (SL 7). Brod, who credits Buber with his own conversion to Zionism, noted the strong impression Buber’s talks made on the young Jews of Prague who felt that his speeches directly addressed their own situation (SL 42-43).
As opposed to Weltsch, Brod and Bergmann, who enthusiastically subscribed to the Buberian credo, Kafka remained highly skeptical of Buber’s ideas. Kafka, who is assumed to have attended at least one of Buber’s “Three Addresses,” found his rhetoric highly suspect. In a letter to Felice Bauer, from January sixteenth 1913, Kafka notes: “The thing is that Buber is lecturing on the Jewish Myth; it would take more than Buber to get me out of my room, I have heard him before, I find him dreary; no matter what he says, something is missing” (LF 185). Kafka’s lukewarm reaction to Buber did not prevent Brod from claiming in his 1937 biography that “Kafka was not striving after a paradox,” but rather “stood more perhaps on the side of Martin Buber” (FK 198). In what might be described as Brod’s ventriloquism act, his biography presented Kafka advocating the Buberian tenets of cultural Zionism as if they were his own.

3. New Jews, Old Stereotypes

A telling document of Martin Buber’s enduring influence on the members of the Bar Kochba student union is an essay anthology entitled *Vom Judentum* (1913). Many of the volume’s essays resorted to a binary frequently used by Buber, which contrasted the vitality and authenticity of Eastern Jewish life to the deracinated and isolated existence of the Western Jew. Hans Kohn (1891-1973) introduced the anthology by proclaiming that a “new kind of Jew” had come into being [Es ist eine neue Art Jude entstanden]. The anthology was a joint effort to articulate the voice of generation set out to realize the ideal of the “new Jewish type,” who was committed to the “realization of renewed Jewish life.” In contrast to the “unbearable subservience” of Jewish assimilationists, this “new Jew” steadfastly strove towards the creation of a “Jewish national community” [jüdischen Volksgemeinschaft] (VJ vi).

Kohn’s positive image of the “new Jew” was inextricably bound to its negative
counterpart embodied in the figure he called the “Jewish philistine,” a parvenu who betrayed his community and abandoned his religious and cultural heritage for the sake of individual self-fulfillment. In his many guises, the “Jewish philistine,” was the “man who appears preoccupied with enterprising activities, but is indisputably indifferent to matters of the heart. A man whose horizon is oriented towards technical progress, and the life of self-satisfied comfort, preferably removed from all excitement and agitation.” Alternatively he was a “self-idolater” or “intelligent hedonist” (VJ vi-vii). In a manner that recalled Buber’s stigmatization of the acculturated Western Jew but also much of the anti-Semitic literature of the nineteenth-century, Kohn and the other contributors to Vom Judentum stereotyped the Western Jew as a hedonistic urbanite, cynical capitalist, and egotistical individualist. The assimilated Western Jew stood for all that was wrong with the contemporary existence of European Jewry, which Kohn decried as “barely a people any longer, but a scattered, lost flock, timid and cowardly, passive and lifeless, yielding to the everyday, awestruck by its contingent existence, perceiving its weakness as its own norm” (VJ vii).

The preoccupation with the Western-Jew’s “distorted” existence found its expression in the early Prague reception of Kafka’s literature, which his Jewish critics read in light of the “crisis of assimilation.” For Oskar Baum, Kafka’s literature mirrored the “fragmentariness” and “tragic duality” [tragische Zweiheit] of European Jewry. Baum argued that in his own life, Kafka was most concerned with overcoming the tragic state of European Jewry (44). Similarly, the critic Manfred Sturmann, in his essay “Franz Kafka’s Jewish Message,” argued that Kafka was not a “Jewish writer” because of his ancestry, but “primarily because of the spiritual form [geistigen Struktur] and tragic fixation [tragischen Besessenheit] that made up his world” (“Sendung” 194). For Sturmann, Kafka’s overriding concern was the Jewish fate: “Who doesn’t
sense the suffering of the solitary overcast fortune of the Jewish people, the yearning of two millennia for a natural form of life?” (195).

An elaborate treatment of this theme is found in Max Brod’s interpretation of “The Cares of a Family Man,” a story Kafka first published in the Prague Zionist weekly Selbstwehr (1919). The story featured a flat, spool-shaped creature called the “Odradek,” whose shabby appearance consisted of assorted bits of thread and little pieces of wood. The creature’s habits and natural environment remain a mystery to the narrator, who cannot even trace the linguistic origins of its name. In his interpretation, Brod claimed that the Odradek’s uncanny and distorted form represented the ghostly existence of Diaspora Jewry. The creature’s shapeless and pathetic existence reflected “the suffering of his [Kafka’s] own people’s misfortune—the homeless, spectral Judaism, a shapeless mass without form, without a body” (Krojanker 60).

Brod’s reading of “The Cares of a Family Man” turns Kafka’s story into a national allegory, corresponding to an argument made by Leon Pinsker in his noted essay, “Auto-Emancipation” (1882). In this proto-Zionist pamphlet, Pinsker called for a national-territorial solution to the “Jewish question.” Diagnosing European “Judeophobia” as a chronic condition, akin to the irrational fear of ghosts, Pinsker claimed that Europe’s “natural antagonism” to Jews could not be ameliorated so long as the Jews, who lived dispersed amongst the nations, lacked their own sovereign territory, a prerequisite for overcoming their anomalous existence. To their host environment, the Jews appeared as a “Ghostlike apparition of a living corpse, of a people without unity or organization, without land or other bonds of unity, no longer alive, and yet walking among the living” (184). Since the Jews comprised a distinctive and inassimilable element within Europe, they could only hope to become equal members in the family of nations if they too established their own independent nation-state. That Pinsker’s ideological position is
somehow immanent to Kafka’s story is highly questionable, but its centrality to so many of the Zion
ist interpretations of his work clearly points to the historical climate in which these readings were produced.

Brod generally read Kafka’s animal stories as allegories of the assimilated Western Jew’s inauthentic existence. An early example of this tendency is found in his 1918 review of Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy.” The story, which was originally published alongside “Jackals and Arabs” in Der Jude (1917), was a first person narrative told by an ape called Red Peter, who had been captured in Africa and taken back to Europe. Red Peter, who learns how to speak and imitate human mannerisms in captivity, recounts the metamorphosis he underwent in trying to overcome his “ape nature.” In his “report” Red Peter explains that his decision to adapt to his new human environment was motivated by purely practical reasons—a search for a “way out.”

Confined to a small uncomfortable cage on the long voyage back to Europe, Red Peter begins to ape his human travel companions in an effort to improve his condition in captivity. He drinks schnapps, smokes a pipe and eventually learns to talk. Through this process, he reports, “I managed to reach the cultural level of an average European. In itself that might be nothing to speak of, but it is something insofar as it has helped me out of my cage and opened a special way out for me, the way of humanity” (CS 258).

In his 1918 review of public reading Kafka gave of the story, Brod called it “the most brilliant satire on assimilation to have ever been written!” He understood it to be an allegory about the assimilated Jew, who pathetically tried to dissociate himself from his origins and imitate his gentile environment in the hopes of avoiding the stigma of the outsider. Red Peter’s half-ape, half-human existence reflected the “tragic duality” of the acculturated Western Jew.
Franz Kafka recounted only a story of an ape that was captured by von Hagenback, and is violently turned into a human. And what kind of human! The lowliest scum of mankind reward him for his efforts to ingratiate himself. Is this not the most brilliant satire on assimilation to have ever been written! One can read this story again in the recent volume of *Der Jude*. The assimilated Jew [*Der Assimilant*], who does not yearn for freedom or eternity, only a way out, a pathetic and pitiful escape! Because an unsolicited divine freedom lurks threateningly in the background of this animal-human comedy [*tiermenschlichen Komödie*] it successfully combines the grotesque and sublime. (“Literarischer Abend” 128)

Brod read the story in a manner that directly complemented his critique of Jewish assimilation, later to appear in his work *Paganism—Christianity—Judaism* (1921). In this extensive cultural-philosophical treatise, Brod lamented the fact that Western Jewry had lost its facility for self-understanding: “More and more we look at ourselves with alien and dull eyes, and we believe in what others have concocted about us… We have become stereotyped. Overly concerned with foreign evaluations, and too conscientious, we misvalue and undervalue ourselves” (34). The condition of Jewish self-estrangement that Brod describes in the passage corresponds to his reading of Red Peter’s tragic situation in the story. Having severed himself from his “origins,” the ape can no longer relate to his true past as a primate on the Ivory Coast. He is so utterly estranged from his former life that he can only recall it from the new human perspective he has adopted. Brod understood the narrative as a parable of the acculturated Jew’s deracinated existence, just like Red Peter understood himself through “alien and dull eyes.” Red
Peter, who confessed that he could not bear the sight of his female companion, a half-trained chimpanzee (CS 259), embodied the stereotypical self-hating “Assimilant,” who was ashamed of his communal and religious past. At the same time, the fact that Red Peter ultimately remained a foreigner in his new human environment represented the Zionist (and anti-Semitic) conviction that the acculturated Jew, despite his efforts to adapt would never succeed in fully integrating into gentile society.

Several years later, in his afterword to a collection of Kafka’s short stories entitled Vor dem Gesetz (1934), Brod’s co-editor at the time, Heinz Politzer, made a similar claim, arguing that the ape, severed from his natural world reflected the “grotesque visage of a people [Fratze eines Volkes] destroyed through assimilation [das der Anpassung verfallen], a people that has forgotten its ancestry, betraying the meaning and goal of its existence” (77). Kafka’s ape, he concluded, represented a “travesty of humanity” [Zerrbild der Menschheit] that revealed Western Europe’s civilizational decline. Read in light of Brod and Politzer’s interpretation, Kafka’s story resonates with the contemporary Zionist discourse that derided assimilation as a form “Jewish mimicry.” If we subscribe to Brod’s reading of the story, it would appear that Red Peter followed Walter Rathenau’s paternalistic and self-deprecating proposal for Jewish self-improvement.

In his essay, “Hear, O Israel!” (1897), Rathenau called upon his fellow Jews to self-consciously adapt to “the expectations of the gentiles,” insisting that such adaptation differed

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13 David Suchoff provides a compelling counter-reading to Politzer and Brod’s interpretation of “A Report to an Academy.” Suchoff’s principal objection to previous “Jewish” interpretations of Kafka’s is that they tend to confine his work to the same fixed categories of identity that Kafka was trying to break away from in the first place. Much like Red Peter, who learns to speak a foreign, human language in his search of a “way out,” Kafka too assimilates different cultural and linguistic traditions in his writing in order to break out of what he perceives as a monolithic and confining literary tradition. Suchoff claims that Kafka’s fictional ape is a satire on the idea of a uniform German linguistic identity. Red Peter and all of the other talking animals that inhabit Kafka’s literature provide the key to what Suchoff calls “the hidden openness of tradition”—a glimpse of the multilingual and transnational undercurrents that permeate a canonical tradition (Kafka’s Jewish Languages, 79).
Adaptation not as “mimicry” in the Darwinian sense—namely, the art of certain insects to take on the coloration of their environment—but a shedding of tribal attributes which, whether they be good or bad in themselves, are known to be odious to our countrymen, and a replacement of these attributes by more appropriate ones. If such a metamorphosis also brought about an improvement in the balance of our moral values, this would be all for the better. The final result of the process should not be Germans by imitation, but Jews of German character and education. (267)

Rathenu’s proposal responds to an ongoing debate about the Jews’ ability to integrate into the German Volk. This possibility was one that Richard Wagner unequivocally denied, arguing that the Jews, despite having lived amongst Germans for centuries, continued to speak their language as foreigners. For Wagner, the Jew’s inability to master the German language represented the deeper cultural and spiritual differences that separated him from the German people. “In this Speech, this Art, the Jew can only imitate and mimic—not truly make a poem of his words, an artwork of his doings” (84-85).

Wagner’s accusations later resurfaced in an essay written by Ahad Ha’am, entitled “Imitation and Assimilation” (1893), where the author argued that “The Jews have not merely a tendency to imitation, but a genius for it. Whatever they imitate, they imitate well” (117). Ahad Ha’am’s essay sought to redeem the anti-Semitic myth of Jewish mimicry by removing its negative connotations in order to claim that “Jewish mimicry” represented a crucial stage in the
process of Jewish national revival. Whereas the Jews’ assimilation of foreign values and ideas originally reflected their submission to external spiritual forces, Ahad Ha’am argued that these foreign influences could ultimately be employed in order to reveal the “essential spirit of Judaism.” By appropriating “the foreign spiritual force to which they have become subservient” for their own ends, European Jews, would come to reveal their own spirit and reinforce their “Hebrew self-consciousness” (117-118).

The myth of Jewish mimicry—regardless of whether it was employed by anti-Semites or Zionists—reflected an anti-liberal stance concerning the limits of Jewish assimilation. Zionists and völkisch anti-Semites alike seemed to agree, albeit for different reasons, that the Jews constituted a collective entity that was essentially incompatible with the German nation. While echoes of this debate are clearly present in Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy,” the ideological conclusions that Brod and Politzer attribute to the story are the result of their own ideological stance. Contemporary critics have confirmed the allegorical dimension Brod and Politzer found in “A Report,” claiming that as a regular reader of the Prague Zionist weekly Selbstwehr, Kafka consciously drew on Zionist discourse when crafting the story (Kilcher and Kremer 63-64). Similarly, Iris Bruce understands the story as a critique of the failed promise of the German Enlightenment. Like Brod, she considers the figure of Red Peter to be a “caricature of the Jewish assimilationist, the successful social climber who despises his origins and who is overly sensitive about drawing attention to his ‘true’ identity” (130).

At the same time, Kafka’s use of Zionist imagery does not necessarily attest to the fact that he subscribed to its ideological program, as Brod seems to suggest. Andreas Kilcher, Giuliano Baioni, Scott Spector, Sander Gilman, Ritchie Robertson and other scholars have demonstrated that Kafka was well aware of the contemporary debates on acculturation and
Zionism, but note that his position was markedly different from that of his Zionist friends. Many of his stories obliquely relate to Zionism and its political aims, but can hardly be read as propagating its cause. The aforementioned critics agree that Judaism played a crucial role in Kafka’s creative process yet reject the notion that there is an allegorical or biographical key that might unlock the ideological message behind his stories. These critics concede that Kafka’s writing was distinctively shaped by the historical and cultural environment of early twentieth-century Central Europe, they nevertheless maintain that his stories cannot readily be translated into any concrete cultural, political or religious worldview. As Scott Spector notes, the problem with reading Kafka’s stories as historical allegories is that in the process of assimilating “the ‘laws’ of essentialist racism, anti-Semitism, degeneration theory,” they radically transform these “laws” to the point where they no longer resemble the immutable realities they ostensibly stand for (“History” 45). Kafka himself took certain precautions in order to prevent his stories from being read as political manifestoes. In a letter Kafka wrote to Buber before the publication of “A Report to an Academy” and “Jackals and Arabs” in Der Jude, he insisted that the two texts were “not really parables” and that he preferred that they be titled “Two Animal Stories” (LFF 132). The latter title, it seemed, was less likely give the impression that his work bore a concrete ideological message or political agenda. Kafka’s request might be understood as an effort to deflect precisely the kind of politically programmatic readings later produced by Brod and other members of the Prague Zionist movement.

4. “The Tragedy of Assimilation”

After The Castle appeared in 1926, Brod proceeded to publish several commentaries that dealt with Kafka’s literary engagement with the “Jewish question.” In ways that recall his earlier
interpretation of “A Report to an Academy,” Brod argued that *The Castle* related to German-Jewry’s dashed hopes of integration and equality. In “The Tragedy of Assimilation: Notes on Franz Kafka’s *The Castle*” (1927), Brod claimed that K.’s false optimism “breathes the illusionary spirit of the psychology of assimilation” [*Die ganze Stelle atmet den illusionistischen Geist aller Assimilanten-Psychologie*] (“Tragödie” 180-181). K.’s foreignness reflected the situation of the assimilated Jew, who despite his efforts, failed to integrate into his non-Jewish environment. The village’s rejection of K. was an allegory for the failure of German-Jewish assimilation. It expressed Kafka’s pessimism in face of anti-Semitic prejudice. K., despite his honorable intentions fails to integrate and live among the villagers because he is considered to be an outsider. In a later commentary, Brod gestured towards a Zionist conclusion, explaining that, “Over all the painful situations this novel takes us through, over all the undeserved misery hangs, invisibly visible, the motto, ‘This is not the way to do things. A new, a quite different way of taking root must be sought’” (*FK* 190-191).

Brod thus reads “A Report to an Academy” and *The Castle* as exemplifying the wrong way of “taking root.” The Western Jew’s efforts to assimilate into European culture left him isolated—estranged from his own “national community” and heritage on the one hand, and rebuffed by the society he sought to enter on the other. The “tragedy of assimilation” according to Brod and his Zionist contemporaries was that it left the acculturated Jew in a state of limbo—both spiritually and socially. Brod did not assume an anti-assimilationist stance on the grounds of impracticality. His critique of assimilation stemmed from the conviction that the Jew was inherently foreign to German culture. Like Kafka’s ape, the Jew would never succeed in becoming a European because he was innately and fundamentally alien to the *language* (which
he could only speak as a foreigner), the *culture* (which he could only imitate), and the *nation* (to which he only nominally belonged).

While these ideas were central to Brod’s Kafka biography (1937), they had already appeared some twenty years earlier in his 1916 essay “Unsere Literaten und die Gemeinschaft” [*Our Writers and the Community*]. In the essay Brod asserted that the principal theme of Kafka’s literature was the isolated individual. Conceding that isolation was a recurring theme in Expressionist literature at the time, Brod explained that what distinguished Kafka’s treatment of this topic from his contemporaries’ was that Kafka lamented it, whereas Hofmannsthal, Werfel, Ehrenstein, and other writers of Jewish descent idealized “the life of isolation” [*Einsamsein*]. In their works, the self [*das Ich*] stood in opposition to the world and basked in its isolated existence. The Expressionist writer glorified solitude and sought to enhance it as his primary source of artistic inspiration, whereas Kafka branded it the cardinal sin of modern life. In stark contrast to barren landscape of literary Expressionism, Kafka’s writing evinced strong yearnings for community, confirming its close proximity to “the loftiest religious conception of Judaism” (“Literaten” 463).

According to Brod, Kafka expressed his ethical principles by representing a reality devoid of communal bonds. His stories alluded to a positive vision of community by depicting the nightmarish reality from which they were wholly absent.¹⁴ Kafka’s narratives were marked by a dark premonition of guilt and an ineradicable sense of shame that grew out of the

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¹⁴ This interpretative approach crystallizes Brod’s ethical reading of Kafka’s works. As Brod explained in his 1947 afterword to the Kafka biography: “In the narratives Kafka shows how man is confused and misses his way; in the aphorisms he exerts himself to define what the way is, and there are intimations that man is not doomed to confusion… We may with some validity affirm that the ‘Kafka of the aphorisms’ tends more to be a helper and teacher, while the Kafka of the tales and novels tends to be the victim of doubts and self-torment” (FK 243). As Helen Milfull explains, “Brod attempts to overcome this discrepancy between Kafka’s ‘theology’ and the reality of his literary work by drawing a sharp distinction between the ‘pessimism’ of the novels and the ‘optimism’ of the aphorisms” (233). She faults Brod’s dualism for being “simplistic and misleading,” concluding that “Brod’s unwillingness to accept both the overriding pessimism of Kafka’s work and his tortured relationship to Judaism almost disqualifies him as a critic, for all his intimacy with the author” (234).
protagonists’ failure to overcome their solitary existence. The harsh fate that befell the main characters of “The Judgment,” “Before the Law,” “In the Penal Colony,” and The Trial reflected Kafka’s conviction that man could not cut himself off from community without incurring guilt. The implicit theme of his work was the abject existence of the modern Jew. Kafka, Brod explained,

has created an astonishingly powerful image of the lamentable sealed-off consciousness [Ausgeschlossenheitsbewuβtseins], clamoring in the soul of the modern Jew, in the figure of the boy who is banished by his parents and immigrates to America, making his first free human connection with a “stoker.” We also see this in the story of a hardworking traveling salesman who wakes up to discover he has turned into a repulsive, uncanny insect. This figure has radically removed himself from society and has severed all human ties. His sad life is that of an unnatural hermit, an abnormality to the end. Although the word ‘Jew’ never appears in his works, they count among the most-Jewish documents of our times. (“Literaten” 463-464)

In the essay Brod’s Kafka stood at the forefront of the “new Jewish literature”—a movement set upon reestablishing the communal bonds of the Jewish people. Brod hoped that the “new Jewish literature” prefigured in Kafka’s writings would at the same time mark the end of Jewish Expressionist art. “This type of egocentric literature,” Brod concluded, “can only count as an interesting and tragic episode in the collective being of our people, despite the fact that so much spiritual and emotional energies have been wasted on it” (“Literaten” 464).
In similar vein, Brod’s interpretation of “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk,” twenty years later, argued that Kafka’s depiction of Josephine was a satirical critique of the Western-Jewish writer, who was wholly indifferent to the fate of his people—a phenomenon he believed was particularly common in the literary world. The contrast between the self-centered Josephine and the communally-oriented mouse folk, whose suffering she was oblivious to, represented the contemporary Jewish writer who had severed himself from the national concerns of his people. It was an ironic depiction of “How the vanity of the star, of the literary man, of the leading ‘personality’ asserts itself even in the midst of the deepest anguish of the people” (FK 192). The story, he argued, was a caricature of the “conscienceless ‘famous man’” who ignored the “distress of the Jewish masses and of the Jewish soul” (FK 192). At the same time, Brod believed that Kafka also provided a solution to the situation he portrayed in the story. Brod asserted that Kafka, who fully supported the “incorporation of the individual in the fate of his people,” was preoccupied with finding his own connection to the Jewish people (FK 193).

Brod’s portrayal of the Jewish Expressionist writer as an insipid, superficial and self-indulgent artist in “Unsere Literaten” and his reading of “Josephine” recalls Wagner’s

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15 Brod’s reading of Kafka in “Unsere Literaten” (1916) and the biography (1937) appear to be radically undermined by Kafka himself. Ironically, it is Kafka’s response to Brod’s novel Jüdinnen that seems to undercut Brod’s politically programmatic approach to Kafka’s own literature. In a diary entry from 1911 Kafka notes that Brod’s story fails to offer a solution to the Jewish question. “Offhand, we recognize in this a fault in the story, and feel ourselves all the more entitled to such a criticism because today, since Zionism came into being, the possibilities for a solution stand so clearly marshaled about the Jewish problem that the writer would have had to take only a few last steps in order to find the possibility of a solution suitable to his story” (D 45-46). While the underlying irony of the passage is not immediately apparent, Iris Bruce has convincingly shown that Kafka’s entry parodies an earlier review of Brod’s novel written by Hugo Hermann. Hermann, claiming to represent the official Zionist party line, criticized Brod’s novel for not being “Jewish” enough, arguing also that it had failed to formulate a clear ideological response to the “Jewish Question.” Kafka’s entry is not really aimed at Brod himself but at the Zionist critique of Brod’s novel, which he satirically reproduces in his diary. Kafka, Bruce maintains, parodies Hermann’s style by imitating the Zionist accusations, which fault Brod’s novel for failing to conform to its ideological program (33). It is only ironic that five years after Kafka defended Brod’s aesthetic integrity in face of the Zionist critique of his novel, Brod applied the very same principles used in Hugo Hermann’s Zionist critique in order to praise Kafka’s literature as “one of the most-Jewish documents of our time.” Brod’s determined effort to account for the ideologically programmatic element in Kafka’s literature reproduces the interpretative orientation Kafka mocks in his diaries. Brod reads Kafka for a solution to the “Jewish Question” and attempts to portray his literature as an aesthetic assertion of collective ethnic identity.
description of the assimilated Jewish intellectual in “Das Judentum in der Musik” (1850).

According to Wagner the educated Jew was doomed to lead an alien and apathetic existence because he did not belong to the organically constituted German Volk. Since the Jews, as foreigners, were incapable of penetrating the true depths of the Germanic spirit, the Jewish artist could only reproduce the most superficial manifestations of German culture. Confusing the appearance of the thing for its essence, the Jews’ art made an “outlandish, odd, indifferent, cold, and unnatural” impression on the German. To illustrate the grotesque nature of the Jew’s art, Wagner asks his readers to imagine one of Goethe’s poems “being rendered in the Jewish jargon.”

Ironically, Wagner’s notion of Goethe rendered in “Jewish jargon,” anticipates Brod’s 1926 afterword to The Castle, in which he called the novel Kafka’s “Faust-poem” (“Nachwort” 143).

The novel was to end with the ironic echo of Goethe’s “Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, Den können wir erlösen” [Whoever exerts himself in constant striving, Him we can save]. For that reason one can call this work Kafka’s Faust-poem. But it is clearly a “Faust” poem in an intentionally modest and essentially modified sense—because this new Faust is not driven after the final frontiers of human consciousness, but is instead searching for the most primeval and basic life-necessities—he is in search of rootedness in a vocation and a home. He wishes to incorporate himself in a community. From the first moment the difference between these two goals appears to make them incompatible, but this difference decreases once one senses that for Kafka, the basic-primeval goals take
on a religious meaning, and that they are about the right life and the right path.

(“Nachwort” 143-144)

According to Brod, *The Castle* reverses the Faustian goal of transcending the limits of human experience with the determination to strike roots as part of a community. Brod’s idealization of rustic simplicity, communal belonging, and agrarian life in his reading of *The Castle* presents a counter-image to the solitary quest for individual self-fulfillment represented in *Faust*. It also inverts the negative stereotype of the Jew as the agent of capitalist-modernity. Most importantly, perhaps, is the act of asserting an intertextual association between Kafka and Goethe for what it tells us about Brod’s understanding of the dialogue that takes place between “Jewish” and “German” literature.

Whereas Scholem emphatically denied Kafka’s place in the “continuum of German literature” (*Friendship* 216), Brod more readily acknowledged the author’s debt to the German canon. The irony here is that despite the fact that Brod’s reading of Kafka’s relationship to the German literary tradition is far more nuanced than Scholem’s, critics have often favored Scholem’s interpretations. Brod’s view of the “German-Jewish dialogue,” both before and after the Second World War, was in some ways far less nationalistic than Scholem’s. As opposed to Scholem, who famously and somewhat disingenuously denied the historical existence of a German-Jewish dialogue (*Crisis* 61), Brod recognized his indebtedness to German culture even after the war (*SL* 46).

The Kafka-Goethe connection brings us back to Hugo Bergmann’s 1917 reflections on Jewish literature as world literature (a concept coined by Goethe). Likewise, the Kafka-Goethe nexus is a literary variation on cultural Zionism’s somewhat paradoxical conception of Jewish
nationalism as a form of internationalism. This immanent link between the national and the aesthetic was first articulated by Buber himself, who alluded to Goethe’s idea of “Weltliteratur,” when describing the mission of Zionism in his famous article, “Jüdische Renaissance” (1901). From the start, Buber characterized the resurrection of the Jewish people as an aesthetic project, one that would “reawaken the gift of Jewish painting and sculpting, and... the dull efforts of the young Judaic poets” (34). The desire for national self-assertion, he explained, was not motivated by the aspiration for territorial expansion but was an unconscious expression of the wish to reconnect with the “national soul.” Through the revival of a Jewish national culture, “Goethe’s dream of a world literature” took on a new life (30). The awakening of the Zionist movement was only part of a greater human renaissance in which all national cultures had their place. By reclaiming its “innermost essence,” each nation contributed to the evolution of a universal culture that encompassed all of humanity.

Buber’s aesthetic conception of Zionism informs Brod’s reading of The Castle, where the work’s Jewish significance is said to complement its importance as a work of world literature.

The word Jew does not appear in The Castle. Yet, tangibly, Kafka in The Castle, straight from his Jewish soul, in a simple story, has said more about the situation of Jewry as a whole today than can be read in a hundred learned treatises. At the same time this specifically Jewish interpretation goes hand in hand with what is common to humanity, without either excluding or even disturbing the other. (FK 187)
Brod’s reading of *The Castle*, which alludes to Goethe’s *Faust* and his conception of world literature, reflects the cultural politics of Prague Zionism. Brod’s insistence on Kafka’s Jewishness, far from seeking to insulate him from his German environment, is rather an attempt to renegotiate the terms of German-Jewish cultural interaction. Brod is not rejecting the Enlightenment ideal of the German-Jewish dialogue, but tries to reconcile it with the Zionist desire for national self-determination. As this reading of *The Castle* demonstrates, “Jewish literature” in the Brodian sense, is perceived to be a thoroughly transcultural phenomenon. Its particularistic Jewish and universally human significance complement one another, in accordance with Goethe and Buber’s model of world literature. Brod’s assertion that Kafka’s national particularism and cosmopolitan universalism go hand in hand crystallizes his understanding of “Jewish literature” as forming part of the colorful tapestry of world literature. What becomes apparent here is that the Zionist nationalization of Jewish writing was not, in fact, an attempt to deny the Jews a place in European culture. To the contrary, it was an effort to conceptualize Jewish literature as an integral part of the European literary tradition, while at the same time, asserting its distinct national character.

5. Oriental Imaginaries: The German-Jewish Linguistic Differential

In his portrayal of Kafka as an author embodying the collective ethos of an emerging national Jewish literature, Brod repeatedly contrasts Kafka—the communally conscientious writer—to the “present-day Western Jewish intellectual” whom he rebuked as the isolated and egotistical “shouting man” (“Unsere” 463). The binaries Brod works with in his portrayal of the “communal Kafka” recall the rhetoric employed by Hans Kohn and other contributors to the *Vom Judentum* essay anthology, who used the stereotype of the rootless Western Jew as a negative
foil for the “new Jewish type.” The stereotype of “the deracinated Jewish intellectual” pervaded the writings of cultural Zionists, who frequently idealized the “Oriental” and nationally committed Jew by contrasting him to a denigrating image of the acculturated Western Jew.

This dichotomy is apparent in Jakob Wassermann’s *Vom Judentum* essay entitled “Der Jude als Orientale,” which contrasted the “Oriental Jew” to the “Literat,” the Western Jewish intellectual. Wassermann claimed that whereas the “Oriental Jew” was capable of artistic creativity because he was conscious of the mythic past of his people, the “Literat” could only play the parasitic role of cultural critic, because he was cut off from the “inner-spirit” of his people. According to Wassermann, the modern Jew, “robbed of the idea of his own being, possessed nothing more than his personality, whose slave and victim he is” (*VJ* 6). The counterpart to Wassermann’s image of the isolated, soulless, and overly rational Western-Jewish intellectual was the “Oriental Jew,” who possessed a “secure sense of self.” As opposed to the Western-Jewish “Literat,” the “Oriental Jew” possessed the “blood-consciousness” [*Blutbewußtsein*], which connected him to his collective past and committed him to his collective future (*VJ* 7). Wassermann suggested that by reestablishing his relationship to Orient, “not in the ethnographic but in the mythic sense,” the modern Jew could find the “transformative power that would make him a creator” (*VJ* 5).

Wassermann and Brod’s caricature of the Western Jew’s “arid intellectualism” was anticipated in Buber’s second address, “Der Sinn des Judentums” (1909), which gave a quasi-sociological explanation for this phenomenon:

… Inferior in number and in strength, we turned aside, feeling tautly superior as “intellectuals.” And this very intellectuality—out of touch with life, out of
balance, inorganic, as it were—fed on the fact that, for millennia, we did not
know a healthy, rooted life, determined by the rhythm of nature. (OJ 18)

In his third address, “Das Judentum und die Menschheit” (1910), Buber continued in
similar vein, when he called Jewish exile the “era of barren intellectuality,” distorted, sickly and
removed from life (OJ 29-30). According to Buber, the Jews’ vapid intellectualism was the most
conspicuous mark of their deracinated existence in exile. It signified the loss of an “inner-unity,”
which the Jews had possessed when they were a “well-rooted community” in Palestine. It was
under these conditions, he claimed, that the “forcefulness of their Asiatic genius” manifested
itself (OJ 29). Despite the decline of the Jewish spirit in exile, Buber argued in “Judaism and the
Spirit of the Orient” (1913) that even “the most assimilated Jew” still preserved traces of the
“Oriental spirit” within him (OJ 76). In contrast to the Western Jew, whose Orientalism needed
to be unmasked and excavated, Eastern Jewry had still preserved the unadulterated spiritual
essence of Judaism in its full “Oriental” glory. In Buber’s lectures, the unemancipated Ostjuden
served as the archetype of an organic, self-contained, and rooted Jewish national existence,
which stood in stark contrast to the “sterile” character and “detached intellectuality” of the
assimilated Jew.16

Buber’s rhetoric was popular amongst Prague’s Zionists, who even resorted this

16 Despite Kafka’s suspicion of Buber’s ideas, he too, often conceived of modern Jewishness in the polar terms of
East and West. Like Buber, Kafka seemed to believe that Eastern European Jewry shared a healthy communal
existence, which he contrasted to the isolated and inauthentic reality of the Western Jew. Writing to Felice Bauer in
September 1916, Kafka praised her work with the Eastern-Jewish refugees who had fled to Berlin. “On the whole I
can think of no closer spiritual bond between us than that created by this work. I shall live on every small thing you
do, on every difficulty you shoulder…” (LF 529). Her work with the refugees, he believed would lead to her
“spiritual liberation,” because more than she was helping them, they were helping her. While the workers at the
Jewish Home would try to civilize the children and “raise them to the standard of the contemporary, educated West
European Jew, Berlin version,” Kafka envisioned a parallel reality in which the roles were reversed, and the Eastern
Jewish refugees would be the ones teaching the Jewish aid workers. Kafka wistfully concludes that this imaginary
scenario would be impossible, because “the quality corresponding to the value of the East European Jew is
something that cannot be imparted in a Home” (LF 529). Kafka believed that Judaism could not be imparted by
pedagogy, but could only be experienced as a total reality—one in which the individual was fully immersed.
Orientalist discourse in their readings of Kafka. Heinz Politzer’s essay “Franz Kafkas zweifache Heimat” published in Selbstwehr (1934) provides a representative example of the ways Buber’s Orientalist ideal was attributed to Kafka’s fiction. The article examined the dual German-Jewish provenance of Kafka’s writing, or his “twofold homeland” as Politzer called it. Although Kafka’s literature exhibited certain affinities with the German culture of Prague, its deeper origins, Politzer explained, were “Asiatic.” Kafka’s “primal homeland,” he asserted, was “the realm of the Jewish soul in its totality” [das Reich jüdischer Seele schlechthin]. The primal force of his writing was derived from a “prehistoric Asiatic element,” which lay in the mythical origins of Judaism. His writing had sprung from the “storm land of Sinai” and “Job’s killing fields.”

To quote Politzer extensively:

It is the spirit of the Jewish people as such [der Geist des jüdischen Volkes als solcher] that speaks from his mouth: the scholastic darkness of the Kabbalah, the Slavonic-colored world of Hassidism—the never-ending traditions of Eastern-Jewish lore. This poet, who has bestowed the features of a biblical prince upon death, may count as the only Jewish author that succeeded in combining the scriptural with the exilic, the German-Jewish with the Eastern-Jewish… By force of intuition he has managed to find the way home to the primeval history of our ancestors. (337-338)

In the essay, Politzer points to the foreign-Asiatic influences percolating beneath the surface of Kafka’s German prose. Kafka’s “Oriental otherness” corresponds to two geographical and historical locales, simultaneously relating to the Ancient Near East, the cradle of biblical Judaism.
and also to the world of Eastern European Jewry, which gave birth to Hassidic spirituality and a rich folk tradition.

The image of Kafka’s Oriental roots reflects a commonly held belief that German writers of Jewish descent were, to quote Gustav Krojanker, “the offshoot of foreign regions.” In the preface to *Juden in der deutschen Literatur; Essays über zeitgenössische Schriftsteller* (1922), the editor Gustav Krojanker asserted the unique character of Jewish literature written in German. The prevalent belief in the Jews’ foreignness, he argued, was not only the consequence of anti-Semitic prejudice—it was an undeniable reality. German-Jewish writing, Krojanker explained, moves to the rhythm of another kind of blood. It only began to draw on the legacy of the German cultural tradition one hundred and fifty years ago. Its members are not nourished from the land, but they have for a long time now been formed on the same territory and have breathed the same air. For generations now, the German substance and German form have sustained their educational experience [*Bildungerlebnisse*]. However—and this is the most essential point—for them too is the German language the basic material, which has left the deepest imprint in them. (11)

According to Krojanker, although the Jews write in the same language as the Germans and share a similar educational upbringing, their use of the German language essentially differed from their non-Jewish contemporaries, but never fully fully elaborates on this point. Krojanker regarded the unspecified foreign element that the Jewish writer ostensibly introduced into his German writing
to be a positive phenomenon—one that ultimately contributed to the diversity and richness of German culture.

The anthology included an essay by Brod entitled “Der Dichter Franz Kafka,” which noted that “If one wishes to find parallels for the significance and lucidity of Kafka’s dreams, one must turn to Kabbalistic literature, the messianic hope of the sixteenth-century, blood-related books, which he [Kafka] had never read—the visionary letter of Salomon Molcho, the Maggid Mesharim of Josef Caro…” (60). Brod’s claim that Kafka’s literature evinces the works of a sixteenth-century Jewish mystic from Spain is clearly in line with Buber and Politzer’s “Jewish Orientalism” and Krojanker’s belief that German-Jewish writing was “the offshoot of foreign regions.” Their attitude attests to a widespread belief that German-Jewish writing—in ways that weren’t always immediately apparent—essentially differed from non-Jewish, or “natively” German forms of artistic expression.

Kafka’s oft-quoted letter on the “small world of German-Jewish writing,” reveals that he too shared this conviction. In his letter to Brod from 1921, Kafka claimed that the writing of German-Jewish authors “could not be German literature, though outwardly it seemed to be so,” calling it instead as a “gypsy literature which had stolen the German child out of its cradle” (LFF 289). Kafka most notably describes Jewish writing in German by calling it “mauscheln.” This derogatory term, originally derived from the name “Moishe,” had been commonly employed in anti-Semitic discourse since the seventeenth-century. Used to highlight the “damaged discourse”

17 Kafka’s sense of his foreignness to the German language can also be found in a diary entry written ten years earlier (October 1911), where he writes: “Yesterday it occurred to me that I did not always love my mother as she deserved and as I could, only because the German language prevented it. The Jewish mother is no “Mutter,” to call her “Mutter” makes her a little comic (not to herself, because we are in Germany), we give a Jewish woman the name of a German mother, but forget the contradiction that sinks into the emotions so much the more heavily, “Mutter” is peculiarly German for the Jew, it unconsciously contains, together with the Christian splendor Christian coldness also, the Jewish woman who is called “Mutter” therefore becomes not only comic but strange. Mama would be a better name if only one didn't imagine “Mutter” behind it. I believe that it is only the memories of the ghetto that still preserve the Jewish family, for the word “Vater” too is far from meaning the Jewish father” (D 88).
of the Jew, *mauscheln* referred to the Jew’s Yiddish-accented and impure German. In *Jewish Self-Hatred* Sander Gilman notes that by the turn of the nineteenth-century *mauscheln* had taken on a much broader symbolic significance—and had come to represent the Jews’ “perceived essence as liars, falsifiers, and merchants” (139). In its moral and linguistic connotations, the idea of *mauschel* encapsulated the German perception of the Jews’ inherent foreignness. The Jew’s inability to master the German language attested to his innate otherness and incompatibility with the German *Volk*.

The derogatory connotations of *mauscheln* and its anti-Semitic portrayal as the Jewish cant of thieves are still apparent in Kafka’s use of the term. As Kafka explains,

> This *mauscheln*—taken in a wider sense, and that is the only way is should be taken—consists in a bumptious, tacit, or self-pitying appropriation of someone else’s property *[Anmaßung eines fremden Besitzes]*, something not earned, but stolen by means of a relatively casual gesture. Yet it remains someone else’s property *[fremder Besitz]*, even though there is no evidence of a single solecism…
> This is not to say anything against *mauscheln*—in itself it is fine. It is an organic compound of bookish German and pantomime *[Papierdeutsch und Gebärdensprache]*… *(LFF 288)*

Kafka describes German-Jewish writing as a combination of “bookish German and pantomime,” suggestively alluding to the accusations of “Jewish mimicry” and “over-intellectuality.” Yet ultimately believes that it is only when “lively Jewish hands rummage” through the “foreign property” of German can the language be “brought to a semblance of life.” Kafka here reverses
the negative image of *mauschel* as a derivative and adulterated linguistic form of German in order to claim that “in German only the dialects are really alive” (*LFF* 288). This playful and somewhat ambiguous treatment of *mauschel* gives us a taste of a much broader trend prevalent amongst Kafka’s Zionist contemporaries, who appropriated the idea of a “Jewish discourse” as an expression of Jewish authenticity. The fiction of *mauschel*—meant to reflect the Jew’s character as a whole—may have originated in the anti-Semitic imagination, yet its negative connotations disappeared once it was reappropriated by Jewish nationalists. By the early twentieth-century, the idea that the Jews’ German somehow differed from the German’s German was adopted by the Jews themselves, who drew on this myth in their effort to affirm the distinctive attributes that constituted the Jews’ national identity.

Kafka’s reference to German as “foreign property” [*fremde Besitz*] thus resonates with the discourse of Jewish self-determination employed by Brod, Weltsch and other Zionist theorists during that period. Moritz Goldstein’s 1912 essay “The German-Jewish Parnassus” contains what might be regarded as the most iconic expression of this outlook. In the essay, which addressed the plight of the acculturated Jew, Goldstein provocatively stated, “We Jews administer the spiritual property [*geistigen Besitz*] of a people who reject our right and capacity to do so.” The Jews, he observed, remained resented outsiders, despite their determined effort to make German culture their own. He described their relationship to German culture as one of “unrequited love” [*unglücklichen Liebe*]. Ruling out the possibility that the Jews would ever be able to fully integrate into German culture as equal partners, Goldstein called for the creation of a separate “Jewish national art.” His purported solution was one of Jewish self-authorship, which would be the task of writing the “still unwritten Jewish drama and Jewish novel.” “What it all
depends on is the creation of a new type of Jew [Schaffung eines neuen Typus Jude], new not in life, but in literature” (294).

Max Brod’s 1913 essay, “Der jüdische Dichter deutscher Zunge” [The Jewish Poet of the German Tongue], was an elaboration of Goldstein’s idea and a response to it. Like Goldstein, Brod observed that the Jewish poet did not possess the German language as “the heritage of his ancestors,” but administered it as “foreign property” [da es nicht das Erbe seiner Ahnen ist, das er verwaltet, sondern fremder Besitz].¹⁸ The essay, which Brod published in Vom Judentum, approached the challenge of Jewish national renewal and self-determination from an aesthetic perspective. It addressed the commonplace belief that the Jewish artist lacked the “overall capacity to attain great poetic form and naïve sensibility” (VJ 261).¹⁹ According to this stereotype, widespread in the German Kulturbereich, Jews were incapable of attaining true artistic feats in the German language because they were alien to its underlying national spirit. Accepting these allegations for a concrete reality, Brod suggested that Jewish poet could regain his creative potential by recovering his “national sensibility” [Nationalgefühl] (VJ 261). By familiarizing himself with the Hebrew writings of the biblical and post-biblical eras, the poet

¹⁸ In Streitbares Leben Brod mentions his debt to the “Kunstwart debate,” which followed the publication of Goldstein’s essay: “The personal revolution I underwent at the time had two consequences: I defined my relationship to Germaness as a relationship of culture, since I was primarily educated in the context of German culture. But the implications were not that from now on I was allowed to integrate with the German nation. It was a painful separation that shook me to the core. The debate that took place in Der Kunstwart journal brought some clarity to this issue. One could maintain ties of friendship with the German people, be grateful for the spiritual values it bestowed upon us by the German genius… I loved Germanness, and the German essence, but at the same time I was aware of a certain distance that prohibited me of making the sharp and unfettered criticism of the likes of Tucholsky” (SL 46).

¹⁹ Brod also engages with the alleged problem of Jewish creativity in many of his later works, most extensively in Paganism, Christianity, Judaism (1921). Elaborating on the difficulties he first presented in 1913, Brod declared, “We Jews have lost the facility for understanding our own peculiarities—we do not understand our soul any longer” (PCJ 34). The modern Jew regarded himself through alien eyes, and valued himself according to measures foreign to his own culture. The artificial and contrived nature of his art, its lack of naïveté and the “immediacy of feeling” were a consequence of his self-alienation and solitary existence. At the root of it all, Brod believed, was the Jewish liberal effort to denationalize Judaism and assimilate into European society. Brod’s diagnosis reflects the general ideological position of the Bar Kochba movement in the 1920s.
would be able to tap into the “heroic forces” [heroischen Kräfte] of his national literary heritage. At the same time, Brod encouraged the German-Jewish writer to read the new Yiddish literature, which would allow him to encounter the “folk-nativity” of his people (VJ 261). “Shaken by biblical greatness and Eastern-Jewish simplicity, the Jewish poet of national-sensibility [national empfindende jüdische Dichter] will join the ranks of Jewish literature” (VJ 261).

Max Brod’s aesthetic program in “The Jewish Poet of the German Tongue” is predicated on the Buberian notion that the Jews constitute a distinct national entity. His theory of a Jewish poetics corresponds to the cultural Zionist effort to define and delimit the boundaries of an independent Jewish culture. Only by “deepening of his own Jewish national sensibility” [durch Vertiefung des eigenen jüdischen Nationalgefühls], Brod argued, would the Jewish poet be capable of comprehending German literature and accessing the “German Volksgeist.” Once the Jewish poet was firmly rooted in the solid grounds of his own national sensibility, he would be able to understand the national spirit of others by way of analogy (VJ 261-262). Brod’s essay is based on the alleged existence of some fundamental and unchanging Jewish character, which corresponds to the Jews’ national spirit. He conceives the categories of “German” and “Jewish” as two distinct cultural spheres, whose respective differences are reflected in their use of the German language.

Years later Brod developed the ideas he introduced in his 1913 essay into the concept of “Distanzliebe” [love from a distance], which he described as a “third way to approach German-Jewish relations” (PK 62). In the concept of “love from a distance” Brod lay down the guiding principles for an encounter between two groups, who possessed their own “individual national character” and inhabited separate “spiritual spheres.” The concept of “Distanzliebe” embodied Brod’s ideal of a kind of cross-cultural exchange that would allow each group to preserve its
respective national difference. By respecting the principal Brod called “being other” [Anders-Sein], the two populations could realize their affinities to one another without falling into “crass intimacy” (PK 62). Brod explains that the “dialectical relationship” envisioned in the concept of Distanzliebe was intended to facilitate “an all-encompassing covenant between men that did not blur the differences between nations, but bridged those differences through the love that is part of understanding” (SL 46-47).

6. Canonizing Kafka as “Jewish Literature”

The interpretations I have discussed in this chapter—primarily those written by Brod, Welsch, Baum, Politzer, and Sturmann—provide a representative picture of the different ways Kafka’s critics account for the Jewish dimension of his fiction. These critical approaches generally follow five patterns:

1. The attempt to relate Kafka’s prose to biblical and post-biblical sources or demonstrate its Talmudic or Scriptural characteristics.

2. The attempt to show how Kafka’s writing concerned itself with Jewish suffering in exile and expressed his yearning for a Jewish homeland.

3. Interpretations that explore the ethical dimension of Kafka’s literature and argue that these are presented in his work from a uniquely Jewish perspective.

4. Readings that try and demonstrate the ways Kafka’s literature is ostensibly concerned with issues of Jewish spirituality and struggles with fundamental questions deriving from Jewish theology.
5. Readings that portray Kafka’s literature as advocating the political and cultural aims of Zionism.

This chapter sought to account for the cultural context and literary praxis that allowed Brod and his companions in Prague to classify Kafka’s literature as Jewish according to their cultural-Zionist taxonomy. I have thus been less concerned with the presumed validity of their interpretations, and more interested in reconstructing the manner in which their ideological convictions about Jewish national creativity informed their readings of Kafka, whose writing they celebrated as the literary embodiment of Jewish national identity. These commentaries reflect an endeavor to concretize that amorphous entity called “Jewish literature.” Seeking to canonize Kafka in the nascent pantheon of Jewish national writers, Brod, Weltsch and other members of the Prague circle try to establish the fundamental differences that distinguish Jewish literature from its German counterpart. One of the underlying principles at work in these early Kafka interpretations is the Zionist conviction that the Jews constitute an independent national entity. Kafka’s readers thus set out demonstrate how the “eternal spirit of Judaism” manifested itself in his literature, which they considered to be the product of a Jewish national legacy. When read alongside the works of Martin Buber and other key Zionist thinkers of the time, the Kafka-criticism produced in Prague during the 20s and 30s appears to correspond to the greater efforts of cultural Zionist thinkers to redefine Jewish national belonging in völkisch terms.
Denationalizing Jewish Identity: Hans-Joachim Schoeps’s Confessional Kafka

1. Introduction

Since the 1920s Jewish critics have related Kafka’s writings to the vagaries of modern Jewish identity. Many of these readings have been canonized as belletristic masterpieces in their own right. Notably absent from the pre-war pantheon of Kafka’s German-Jewish commentators is Hans-Joachim Schoeps (1909-1980), who published his first piece on the author, “Die geistige Gestalt Franz Kafka,” in 1929 and wrote numerous essays on his religious significance throughout the 1930s. Although Schoeps was one of the first commentators to explore the Jewish theological significance of Kafka’s work, scholars have mostly overlooked his critical readings. Where he is mentioned it is usually to note his brief editorial collaboration with Max Brod, which led to the posthumous publication of Kafka’s selected writings, entitled Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer: Ungedruckte Erzählungen und Prosa aus dem Nachlaß (1931). The indifference to Schoeps is especially striking when compared to the scholarly interest in what his contemporaries, Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin, had to say about Kafka’s Judaism.

In their animated epistolary exchange, the one thing that Scholem and Benjamin agreed on is their mutual contempt for Schoeps. In January 1933 Benjamin wrote Scholem that he had not yet begun his Kafka essay because he was still waiting for Schoeps to publish his own forthcoming monograph on the author. As Benjamin sardonically explained: “I really wanted—and still want—to read the essay announced by Schoeps before I start working on mine. I expect Schoeps’s essay to be a codification of all misguided opinions that can be distilled from a specifically Prague-bound interpretation of Kafka, and, as you know, such books have always inspired me” (CBS 29). Scholem’s response was no less malicious.
As far as Kafka is concerned, in my estimation you cannot count on seeing the book you are awaiting from Herr Schoeps. The young man—I must have written you that I also made his acquaintance in Berlin and have little interest in its continuation, since he is bursting with vanity and the desire to be on everybody’s lips—is so busy trying to connect up with German fascism in every way, sans phrase [without further ado], that he will not have time for any activities in the foreseeable future. He has now published a book that defies the imagination… I confess that one did not expect such a spectacle from the editor of Kafka’s papers, even if he is but a lad of 23, who was by no means selected by the deceased.20

(CBS 30-31)

Scholem and Benjamin’s damning verdict of the man and his work may not be the sole cause for his contemporary neglect. Yet their acerbic response to Schoeps reflects the pervasive antipathy to his peculiar identity politics amongst German-Jewish intellectuals during the interwar era.

Despite his prolific career as a scholar, whose collected works consist of sixteen volumes, Schoeps remains on the margins of the twentieth-century canon of German-Jewish thought. Schoeps’s marginalization is a consequence of his controversial political stance in the 1930s, which cast a dark cloud over his intellectual achievements in the postwar era. His appeals to

20 Schoeps, for his part, was not particularly fond of Benjamin and Scholem either. In his 1970 memoir Ja-Nein-Und Trotzdem, Schoeps gave his own account of the disastrous encounter with Scholem. According to Schoeps, Scholem accused him of being a “Protestant piestist” (not an appellation that Schoeps would necessarily take as an insult), and berated him for his abysmal knowledge of Hebrew. After Schoeps’s mother interrupted the ongoing tirade to invite Scholem for a cup of tea, she tried to hold a friendly conversation with the honored guest from Jerusalem. Scholem, however, remained silent throughout, refusing to answer any of the mother’s questions, and ultimately bringing her to tears. Schoeps ends his account of Scholem’s visit with his mother’s demand that he never host another mystic in their house: “Please promise me that you will never again bring a mystic into this house. That was something horrible. A mystic is surely a man without a world. He essentially sees no other men and is boundlessly arrogant in a way none of us could ever be” (Ja 55). In another passage, which was clearly aimed at Scholem, Schoeps calls Sabbatai Sevi a “cowardly swindler” [feigen Betrüger], who surpassed Hitler in his villainy (Ja 139-140). These accusations appear to be another attempt to settle scores with Scholem, who crowned the seventeenth-century messianic leader as the hidden king of Jewish modernity, and forerunner of Zionism.
remain loyal to Germany despite Hitler’s rise to power were denounced by his contemporaries, some of whom went so far as to publicly condemn his “supra-nationalist German loyalty (even to the Nazi regime).”

That Schoeps maintained his avid Prussian patriotism after the rise of National Socialism, and continued to subscribe to his idiosyncratic German nationalism after the Holocaust, did not contribute to his postwar popularity in the least. As a self-proclaimed “Conservative, Prussian, and Jewish” thinker, who once described himself to Max Brod as a Jew with a “Protestant thought-structure,” it should not come as much of a surprise that Schoeps never found much of a Jewish following.

While overwhelmingly rejected by his contemporaries, Schoeps’s apocryphal strand of Judaism merits our attention, if only to illuminate the ideological complexities of German-Jewish identity in the years leading up to the Second World War.

This chapter revisits Hans-Joachim Schoeps’s writings from the years 1929-1939, focusing primarily on his extensive Kafka commentaries. The underlying premise of this chapter is that if the ideological significance behind his portrayal of Kafka is to be fully understood it must be read in light of his religious and political writings, in which he formulated his critique of Zionism, liberalism and orthodoxy. Schoeps’s essays on Kafka are a reflection of their author’s greater effort to confessionalize Judaism and base its “spiritual essence” on the individual’s profession of faith. His quasi-Protestant conception of Judaism is meant to denationalize modern Jewish identity and provide an alternative to Zionism’s nationalist conception of Jewish peoplehood, orthodoxy’s insistence on the primacy of rabbinic law, and the liberal-reform movement’s belief in Judaism’s ethical rationalism. I seek to frame Schoeps’s Kafka criticism

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22 See Ja—Nein—Und Trotzdem (11; 139) and Schoeps’s letter to Brod from the 17th of March 1931 (Im Streit 52).
within the broader context of his interwar writings, and show how his ideological convictions shaped his views on Kafka’s Jewish theological significance.

2. Max Brod and Hans-Joachim Schoeps: The Story of a Brief Friendship

“The diaries shed much light on Kafka’s relationship to Jewish issues. Unfortunately, the editor sought to reclaim Kafka for Zionism through his arbitrary editing (there exist other comments that differ from those Brod chose to publish!)”

Hans-Joachim Schoeps in a review of Franz Kafka’s *Collected Works* (1937)

Schoeps’s ideologically fraught relationship with his German-Jewish contemporaries is encapsulated in the story of his collaboration with Max Brod. While it was their shared interest in the Jewish-religious dimension of Kafka’s work that brought Brod and Schoeps together, it was their disagreement about how to define his religiosity that soured their friendship and ended their editorial collaboration. Brod first became acquainted with Schoeps after the latter published a review of his work *Heidentum, Christentum, Judentum* in the *Christliche Welt*. In his review Schoeps argued that despite Brod’s polemic against Christianity, his vision of Judaism was, in fact, not so far removed from Barth’s dialectical theology The review led to an intense correspondence between the two, who began to exchange their ideas about Zionism, Jewish theology and Kafka.

In June 1929 Schoeps sent Brod a draft of his first Kafka essay, “Die geistige Gestalt Franz Kafkas,” which he later published in in the *Christliche Welt*. Requesting Brod’s opinion on the piece, Schoeps wanted to know whether it accurately captured Kafka’s “spiritual form” or whether he had projected his own ideas onto Kafka’s texts.

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[...möchte ich von Ihnen nach Lesung des betr. Aufsatzes wissen, ob ich den nun auch die geistige Gestalt Franz Kafkas recht erfaßt oder vielleicht nur—diese Gefahr besteht ja immer—die eigene Situation in sie hineinprojeziert] (Im Streit 35). In his memoirs, Schoeps recalls that Brod sent him an ecstatic letter, claiming that he had been “the first person to properly understand the key issues in Kafka’s work, and judge him as he [Brod] would” (Ja 117). In the same letter, Brod invited Schoeps to collaborate on an upcoming edition of Kafka’s work. Upon meeting Schoeps in Marienbad, Brod was quite astonished when first approached by a twenty-year-old rather than the aged scholar he had expected to meet. Brod, however, remained true to his word and invited Schoeps to Prague the following month in order to begin their editorial collaboration on Kafka’s unpublished papers.

Max Brod delegated the responsibility of finding a publisher to Schoeps, who eventually signed on the Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag for a two-volume publication that would include Kafka’s unpublished stories, sketches, aphorisms, and other biographical materials. In 1931 the work appeared under the title Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer: Ungedruckte Erzählungen und Prosa aus dem Nachlaß. In the afterword to the volume, the two editors noted that their views on Kafka’s religious significance differed on a number of minor points, but that they generally agreed on the main issues [Max Brod hat seine—in einigen Punkten von der hier skizzierten—abweichende Auffassung (in den meisten wesentlichen Punkten stimmen beide Herausgeber überein)] (258). Contrary to this assertion, their “diverging conceptions” turned out to be essential enough to end their collaboration before they had even completed the second volume that was planned to appear with the Kiepenhauer Verlag.

Schoeps and Brod were in agreement that Kafka belonged to a tradition of great religious thinkers, in the line of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky. They disagreed on Kafka’s
relationship to Zionism. Schoeps, who remained an ardent believer in the German-Jewish symbiosis, argued that Zionism was political ideology that threatened to obfuscate the religious substance of Judaism by channeling its religiosity towards secular-nationalism. As he wrote Brod in August 8th, 1932:

And when it comes to Zionism, it is utterly impossible for us to come to an agreement. The experiential substance that one must possess in order to become a Zionist has never been granted me, and everything that has to do with national rootedness [völkische Verwurzelung] is foreign to me. There is nothing left to do but to assert this fact. In any case, I have great reason to doubt that Zionism represents an objective return to Judaism. In fact, I see it as nothing else but a late-blooming of West-European imperialism [als eine spätblüte des westeuropäischen Imperialismus], a product of the Occident’s secularized realm of thought. Zionism is not a religious movement. Its conception of the Jewish people secularizes all that is religious, and turns the people of God into a worldly people, thereby distorting the Jewish reality [Der Zionismus ist keine religiöse Bewegung; die Konzeption des jüdischen Volkes säkulrisiert sogar das Religiöse, macht aus dem Gottesvolk ein weltliches Volk und entstellt so die jüdische Wirklichkeit]… I am sorry if I cannot but regard Zionism as a threat to real Judaism, possibly even greater than liberalism, which was harmless, since it was merely ideological. Zionism, in contrast, seeks to transform the Jewish substance [Umwandlung der jüdischen Substanz] and secularize it. (Im Streit 74)
Schoeps rejected what he considered Brod’s arbitrary attempt to reclaim Kafka for political Zionism. Brod, for his part, maintained that their diverging conceptions of Judaism were so deep-seated as to preclude any future collaboration. “I am convinced,” writes Brod, “that on the grounds of intellectual integrity, you will understand my decision, and perhaps we should part ways because at the moment, I do not see how we could possibly become ideologically reconciled” (Im Streit 81). Brod asked Schoeps to return the remaining Kafka manuscripts in his possession, and went on to edit Kafka’s collected works with the help of the young literary scholar Heinz Politzer. In response to Schoeps’s intransigent anti-Zionism, Brod writes,

I greatly regret that our differences are so great that they make it impossible for me to preserve the good feelings I had for you at the beginning. As far as Kafka is concerned, I ask that you return the manuscripts that are still in your possession. I plan to publish all of Kafka’s works with Schocken Press. I can assure you that the new edition will acknowledge all of the editorial work you have undertaken up to this point. Our continued collaboration seems to no longer be possible due to the geographical distance, because I will not be coming to Germany and you will rarely come here. Yet besides that, it appears that our different conceptions of Judaism have proven to be so fundamental that they prevent us from continuing our collaboration.... Only when the differences between us become fully manifest might we be able to find a middle ground—and this is a possibility I do not foresee in the near future. (Im Streit 82-83)
Disenchanted with the recent turn in German politics, Brod distanced himself from
German culture, describing his relationship to it as “love from a distance” [Distanzliebe].
Schoeps, on the other hand, remained an ardent believer in the “German-Jewish symbiosis,” and
continued to assert his loyalty to Germany even after the rise of National Socialism. Their
irreconcilable ideological positions reflect the intra-Jewish polemics of the 1930s. The
correspondence between Brod and Schoeps epitomizes the ideological rift between Zionists and
assimilated Jews during that period. Schoeps and Brod’s opposing worldviews were also
mirrored in their life trajectories. Max Brod who became a devout Zionist in the early 1910s,
emigrated from Prague to Tel-Aviv in 1939 and remained in Israel for the rest of his life.
Schoeps fled the Gestapo in 1939, and spent the war years in Sweden, only to return to Germany
in 1945 in order to take up professorial position at the University of Erlangen (Ben Chorin,
“Antipoden” 64). While the political rift between Schoeps and Brod is reflected in their
postwar biographies, it assumed an even more pronounced expression in their conflicting
interpretations of Kafka and the Jewish element of his work. In the following section, I compare

24 Despite their rancorous break in the thirties, the two resumed their correspondence for a brief period after the war. Writing to Schoeps in 1946, Brod harshly criticized his decision to return to Germany, wondering how he could “desire to live and teach amongst this accursed nation [verruchten Volk]” (Im Streit 113). Schoeps, for his part, went to great lengths in order to justify his return to Germany. In a letter to his cousin Heinz Frank, Schoeps explained, “The horrific fate of European Judaism should certainly not be trivialized, but it should also not be interpreted metaphysically. It is not the inevitable consequence of some ostensible German national character, or the anticipated result of the German-Jewish symbiosis, but the tragic consequence of an accumulation of sorrowful coincidences, that the National Socialists—a gang of criminals—took over power…” (Im Streit 117). A similar sentiment is expressed in a letter to Ben-Chorin from the same year, where Schoeps explains why he rejects the notion of collective German guilt: “Clearly, the German people are accountable before a tribunal of biblical proportions such as ‘Amalek’ was…. I can say no more about this. But in a practical-political sense: are the allies free of guilt? Did the Bolsheviks whose hands ooze of blood, the duplicitous English, and the rich Americans have any right to judge? [or ‘sit on the tribunal?’] They do not. They have not merited the fact that God has chosen them as his rod. And hopefully we shall live both, God willing, to witness the retribution for the Russian mass-rapes and Anglo-Saxon hunger blockades. Just think of the Pesach song Chad Gadya: The malach hamoveth [the angel of death] is probably the atom bomb! … The thought of ‘collective guilt’ is a politically transparent maneuver, it is an expression of evil: there is no juridical, political, or metaphysical guilt to be attributed. The 70 million cannot be held guilty for the horrors of the Nazis, their followers and accomplices. Millions did not protest. True. But could they have protested? … For this reason the question must be applied to every individual separately, and decided on an individual basis” (Auf der Suche 35). It seems beyond the point to argue with Schoeps’ German apologetics. The preposterous of this stance—voiced by Holocaust survivor, no less—speaks for itself.
Brod and Schoeps’s respective interpretations of *The Castle* and the ideological differences that inspired them.

3. Competing Commentaries on *The Castle*: Between Zionism and Crisis Theology

In a letter to Benjamin from July 17th 1934, Scholem asked whether their disagreement about Kafka’s theological significance was not merely a matter of terminology. “I cannot accept your disavowal of this aspect,” referring to what he believed was Kafka’s preoccupation with Jewish law, “if I should regard it as such, that is, and not just as a misunderstanding brought about by your polemics against Schoepsen and Bröder” (*CBS* 126). In their correspondence, both Scholem and Benjamin grouped the “Schoepsen and Bröder” of Kafka criticism together—that is, those critics who they detested for interpreting Kafka theologically in the vein of Schoeps and Brod. By placing Schoeps and Brod into one category, Scholem glosses over the blatant differences between the two critics, whose interpretations stand on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. In the following section I wish to highlight the differences that Scholem overlooked by comparing their “Jewish theological” interpretations of *The Castle*.

Schoeps reads *The Castle* as a literary text that exemplifies the Jewish conception of divine grace [*Gnade*]. Schoeps elucidates this concept using a theological schema borrowed from Karl Barth. To Schoeps’s credit, he does not deny the non-Jewish provenance of his philosophy, in contrast to his other contemporaries, who often tried to conceal the hybrid aspect of their “Jewish thought.” Traces of Karl Barth’s influence are present throughout his interpretation, which is framed by concepts such as “the fall,” “salvation history” [*Heilsgeschichte*], “primal history” [*Urgeschichte*], and the “infinite qualitative distinction” [*qualitativen Unterschied von*]
Schoeps begins his unpublished monograph, *Der Vergessene Gott: Franz Kafka und die tragische Position des modernen Juden*, by openly declaring that his commentary is an attempt to explore Kafka’s theological position and place it in dialogue with dialectical theology—a school of thought with which Kafka’s writing ostensibly shares much in common (8). In a manner that resembles Scholem and Susman’s negative theological readings of Kafka, Schoeps focuses on the absence of transcendence in Kafka’s stories. He argues that despite the conspicuous absence of the divine, God exerts a tremendous influence on the course of events in Kafka’s novels. Schoeps, like Scholem and Susman, characterizes Kafka’s theology in terms of a negative dialectic. Yet he differs from Scholem and Susman by claiming that Kafka’s work constitutes a concrete theological doctrine that corresponds to Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* and Karl Barth’s *Epistles to the Romans*. Kafka, he explains is the “poet of paradox,” of the incommensurable relationship between heaven and earth, like Kierkegaard. For both Kafka and Kierkegaard, God remains beyond human comprehension, he is the “wholly other” that may only be perceived in the form of the absurd. Kafkaesque transcendence is a literary expression of Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith”—showing that what is required of man is his humble resignation to God’s mysterious ways and an acceptance of the inscrutability of divine judgment. Accordingly, what appears as the “absurd” in Kafka’s stories is the key to understanding his theological worldview.

Schoeps illustrates this claim through his reading of *The Castle*. The story begins with the novel’s protagonist, K. a land surveyor who has been summoned by the castle, arriving at the

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25 After reading Schoeps’ *Contemporary Jewish Faith*, Barth himself came to wonder about the muddled Jewishness of Schoeps’s Jewish theology, which eschewed all references to the Tabernacle and the Temple. Sharing his reservations with Schoeps, Barth asked: “Is it fully clear to you that the concepts of revelation, election, law, grace, forgiveness, and atonement, which you employ in your interpretation, strongly resonate with what Paul called *dikaiosyne ek nomou* and mark the dividing-line between Christianity and Judaism?” (Lease, “Briefwechsel” 118).
village inn late at night. He is greeted to a cold welcome and is regarded with suspicion by the villagers. He is woken up in the middle of night only to learn that the castle administration denies having summoned him. Throughout the story, K. struggles to gain recognition from the castle and settle down in the village, yet fails to achieve his aims, and remains an isolated foreigner. He seeks to comprehend his legal situation by appealing to a convoluted hierarchy of officials, who claim to represent the castle. The letters from the castle are highly ambiguous, and often contradict one another. His personal encounters with various castle officials are of no help either. The castle’s emissaries all appear to be corrupt, lascivious, and immoral, and the reader has good reason to assume that it is their bumbling incompetence that resulted in the accidental summoning of land surveyor.

Although it would appear that this misunderstanding began with an administrative error, the castle representatives insist that such mistakes never occur, and Schoeps, who believes the castle stands for God, is inclined to accept their assertion. According to Schoeps, it is K. who is at fault. He misperceives his predicament by insisting on his rights and demanding that his relationship to the castle be formally ratified. The villagers, in contrast, remain suspicious of K. because they cannot comprehend his conduct. They all resign themselves to the castle’s authority and follow its commands, as irrational and arbitrary as they may appear. The protagonist’s quixotic attempts to gain access to the castle fail because there is no possibility of bridging the “infinite qualitative distinction” that separates man and God. Whatever K. does will always be wrong and misguided, because his claims against the castle are made on juridical and ethical grounds, whereas the castle represents a divine, transethical entity, which inevitably lies beyond the grasp of human reason. Thus, one cannot expect justice from God, but only hope for grace. Schoeps supports his reading by citing Brod’s afterword to *The Castle*, which reported that
Kafka meant to end the story with K. lying on his deathbed, surrounded by the villagers. Kafka had intended to end the novel with a scene in which K., a moment before dying of exhaustion, learns that the castle refuses to grant him the legal right of residence, but in a magnanimous gesture, agrees to let him remain in the village out of consideration for his difficult circumstances (*Vergessene* 127).

According to Schoeps, the tragedy is a result of the protagonist’s misguided response to the challenges he faces. His predicament represents man’s effort to force divine grace. It is precisely because K. thinks that he can understand the inner-workings of the castle and demands that it conform to his own ethical norms that he is guilty before God. What he lacks is pure faith—the kind possessed by the villagers. K. thinks he is better than the naïve and crude villagers. But they have one advantage over him; they humbly submit themselves to its authority. For Schoeps the villagers exemplify the faithful humility required of the believer. Their fearful veneration of the castle and its representatives constitutes the ideal form of religious faith (*die... einzige Voraussetzung für ein rechtes Gottesverhältnis, für wirkliche Menschenwürde geforderte jiroh = Gottesfurcht*) (*Vergessene* 134). As such the villagers make up a holy community [sakrale Gemeinde]. Even if it appears that they have no written laws, they nevertheless subscribe to the law of the heart and therefore enjoy the castle’s grace (*Aber weil sie das Gesetz im Herzen zu haben scheinen, stehen sie eo ipso in einer Gansenbeziehung*) (135). Schoeps draws on Brod’s 1926 afterword to *The Castle*, which explained that *The Trial* and *The Castle* were two complementary works that represented the divine qualities of judgment and grace. Yet whereas Brod insists that the protagonists’ guilt is a consequence of their immorality, their cardinal sin being their isolated existence, Schoeps formulates their guilt in transethical terms, akin to Karl Barth’s idea of original sin. The cause Joseph K.’s guilt is never clarified and never
named—because it cannot be. According to Schoeps, *The Trial* represented “a pure religious guilt, one that is absolutely transethical and as such, cosmically-rooted” [Darstellung der rein religiösen Schuld, die vollkommen transetisch ist und als solche im Kosmischen wurzelt] (Vergessene 129).

Kafka’s characters are not guilty of anything in particular. Their guilt is innate and incomprehensible, and is best understood as “metaphysical guilt.” Both K. and Joseph K. share a similar problem, they seek to understand their guilt from an ethical and legal perspective. As Schoeps explained,

> It will surely not be overlooked by the attentive reader that *The Castle* and *The Trial* are two expressions of the same thing, which the theologian customarily calls “grace” [Gottes Gnade] and “judgment” [Gottes Gericht] … The “castle” and the “court” are forever transcendent, but their reality determines being and renders it uncanny. There is truly no certainty or safety in faith, but only a convulsive skepticism regarding all positions. This doubt is not directed at the existence of a heavenly order, but against the idea that it is in a relationship to worldly existence. The human soul can never comprehend the meaning of divine order (the hierarchy in the castle), all revelations of divine order go beyond human comprehension. (*Im Streit* 170)

Both works represent the absolute incommensurability between the human and the divine, demonstrating what Schoeps calls Kafka’s “tragic situation”—a poetic rendering of the consequences of Jewish secularization. It reflected “the crisis of transition,” and “religious
“despair” brought about by the contemporary rift that separated the Jew from God and the “Law of Revelation” (*Im Streit* 212). Yet although God’s “Law of Revelation” had withdrawn into total obscurity, man continued to yearn for it. As Schoeps explained in his 1935 essay, “Franz Kafka. Der Dichter der tragischen Position,”

The Law has become incomprehensible, but its validity for man still remains. He remains part of an intergenerational chain, which is bound to the Law, and even if he himself no longer recognizes the fact of this subordination… The generational chain and the Law are inseparable, whether their meaning becomes available to consciousness or remains incomprehensible. Franz Kafka’s whole life attests to this intertwinement... (*Im Streit* 194-195).

A lengthy account of Judaism’s “historical-theological” situation served as the context for Schoeps’s exposition of Kafka’s religious predicament. Kafka’s narratives, claimed Schoeps, were best understood as a Jewish-theological response to secularization and modernization. The historical frame Schoeps used to explain Kafka’s work began with the collapse of the Jewish ghetto in the mid nineteenth-century. Following their legal emancipation into European society, the Jews, Schoeps argued, were confronted with a reality that contradicted the theological foundations of their “theonomic” religion. In the process of adjusting to their new civic status as members of various European nation-states, Western Jewry had distorted its religious heritage by recasting it in the language of human autonomy and rational self-mastery. The social emancipation of Western Jewry entailed a complete falsification of Judaism’s theological principles, primarily its conception of revelation. The theological conception of divine
transcendence was replaced by an attenuated religious humanism that subscribed to Enlightenment anthropocentrism (*Vergessene* 68-70).

The historical-theological rupture Schoeps saw in Kafka’s fiction corresponded to the observations he made in his 1932 work, *Jüdischer Glaube in dieser Zeit: Prolegomena zur Grundlegung einer systematischen Theologie des Judentums* [Contemporary Jewish Faith: Prolegomena to the Foundation of a Systemic Theology of Judaism]. The work was a theological critique of modernity that called for a return [Umkehr] to Judaism’s authentic religious existence, conveniently located in its archaic-biblical past. For Schoeps, the crisis of liberal Judaism was an inevitable outcome of the Enlightenment and bourgeois culture. What was needed, in face of those theologies that “cloaked themselves with humanitarian-ethical ideals, and held to the misguided and hubristic belief of human autonomy, was a return the primeval message of biblical Judaism. Schoeps called for a “militant-combative theology” [*notwendig kämpfende Theologie, theologia militans*] that would defend the true word of God against the anthropomorphic reductionism of liberal Judaism on the one hand, and its politicization by Zionism on the other (5).

Schoeps’s “systematic theology” demanded that the Jew recognize the divine, or alternatively—its absence, in “the ontic character of the times.” The work’s conceptual linchpin lay in the notion revelation. Schoeps argued that divine revelation could not be understood in human terms, since it was a timeless-universal utterly incompatible with the categories of human knowledge. In calling for a return to the core dogmas of Judaism, Schoeps relied on Karl Barth’s dialectical theology and Salomon Ludwig Steinheim’s four-volume work entitled *Revelation According to the Doctrine of the Synagogue*. What drew Schoeps to Barth and Steinheim was

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their unwavering insistence on the radical alterity of divine revelation. The point of departure in both Steinheim’s critique of Mendelssohnian Judaism, and Barth’s rejection of Schleiermacher’s natural religion lay in the fact that the divine truth of revelation surpassed the historical contingencies of human understanding. Steinheim, the nineteenth-century renegade Jewish thinker, and Barth, the influential twentieth-century Protestant theologian, both rebuked the growing anthropocentric trend in modern religious thought. They adamantly held that revelation was irreconcilable with the ethical-humanistic content that various liberal theologies had ascribed to it. Revelation, they argued, stood in opposition to all forms of human comprehension, and all attempts to couch it in the terms of human reason were a betrayal of its divine character. Both argued that liberal theology had corrupted religious faith by conceiving revelation in terms of subjective human experience, thereby undermining God’s absolute otherness. There was no positive content to be derived from divine revelation, since it was wholly incommensurable with human consciousness.

The concept of revelation developed in Jüdischer Glaube found its literary correlate in Schoeps’s interpretation of Kafka, whose work, he claimed, offered a contemporary representation of Judaism’s understanding of revelation from its negative perspective.

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27 Revelation according to Steinheim was not given in order to legislate the law, but to serve as a manifestation of the living God. The law, according to Steinheim, was subsidiary to revelation. Schoeps took up Steinheim’s objection to Mendelssohn’s “ethical-nomism,” and his attempt to establish a philosophical “natural religion.”

28 In the fourth chapter of Contemporary Jewish Faith Schoeps elaborated upon four principle dogmas for his revised Jewish theology: 1. The singularity of God. 2. The creation of the world ex nihilo, and the creature’s freedom to sin. 3. Revealed law as the provision for man’s freedom to fear God and the sinner’s capacity for atonement. 4. God’s retribution upon history and its reversal in the return of the fallen.
jüdisches Offenbarungsverständnis] (Im Streit 200). The religious “shibboleths” of Kafka’s writing, Schoeps claimed, exhibited a distinctly Jewish understanding of revelation. What Schoeps meant by Kafka’s Jewish understanding of revelation was merely a modified version of Steinheim and Barth’s view of divine revelation. For Kafka revelation was not a thing of this world, but a call from a distant beyond urging man to fear God and obey his laws. It was an eternal and unchanging message of salvation [Heilsanruf] that could not be comprehended in terms of human reason (Vergessene 48). Kafka’s novels depicted the daemonic consequences of man’s denial of revelation. Both K. and Joseph K. fail to grasp the essence of their guilt, which—like divine revelation—cannot be grasped in ethical or juridical categories. Had they submitted themselves to “the metaphysics of the unknown,” they would have found the path to atonement and redemption. Both The Castle and The Trial reflect the modern Jewish condition in which divine law had withdrawn from the world and was no longer recognizable as such.

What Schoeps saw as the negative imprint of revelation in a secular Jewish age came to define his understanding of the religious dimension of Kafka’s work. Schoeps designated the “Jewish doctrine of revelation” as the awareness that revelation stood in opposition to all forms of human reason—it occurred in history but was irreducible to it. This tragic religious awareness stood at the root of Kafka’s novels, which did not question the existence of a divine order, but set themselves against the notion that the divine maintained a direct relationship to the plane of human existence. Kafka’s religious pessimism, or his “tragic position,” thus reflected the radical consequences of Judaism’s encounter with modernity, and the abject faithlessness of its contemporary condition.

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In contrast to Schoeps, who reads *The Castle* in Kierkegaardian vein, Brod sees the novel as Kafka’s attempt to overcome the pessimistic *Weltanschauung* of Kierkegaard’s religious philosophy. As Brod notes in the biography,

> It is obvious that Kafka was not striving after a paradox, an ideal in principle unachievable—like Kierkegaard, like the “theology of crisis,” but—and this is the decisive factor, good and proper life, that he stood more perhaps on the side of Martin Buber, who, in rejecting Kierkegaard, the solitary, from principle, says of living together with a wife… (FK 198)

For Brod, Kafka’s religious significance coincides with Zionism’s gospel to the Jews and the world. His “almost realistically Jewish interpretation” strives to show that in Kafka’s stories “Zionism is accepted as a way of life of almost religious relevance” (FK 174). Brod’s afterword to *The Castle* (1926) exemplifies his own understanding of Zionism as a contemporary realization the Jewish message. Anticipating Schoeps’s interpretation, Brod notes that *The Castle* exemplifies the Kierkegaardian paradox of faith and reason. At the same time, however, he also claims that the novel constitutes a religious-ethical response to Kierkegaard’s outlook, one that tries to overcome its inherent pessimism and find a positive substitute to its religious despair.

According to Brod, K.’s relentless attempts to enter the castle and integrate himself in the village reflect Kafka’s conviction that divine grace could be realized by striking root as part of a community. As Brod already argued in his 1916 essay, “Our Writers and the Community,” the cardinal sin in Kafka’s stories was the protagonist’s isolation. In *The Trial*, Joseph K.’s “secret guilt” consisted of the fact that he remained unmarried and “shut himself out from the circle of
life” (*FK* 179). *The Castle*’s protagonist, too, is an isolated individual, but in contrast to Joseph K., he strives to overcome his seclusion and become part of society. His aspirations for a rustic life, his wish to be close to the land and to the people showed that “the path to God passes through the village” [*Der Weg zu Gott führt durch das Dorf*] (“Tragödie” 181).

Brod’s religious reading of *The Castle* is rooted in precisely those terms that Schoeps rejects: ethics and history. For Schoeps divine revelation stands in opposition to both history and human reason. He thus reads *The Castle* as manifesting a transhistorical and transethical religiositiy. Brod, in contrast, believes that Kafka’s religious worldview consists of a communal ethics, which he describes as the author’s “religious humanism.” Brod too claims that the novel is related to the Jewish fate [*die beziehung des Romans zum jüdischen Schicksal*] (179), but his understanding of the “Jewish fate” is historical, as opposed to Schoeps, who sets the “Jewish fate” in opposition to historical experience. According to Brod, K.’s difficulties in the village stand for the modern Jewish experience in the Diaspora and the failure of assimilation. Schoeps sees the villagers as the ideal community of faith, whereas Brod views them as an embodiment of gentile prejudice against the Jew. As Brod notes,

The remarkable legal claim on which the Jews in the Diaspora built up their ‘right to settle’ occurs to one as a parallel, when one has entered into the spirit of this half-accidental “tolerance” that K. claims… Already in this little introductory scene one sees the position of the “gentiles” with their calm rejection, and that of the Jew with his obligatory friendliness, pushfulness, indeed importunity, described with shatteringly objective melancholy. (*FK* 187)
K.’s pariah-existence in the story addresses the modern Jewish question. For Brod, the villager’s claim, “You are not from the village, you are nothing”, encapsulates the novel’s portrayal of the “eternal Jewish fate.”

It is this reading that leads Brod to conclude that the ideological message behind Kafka’s novel was the Zionist rejection of the Diaspora. Hanging over it was the “invisibly visible” motto: “This is not the way to do things. A new, quite different way of taking root must be sought” (PK 190-191). Brod doesn’t say whether this means that K. should resettle in Palestine, but the two claims he makes—that K. is an “errant, persecuted, wandering Jew” and that his actions in the novel represent the “true idea of Judaism”—reflect the religious, socialist, and national pillars that constitute Brod’s vision of Zionism. As Brod explains in a later essay, “Humanistischer Zionismus im Werk Kafkas” (1963),

This is the meaning of Kafka’s religious socialism, which constitutes a significant part of his humanistic Judaism, whose fundamental meaning is the demand for justice. The fragmented, assimilated Jew cannot follow this ideal with full force. Only he who has become internally whole again, who has found his homeland, his “castle,” is capable of realizing this ideal. (281)

In a nutshell, Kafka’s “Jewish essence” is his Zionism—neither a parochial nationalism, nor an abstract religious dogma à la Schoeps. Zionism, for Brod, is an expression of the Jews’ desire to realize their “spiritual character as an active element in the human community” (Zionismus 37). Brod’s considers the Jewish-national movement as unique in that it is not “national” in the common sense of the word—in fact, its goal is to give a new meaning to the idea of the nation. It
is by realizing the “Jewish national character” that Zionism will be capable of fulfilling Judaism’s prophetic-messianic vocation. The Jews’ return to their national essence is meant to achieve a universal goal, the redemption of mankind, a task that cannot be achieved by the “fragmented, assimilated Jew” [der zersplitterte, assimilierte Jude].

In both his Kafka commentaries and Zionist writings, Brod faces the challenge of distinguishing Jewish nationalism from its European counterpart—a problem Schoeps does not need to resolve because of his a priori rejection Jewish nationalism. Brod’s solution, one he shares with other Prague-based Zionists such as Hugo Bergmann and Felix Weltsch, is to conceptualize Zionism dialectically, describing it as a movement that is both “for nationalism and against it” [Gegen den Nationalismus und für Ihn]. As Brod explains, “When the Jew reflects upon the question of nationalism, he confronts the following paradox: he must fight nationalism for the sake of human-brotherhood” (Kampf 60). Brod condemns all forms of nationalism with the exception of Zionism, which exists under the sign of paradox—a national movement that is simultaneously universalistic and anti-national. Zionism reclaims Jewish values, not for itself, but because it sees them as the path to worldly redemption [es will nicht die jüdischen Werte um ihrer selbst willen erhalten, sondern deshalb, weil es in ihnen den Weg zum Heil, zur Erlösung aller Menschen sieht] (63). Brod’s vision is similarly expressed in Felix Weltsch’s essay, “Against Intellectual Incest in Zionism” [Gegen die gedankliche Inzucht im Zionismus], where Weltsch explains that the Zionist movement does not limit itself to solving the Jewish problem: “From a political standpoint, Zionism is a goal, but on a moral level, it represents a path, a path to resolving the deepest problems of mankind” [Der Zionismus ist—politisch betrachtet—ein Ziel; sittlich gesehen aber ist er ein Weg; ein Weg zur Lösung der tiefsten Probleme der Menschheit] (Zionismus 23).
Brod and Weltsch conceive of Zionism as a form of “anti-national nationalism,” a religious-socialist-utopian movement that addresses a universal problem as it seeks to solve Jewish question. This duality translates directly into Brod’s Zionist reading of The Castle (but this also holds true for the rest of his Kafka interpretations as well).

The word Jew does not appear in The Castle. Yet, tangibly, Kafka in The Castle, straight from his Jewish soul, in a simple story, has said more about the situation of Jewry as a whole today than can be read in a hundred learned treatises. At the same time this specifically Jewish interpretation goes hand in hand with what is common to humanity, without either excluding or even disturbing the other. (PK 187)

In his Kafka commentaries, Schoeps too works within a dialectic of Jewish particularity and (Pauline) universality. Yet in Schoeps’s case the former ultimately dissolves into the latter. Brod’s interpretation is motivated by an ideology of dissimilation, a fact that is readily apparent from his reading of “The Cares of a Family Man” and “Report to an Academy”—stories which he interprets as Kafka’s critique of Western Jewry’s deracinated existence, and its “mimicry” of non-Jewish cultures. Brod’s reading of Kafka reflects his eclectic understanding of Judaism: a hodgepodge of inspirational-folkloric religiosity, communitarian ethics, and cultural-diasporic nationalism. Although Schoeps’s reading claims to be purely theological, it too is motivated by a particular political agenda. By painting Kafka’s Jewish religiosity in Barthian colors, Schoeps essentially eliminates all collective, traditional, and national markers of Jewish difference. What Schoeps sees as Kafka’s Jewishness is a non-denominational, abstract confession of faith that
transcends all confessional distinctions, embodying a “fundamental form of religiosity unlimited to a particular period” (Im Streit 160).

Schoeps’s interpretation reflects an attempt to recast Jewish particularism in the image of the universal. By reading Kafka’s Jewishness as a purely metaphysical and abstract ideal, one that draws on his philosophical exposition of the Judaism’s “biblical faith” in Jüdischer Glaube in dieser Zeit, Schoeps responds the Enlightenment’s accusation of Jewish tribalism. If Judaism’s core essence is nothing but an assertion of individual faith, and if rabbinic law is a falsification of Judaism’s transhistorical and universal message, as Schoeps argues, then the differences between Judaism and Christianity are cosmetic at best. Schoeps’s philosophical recuperation of Judaism’s “core biblical dogmas” in Jüdischer Glaube and his interpolation of these ideas into his reading of Kafka represent an attempt to articulate Jewishness in an abstract universal register. As apparent from Brod’s commentaries on The Castle, he too struggles with the problem of Jewish particularism. Brod’s key argument is that The Castle’s Zionist message complements its universal-ethical significance. This interpretation encapsulates the general thrust of Brod’s ideological writings, in which the self-assertion of Jewish national identity is justified as the means to achieving a trans-national, universal goal. In sum, both Schoeps and Brod struggle with the problem of negotiating the particular and the universal in their respective conceptions of Judaism. Schoeps resolves this problem by arguing that once you see past the historically contingent veneer of Judaism and peel away the extraneous layers of the rabbinic tradition, you discover that its “core” is the epitome of the universal. In his attempt to preserve Jewish particularism, rather than sublate it into the European whole as Schoeps does, Brod takes a different route by showing that Jewish particularism strives for the realization of the universal. Said differently, Schoeps tries to articulate the particular universally, whereas Brod seeks to
define the universal particularly. The following section explores the implications of Schoeps’s theological outlook for his unique perspective on the contested question of German-Jewish identity.

4. Reconciling Germanness and Jewishness

The phrase Schoeps first used to characterize Kafka’s religious outlook was “Barthianism without an intermediary” [Barthianismus ohne Mittler] (Im Streit 173). There is, of course, a certain irony to the fact that Schoeps chooses to describe what he believes is Kafka’s supra-historical, and trans-denominational religiosity in terms of a contemporary religious thinker with clear confessional ties to the Protestant Church. Yet Barth’s role in Schoeps’s reading of Kafka went beyond this nominal analogy. Schoeps’s interpretation tries to hold the rope by both ends— at once asserting the unambiguously Jewish character of Kafka’s writings, and at the same time affirming his religious outlook through theological categories of interwar Protestant thought. This Judeo-Christian syncretism epitomizes the identity politics behind Schoeps’s reading of Kafka. It also complements his views on the question of German-Jewish identity. Schoeps blurs the religious boundaries of Kafka’s Judaism in an effort to reconcile the ostensibly discrete entities referred to as “Germanness” and “Jewishness.” By limiting Jewishness to a credo and claiming that Judaism’s rituals and laws are superfluous to its “core dogmas,” Schoeps—in a Pauline gesture—strips Judaism of all its external manifestations, traditions, and shared customs. He distills Jewishness to a matter of pure faith, one that he articulates in the language of Protestant crisis theology.29

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29 An example of Schoeps’s rhetoric of inter-religious solidarity is found in his introduction to Modern Man and the Proclamation of Religion (1939), where he states, “In the present state of affairs the revealed religions find themselves in a difficult position. And the open attack led against them is not even the biggest threat. The good thing is that they all have a shared opponent in common. Protestants, Catholics, Jews, all of whom manifold separate
Schoeps’s conception of Judaism—and subsequent reading of Kafka—constitutes an apologetic response to accusations made by figures such as Hans Blüher in his work *Secessio Judaica: Philosophische Grundlegung der historischen Situation des Judentums und der antisemitischen Bewegung* (1922). Blüher, one of the leading intellectuals of the *Wandervogel*, the German youth movement, denounced the Jewish cultural presence in Germany using the all too familiar rhetoric of Wagnerian-völkisch anti-Semitism. The Jews, he claimed, were a people without a history, without an essential character, and thus a threat to the German *Volk*. Their influence on other nations was nothing but purely destructive [*wo der Jude in die Geschichte anderer Völker eingreift, wirkt er immer rein destruktiv*] (20). Blüher concludes that one cannot simultaneously tread the Jewish and German path [*Es gibt nur zweierlei: entweder ... oder... Man kann nicht zugleich den jüdischen und den deutschen Weg gehen*] (36).

Blüher is in full agreement with the Zionists, who criticize assimilated Jewry for its deracinated and inauthentic existence. Schoeps too dabbles in the discourse of the “uprooted Jew,” but transposes the problem from the realm of national authenticity to that of individual faith. Criticizing both Zionist dissimilation and liberal assimilation, Schoeps accuses these movements of falsifying Judaism, and betraying the “destiny of the people” [*Volksschicksal*] (*Wir deutschen Juden* 9). Brod and Blüher denounce German Jewry as inauthentic in order to reject the idea of a German-Jewish symbiosis. Each claims—albeit for different ideological recognition of one truth, that the Holy Scriptures are the word of God and that divine will was laid out before mankind through revelation—unscathed by the differences in the belief—in a shared front and bear the same responsibilities, challenges, and tasks. An ecumenical disposition grows out of this awareness, which is the inspiration for this series entitled ‘Contemporary Religion’ … The pressing question faced equally by all religions and confessions that emerged from biblical revelation is how to bring word of the bible to modern man who is estranged from it as never before. The following pages concern themselves with what the meaning of this estrangement, its consequences, and whether and how man can come to grips with it” (5).

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30 Schoeps engaged in a highly publicized exchange of letters with Blüher, which were published in 1933 under the title *Streit um Israel: Ein jüdisch-christliches Gespräch*. A partial account of this exchange is found in Gary Lease’s “Odd Fellows” in the Politics of Religion: Modernism, National Socialism, and German Judaism, pp. 211-220.
reasons—that the two national-cultures are mutually exclusive. Schoeps, asserting the compatibility of the German and the Jewish culture, responds to the accusations of both ideological camps by redefining Jewishness and Jewish peoplehood as compatible with the German nation and its “essence.”

He defends the Jew’s duality [*Doppelheit*], arguing that the Jew can be a part of the German nation without compromising his Jewishness. The Jews’ cultural interaction with the Germans constitutes an ideal symbiosis: “Germanness has entered our substance and we, who today are compelled to passionately cling to Germany, feel ourselves to be essentially German [*urtümlich Deutsches*]” (17). German Jewry’s dual allegiance to Germanness and Jewishness does not pose a problem because they represent two wholly different levels of the individual Jew’s existence. Whereas the Jew’s “Germanness” comprises his national identity, his “Jewishness” represents the spiritual-religious dimension of his being, which in no way compromises his national loyalties. The reality of the Jew’s existence is that he is German without being exclusively German. As Schoeps explains,

> We are bound to the German people [*deutschen Stämme*]. But at the same time we are Jews, by descent and belief, in what is more than a national collective. This “at the same time” constitutes the duality [*Doppelseitigkeit*] of our existence. It does not bring about a double-bind [*Zweispalt*] or conflict, because it is essential for our self-determination that we exist on these two different planes of being. (19)
It is with this idea in mind that Schoeps responds to the Zionist and German-völkisch accusations of the German-Jew’s duality and fragmentation. According to Schoeps it is not the immanent conflict between the Jew’s Germanness and Jewishness that is the cause of his contemporary deracination, but his secularity. In his retort to the claim that the Jews are bearers of a corrosive spirit [Träger eines zersetzenden Geistes] that threatens to dissolve the German national-substance [Volkssubstanz], Schoeps apologetically explains that it is not Judaism that is a threat to Germany and the German spirit, but the Jew who has distanced himself from Judaism [Nicht das Judentum hat einen zersetzenden und auflösenden Geist, sondern entwurzelte und vom Judentum losgelöste Menschen können ihn haben] (28). The real threat to the German Geist is posed by those radical left-wing Jewish intellectuals, whose worldview epitomizes the principles of “soulless, dissolute, abstract reason” [entseelende, auflösende und abstrakte ‘Vernunft’] (29).

Schoeps means to defend of Judaism but ends up reproducing the anti-Semitic logic he tries to refute. He explains that liberalism and Marxism are not inherently Jewish ideologies, but concedes that the Jews represent a large contingent in these movements. In his defense of Judaism, Schoeps argues that the Jews who swarm to these secular movements are those who have parted ways with everything Jewish. It is only because they are no longer bound to Judaism that they subscribe so passionately to these destructive ideologies. These deracinated Jews become revolutionaries because they seek to violently break away from the repressive world of their fathers and grandfathers. Having no understanding of the freedom that other Western Europeans have had generations to adapt to, the newly emancipated Jews confuse their liberty with nihilism. Thus, according to Schoeps’s logic, the Jew, who disavows his own religious essence, will also seek to destroy the bonds that hold together other peoples (31).
It is Schoeps’s understanding of the modern Jew’s religious “uprootedness” that informs his theological reading of Kafka’s animals and hybrid creatures, such as Bucephalus, Gregor Samsa, and the singer Josephine. Kafka’s characters, he explains, suffer from a threefold loss—the “loss of self” [Selbstverlorenheit], “loss of God” [Gottverlorenheit], and “loss of thou” [Duverlorenheit]—all of which are immanently related. Schoeps illustrates his thesis through his interpretation of Kafka’s “The Cares of a Family Man.” This fictional creature called the Odradek lacks distinct form, has no fixed abode, and even the meaning and origin of its name remain a matter of speculation. The Slavic linguistic origins of the creature’s name, Schoeps speculates, refer to the fact that the Odradek is “not subject to the law” [dem Gesetz entraten]. This thing, the Odradek, is an expression of the reification of the individual [Eswerdung des Ich] who has been severed from his relationship to God. The “worries of the father of the house”—Die Sorge des Hausvaters, as the story is called in German—refer to the worries of “the heavenly father.” Half living and half dead, this disfigured creature represented the existential predicament of the modern-secular Jew, who had forgotten God’s law (Vergessene 116). As discussed in the previous chapter, Brod also interprets the Odradek as an allegory for modern Jewry’s fragmented existence. Yet in contrast to Schoeps, who sees this hybrid creature as a parable of the individual Jew’s religious-existential condition, Brod explains that the Odradek’s deformity corresponds to that of the Jewish people as a whole. The difference between these two “Jewish readings” gets to the heart of the commentators’ ideological disagreement. Brod conceives Jewish authenticity in terms of a national-culture, a collective historical identity. Schoeps, on the other hand, conceives Jewishness as a matter of “pure faith”—one that concerns the Jewish individual. As Schoeps explains in Wir deutschen Juden (1934), the Jewish-national misconception [das national-jüdische Mißverständnis] is rooted in their misguided belief that the
Jewish people are a national-collective (18). It is following this logic that Schoeps sees the Odradek’s (or the individual Jew’s) deformed existence as a consequence of his forgetting of the “Law of Revelation.”

In conclusion, Schoeps’s reading of Kafka complements his ideological effort to denationalize Jewish identity and recast Judaism as a purely spiritual and individualistic faith. Of the contemporary sources that Schoeps harnessed for his ambitious attempt to recast Judaism as a confession, none is more prominent then Franz Kafka, whose novels he described as “modern hieroglyphic-scriptures” of a “negative religion.” Schoeps argues that although they were written in “secularized form,” Kafka’s writings are “suffused with the central themes of Jewish religiosity,” and governed by an “acute religious predicament” (Im Streit 200). He defines this “predicament” in the abstract terms of Kierkegaard’s paradox of faith. Dismissing the ethnic, national, and cultural dimensions that German-Jewish Zionists saw as the defining elements of contemporary Jewish identity, Schoeps redefines Jewishness as a matter of pure faith, or what he calls Judaism’s “originary dogmas.” While Schoeps’s “systematic theology of Judaism” is rooted in a critique of German-Jewish liberalism, it continues its legacy under a new philosophical guise. His main critique of Mendelssohn, Cohen and other German-Jewish reformers is that they rationalize Jewish law, and try to turn Judaism into a natural religion. He claims that these thinkers neutralize Judaism’s primeval principles of faith. At the same time, his insistence on a Judaism of pure dogma perpetuates the modern liberal project of assimilation under a new guise, one adapted to the discourse of interwar crisis theology. Replacing the rhetoric of Enlightenment rationality with the apocalyptic rhetoric of Barth, Heidegger and Rosenzweig, Schoeps, just like the liberal forebears he rails against, disposes with all ritualistic elements of rabbinic Judaism.
and traditional Jewish law in an attempt to eliminate all traces of Jewish particularism that stand in the way of the Jews’ path to becoming fully-fledged Germans.

5. Between Job and Don Quixote (Chapter Postscript)

Throughout his life Schoeps was embroiled in various intra-Jewish controversies. His unorthodox politics and religious views incurred the wrath of his coreligionists from early on in his career. Although Brod strongly objected to Schoeps’s German nationalism he is one of the few who did not try to settle scores with Schoeps in their memoirs and postwar writings. This was not the case with Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who described Schoeps and his followers in the *Deutsche Vortrupp* as “fanatic, superpatriots, passionate anti-Zionists, and in a very real sense anti-Semitic. They were self-hating Jews who thought they could save themselves by making common cause with the Nazis” (100). Prinz accused Schoeps’s pamphlet, *Wir deutschen Juden*, which professed its German-Jewish oath of loyalty to fatherland, of being “an exercise in sheer futility, morally, intellectually obnoxious, but nevertheless, an expression of some streams within German Jewry whose adherents held stubbornly to their convictions that sixteen hundred years of German-Jewish history could not be wiped out and that they were at least as German as the others” (100).

Paradoxically, it was his lifelong endeavor to fuse his German and Jewish identities that left him excluded from both worlds. German-Israeli scholar Schalom Ben-Chorin accurately described Schoeps’s ideological homelessness, in his 1971 article “Between Job and Don Quixote II”:

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31 On the Jewish critical responses to Schoeps see also Dominique Bourel’s “Hans-Joachim Schoeps und Seine Gegner” in *Wider den Zeitgeist* (140-158).
In the German reality of 1970, the trinity Schoeps sought to embody by way of Judaism—Prussianism—Conservatism was no more than an anachronism. Not only the Jewish youth, but also the German youth no longer understands Schoeps’ language. This is tragic insomuch as Schoeps came out of the Free-German Youth and remained influenced by the youth-movement. A Jewish theologian without Judaism, a leader of youth without a following, a Prussian without Prussians—Schoeps is in danger of becoming a German without Germany.}

In his public plea on his Schoeps’s behalf, Ben-Chorinn denounced the slanderous misconstrual of his friend’s political views and described the tragic irony of a German-Jew, who despite the loss his mother in Auschwitz and his father in Theresienstadt had quixotically remained ‘prepared for Germany.’ The inconceivability of such a political and religious stance in the aftermath of the Shoah rendered Schoeps a permanent outsider in relation to both his German and Jewish contemporaries. The unlikely politics embodied in a Prussian-Jewish conservative

32 Schalom Ben-Chorin, “Zwischen Don Quijote und Hiob II” (pp. 154-155) in Auf der Suche nach einer judischen Theologie: Der Briefwechsel zwischen Schalom Ben-Chorin und Hans-Joachim Schoeps. Ed. Julius Schoeps. Königstein: Jüdischer Verlag bei Athenäum, 1989. The “II” in article’s title was an allusion to a review written almost forty years earlier by Schalom Ben-Chorin, formerly Fritz Rosenthal, entitled “Zwischen Don Quijote und Hiob.” In the 1934 piece Ben-Chorin criticized Schoeps’ politics, stating “If in 1934 a Jew breaks out with the call ‘Prepared for Germany’ what immediately comes to mind is the sad image of a rider going after his Dulcinea del Toboso... But if the same Jew makes the gestures of an ultra-nationalist, then one is reminded of Job who repays his suffering with love... Schoeps positions himself between Don Quixote and Job, between a grotesque bordering on anachronism, and a heroic disposition that attracts even the attention of his opponents. What is astounding is that Schoeps’s German-Jewish philosophy begins with theology and ends in politics” (Ibid 147). 

33 “Bereit für Deutschland” was the motto of the Jewish political movement that Schoeps founded during the nineteen-thirties as a response to the rise of Nazism. The Deutsche Vortrupp promoted a German-Jewish nationalism that was meant to counter the growing anti-Semitism in Germany with its political vision of German-Jewish symbiosis.
thinker, who was a professed anti-Zionist, German nationalist, and gay rights advocate left Schoeps standing in an ideological no man’s land. 34

That Schoeps should be assigned to a mere footnote in the history of Weimar-era Jewish theology is an egregious scholarly oversight. Although it was predominantly rejected by his contemporaries and has failed to withstand the test of time, Schoeps’s inventive religious syncretism merits our attention, if only to illuminate the variegated and heterogeneous tapestry of interwar German-Jewish thought. Schoeps’s peculiar strand of Judaism affords us with a unique apocryphal perspective on the religious and political debates waged within the German-Jewish community during those years. His political, literary and theological writings contribute to our understanding of its religious and ideological complexities from the oblique perspective of one of its outliers.

1. Kafka, Job and the Jewish Fate

In her 1929 essay, “Das Hiob-Problem bei Franz Kafka,” the poet and critic Margarete Susman (1872 - 1966) proclaimed, “Franz Kafka has achieved the task of counterposing the truth of his own time to the eternal truth of Judaism” (47). Conceding that the author’s work reflected the secular reality that had spawned it, Susman believed that it nevertheless formed part of a longstanding Jewish theodical tradition that began with the Book of Job (48). In this regard, Susman shares the distinguished company of Gershom Scholem, Hans-Joachim Schoeps and Max Brod, all of whom noted Kafka’s affinities to the Book of Job and placed his relationship to Scripture at the center of their interpretations. They all regard the “scriptural character” of Kafka’s writing as proof of its inherent Jewishness, yet their definitions of this Jewishness radically differ.

Max Brod, for example, frequently pointed out Kafka’s affinities to the Bible and the Talmud, but the conclusions he drew often reflected the communitarian ethics and national ideals of early Zionism. On first glance, Susman’s Kafka essay gives the impression that she too read Kafka in the post-assimilatory tenor of cultural Zionist ideology. By associating Kafka with the “Jewish essence,” “Jewish spirit,” and “eternal truth of Judaism,” Susman seemingly adopts the rhetoric of Jewish-national self-determination. Even the correspondence she draws between

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35 “Das Hiob-Problem bei Franz Kafka,” Der Morgen 5 (1929): 31–49. The citations for this essay refer to Theodore Frankel’s 1956 translation, which appeared under the title “Franz Kafka.” All other citations of Susman’s work refer solely to the German and are my own translation.
Kafka’s literature and the biblical Book of Job resembles the methods of Zionist-oriented critics, who often alluded to a work’s biblical themes as a sign of its author’s Jewish sensibilities.

By linking Kafka’s writings to the Book of Job, Susman seems to be arguing that despite the progressive secularization of Western European Jewry, certain biblical echoes continue to resonate in the literature produced by Jews in the German-speaking world. Such a reading would conclude that Susman’s Kafka-essay celebrates Jewish historical continuity, and uses the Kafka-Job nexus in order to demonstrate how modern European Jewry had preserved its religious heritage and collective identity. Susman, however, believed that since the emancipation, Western Jews had lost the spiritual and cultural markers that had previously distinguished them from their non-Jewish environment. As she stated elsewhere, “The Jews have become an invisible people… Today’s Jews are completely severed from the collective reality of a nation [Volkswirklichkeit] they possessed as the biblical Israel” (Hiob 66).

Brod regarded the scriptural character of Kafka’s stories as a sign of his strong affinities to traditional Jewish doctrine, whereas in Susman’s reading, Kafka is neither a prophet of Jewish-national renewal nor a religious visionary. His works, she believed, contained no positive religious message and relayed no doctrinal truth. To the contrary, Kafka’s stories mirrored the religious and communal dissolution that affected both Western Jewry and Europe as a whole. Paradoxically, it was Kafka’s utter negativity that demonstrated his affinities to the Book of Job, and by extension reflected the modern Jewish condition. Kafka’s “unparalleled artistic achievement,” she explained, consisted in having found “the form of nothing itself” [die Form des Nichts selbst] (40)—a reflection of the “nothingness” Judaism had been reduced to in the modern era.
Kafka’s nihilistic vision of modernity “could be completed only by a Jewish spirit,” because it was precisely the “form of nothing itself” that European Jewry had assumed since the time of the Emancipation (41). In contrast to Max Brod, Felix Weltsch, and Oskar Baum, for whom Kafka’s “Jewish spirit” denoted a positive moral and religious Weltanschauung, Susman associates the author’s Jewishness with a radical negativity. Conversely, it was not the triumphal affirmation of modern Jewish identity that Susman saw in Kafka’s works, but its very disintegration. After becoming full participants in Europe’s spiritual and cultural life, the Jews had shed the external and internal characteristics that had previously distinguished them as a community of faith. If Kafka’s fiction reflected the reality of modern European Jewry, it was by virtue of the fact that it illuminated its profound state of crisis. The modern day’s Jew relationship to the foundational truth of Judaism resembled the lines from Kafka’s “An Old Legend,” in which the narrator explains, “Here and there we catch a curiously significant phrase and we would almost like to leap to our feet, if we did not feel the weight of the centuries upon us” (Hiob 24).

In the following chapter, I wish to translate Susman’s two contradictory claims concerning Kafka’s work into the register of identity politics. My question is, what does her reading of Kafka in relation to these two seemingly antithetical contexts—that of biblical Job and secular modernity—say about Susman’s own vision of modern Jewish identity? What does it mean for Susman to celebrate Kafka’s writing as a manifestation of the “eternal truth of Judaism” and at the same time regard it as a sign of Western-Jewish decline? Susman’s contradictory interpretation of Kafka’s “biblical-modernity” provides the key to her understanding of what it is that survived of the “Jewish essence” since the secularization and acculturation of Western European Jewry. Whereas her contemporaries associated Kafka’s
writing with different ethical, theological, and communitarian values they designated as “Jewish,” Susman does not seek to distill a discrete and unified conception of Jewish culture or identity from her reading. Zionist literary critics, such as Max Brod and Felix Weltsch, interpret Kafka’s fiction in an effort to differentiate its underlying spiritual and aesthetic Jewishness.

Susman, on the other hand, believed that what was “Jewish” about Kafka’s writing was precisely the fact that it could not be distinguished as such. Her account of the “Jewish Kafka” forms a polemic response to the identitarian discourse employed by cultural Zionist thinkers, who sought to delimit and circumscribe the cultural, spiritual, and national boundaries of the so-called “Jewish spirit.”

Susman’s effort to weave Kafka into two seemingly antithetical frameworks—the Jewish and the non-Jewish, the biblical and the modern—is apparent throughout the essay. Although his literary works seemed wholly removed from the world of the Old Testament, Susman saw a distinct point of convergence. In the reified reality that made up Kafka’s world, antagonistic and dehumanizing forces had destroyed all meaningful human existence. The uncanny, over-determined reality that unfolded in his stories, she explained, was a “gruesome mirror-image of our contemporary being” [furchtbares Spiegelbild unseres heutigen Daseins] (Freiheit 332). His work anticipated the full consequences of rationalization, bureaucratization, and industrialization of modern life: “the rule of dead goals over living meaning” [die Herrschaft des toten Zwecks über den lebendigen Sinn] (Freiheit 332). At the same time, the problem of incomprehensible suffering and guilt that pervaded his stories resonated with the fundamental question presented in the Book of Job.
Like Job, Kafka’s characters were preoccupied with existential questions concerning good and evil, crime and punishment. The meaninglessness and inevitability of human suffering described in his stories closely resembled Job’s predicament and his inability to make sense of his tragically inexplicable fate. Kafka’s writing, she concluded, emerged out of the “Jews’ theodicy,” their longstanding quarrel with God [Hader mit Gott], which began with the Book of Job and continued throughout the Jews’ exile (37). The Jews’ ongoing dispute, their

Susman’s association of Kafka and Scripture was anticipated by Franz Rosenzweig, who in a letter from May 1927 to his cousin Gertrud Oppenheim, observed, “The people who wrote the Bible seem to have thought of God much the way Kafka did. I have never read a book that reminded me so much of the Bible as his novel The Castle, and that is why reading it certainly cannot be called a pleasure” (Life and Thought 160). One of the remarkable things in Rosenzweig’s analogy is the primary he gives Kafka over the authors of the Bible. It is not Kafka’s image of God that is said to resemble its biblical counterpart, but the other way around. Just as perplexing is the fact that Rosenzweig does not specify which of the many biblical representations of God Kafka’s The Castle corresponds to. The Hebrew Bible’s portrayal of God ranges from merciful guardian and heavenly redeemer to zealous and unforgiving judge. The biblical image Rosenzweig is most likely referring to is neither of those, but rather the God of Isaiah, of whom it is said “And I will wait upon the Lord who hides his face from the House of Jacob, and I will look for him” (8:17). Rosenzweig’s succinct observations from 1927 became the central theme of Susman’s Kafka essay two years later. This is not to suggest that Susman was familiar Rosenzweig’s private communiqué to Gertrud Oppenheim. But in light of Rosenzweig’s profound influence on Susman, it is hardly implausible that the two should have come to similar conclusions regarding Kafka’s religious worldview. In fact, one might argue that Susman’s understanding of Kafka’s relationship to Scripture is constructed upon the philosophical foundations of Rosenzweig’s “New Thinking.” While Susman does not mention Rosenzweig by name in her 1929 Kafka essay, traces of his dialogical philosophy are clearly discernable throughout (See previous footnote).

It is worthwhile noting Susman’s unique reformulation of the concept of “theodicy,” and the philosophical critique of German Idealism it encapsulates. Theodicy addresses itself to the basic religious question of God’s relationship to the world. The problem it seeks to resolve is the dissonance between the moral conception of God and the apparent imperfections of the world. As a philosophical argument, it is meant to account for inexplicable human suffering in an effort to maintain an ordered sense of the world and its moral coherence. Susman’s recourse to the Book of Job as the scriptural framework for the Jews’ theodicy raises a certain difficulty, primarily the fact that the book itself does not resolve the problem of evil. The Book of Job, as Susman well knew, did not resolve the problem of evil, but it was the manner in which the book articulated the problem, as a first person narrative that related the suffering of a solitary individual, that recovered the constitutive dimension of the question itself. The Book of Job imparts no ultimate knowledge about the moral coherence of the world. Yet what Susman defines as the Jews’ “theodicy” is not the integration of their suffering into a greater metaphysical framework, or a justification of that suffering as the work of divine providence. For Susman, the dialogue of Job’s three friends—Eliphaz, Zophar and Bildad—represented the failure of the traditional conception of theodicy as a all-encompassing philosophical system. The challenge of theodicy could not be resolved in the manner proposed by Leibniz in the Essais de Théodicée (1710). It was not an exercise in abstract thought, to be solved by an armchair philosopher, who could prove that “we live in the best of all possible worlds.” For Susman, this existential quandary was not one that emerged in a pure void, but emerged from the depths of individual experience. It was a question expressed by a historically situated individual who sought to reconcile the subjective conditions of his existence with his understanding of God’s justice in order to find meaning experience. Although she does not explicitly refer to Leibniz or Hegel in the essay, it is clear that her critique of Job’s three friends reflects a contemporary critique of the
enduring effort to comprehend the historical and religious meaning of their suffering had been prefigured in Job’s indictment of God and his demand for justice.

shortcomings she saw in philosophical Idealism, which failed to address the personal and experiential dimension of human suffering.

The Book of Job recuperated the authentic scope of the theodical problem by refusing to establish an unequivocal solution to the question of suffering. Susman’s conception of theodicy took its cue from the book’s dialogical narrative form. The book’s narrative unfolded as a continuous dialogue between God and Satan, Job and his friends, and ultimately Job and God. Dialogue, not system, was the proper frame for an authentic theodicy. The Book of Job did not give any ultimate answers to the questions it presented, but it provided the scriptural mainstay for the Jews’s post-exilic existence. Job’s “disputation” [Hader] with God formed the dialogical framework for subsequent generations whose experience of inexplicable suffering was mirrored in the Book of Job.

For Susman, the juridical framing of the Jobian narrative is the starting point for the Jews’ dialogical-theodicy. Susman’s understanding of the Book of Job as scriptural reflection of Jewish suffering belongs to a well-established religious tradition that extends back to medieval rabbinic commentaries of the book. The more radical aspect of her interpretation is that it seems to upend the conventional wisdom that claims the book is about the trial that the righteous endure at the hand of God. Susman notably reverses the traditional understanding of the courtroom drama that unfolds in the book. It is not Job who is put on trial in the book, but God who is put on trial by Job. Courtroom allusions and trial references abound. Job implores God, demanding he have his day in court. Job, unlike his friends, does not want a general solution to the problem of evil. He wants to understand the meaning and cause of his individual suffering.

Susman’s notion of the “Jews’ theodicy” is essentially a critique of German Idealism, which is markedly shaped by the thought of Franz Rosenzweig. As Susman notes in her review of The Star of Redemption, “This book comes, self-consciously, at a great turning point, a time of decay, of the degeneration of the philosophy of pure thought that has dominated the Western world from Parmenides to Hegel. At this moment… we can see that the philosophy of pure thought has no strength left to resolve life and redeem us from death” (133). Pure thinking, which culminated in Hegelian philosophy, proclaimed to provide an all-encompassing system of knowledge. But integrated all individual entities and historical events within its comprehensive structure it denied them their unique singularity. The history of Western philosophy destroys all forms of otherness, which it strives to incorporate with its domain of knowledge. What Rosenzweig had done in The Star of Redemption was shift the terms of philosophy from the universal Whole to the solitary individual.

For Rosenzweig, the only valid philosophy was one that arose from the “personal standpoint of the thinker,” one whose starting point was the subjective position of the thinker. As he succinctly “Our eyes are, indeed, only our own eyes; yet it would be folly to imagine we must pluck them out in order to see straight” (179). One could not deny the physical dimension of human existence, or the experience of anxiety that it brought with it. Yet this was precisely what Western philosophy had done—it had constructed a system of knowledge that reified the world of experience by fitting it into an abstract-conceptual frame. The philosophical-theological thrust of Rosenzweig’s work was a critique of this complete disregard to individual life, and embodied experience. By denying the corporeality and mortality of human life, philosophy failed to acknowledge the true human condition. The knowledge of “the Whole”—general knowledge—failed to acknowledge death.

Under the influence of Rosenzweig’s “New Thinking,” Susman conceives the idea of the “Jews’ theodicy.” It does not constitute a system, but is rather the unfolding of a hermeneutic problem—the ongoing struggle to recount the contents of individual and collective experience in the narrative form that will endow it with meaning. The theodicy Susman presents in her essay never attains its final form, but continues to evolve through the Jews’ ongoing “struggle with God”—which is an expression of their effort to give form to their historical existence. The varying aesthetic and metaphysical terms that form the Jews’ theodicy correspond to their collective self-consciousness at a given historical era. Every generation’s theodicy reflected its attempt to give form to the particularity of its own experience. The respective theodicy of every generation represented the unique theological form it gave its historical experience.
Job who in his suffering was delivered by God to his tempter prefigures in his fate the sorrowful fate of the Jewish people in exile. Like Job the Jews accepted their suffering as something decreed by God. But they do not simply accept it; they want to understand. They want to understand God for Whose sake they suffer. Like Job they demand that God Whose bidding and law they have accepted be absolutely just. Here is the reason why life for the Jews in their exile is one long litigation, an incessant quarrel with God. (“Kafka” 39)

Kafka’s narratives formed part of a Jewish theodical tradition that began with the Book of Job. Yet whereas this theodicy had, in previous centuries reflected the Jews’ historical self-consciousness as a unified people, this was no longer the case with Kafka’s work. The Jews’ theodicy continually transformed itself under the pressures of historical necessity, and contact with the non-Jewish world. With the dissolution of the ghetto and the secularization of European Jewry, this theodicy took on new forms, which reflected the Jews’ new historical reality and the disintegration of their traditional religious mainstay.

If Kafka’s writing was a modern articulation of the “Jews’ theodicy,” it was one that simultaneously revealed the Jews’ self-estrangement from their religious heritage. In his writing, the physical dimension of Jewish exile was augmented by a metaphysical homelessness—a consequence of secularization. In the modern era, she explained, “the isolation and the abandonment of the Jew in exile has been completed with his assimilation into the occidental world” (39). Just as God hid himself from the biblical Job, he had disappeared from the horizons of the modern Jew. It was this absence that occupied the entire foreground of Kafka’s writing.
2. Two Perspectives on “the Continuum of Jewish Literature”

Susman’s association of Kafka and Job seems to have been anticipated by Gershom Scholem. In an unpublished manuscript that Scholem wrote after reading *The Trial* in 1926, he noted:

If one can say that prose, in order to be renowned for absolute greatness, must necessarily shed light upon the theological contents of experience in the realm of language—then this book serves as a confirmation of this. After millennia, there has been attained anew, from an unexpected point of view, the linguistic world of expression of the Book of Job. Essentially, this work is without parallel, apart from the Book of Job. The situation of the hidden trial, within the framework of whose rules human life occurs, is developed in these two works to the very highest level. One may conjecture that never did any Jew attain such a fashioning of his world from such an inner and profound center of Judaism. (*Mysticism* 193)

There are remarkable similarities between Scholem and Susman’s respective conceptions of Kafka. Both believe there is an inherently Jewish dimension to his work, which they characterize in negative-dialectical terms. Yet despite their rhetorical affinities, the two arrive at an antipodal understanding of Kafka’s “Jewish essence.” Paradoxically, the ideological discrepancy emerges at the point where their readings seem to almost coincide—in the analogy both make between Kafka and the Book of Job.

In a 1931 letter Scholem advised Benjamin “to begin any inquiry into Kafka with the Book of Job, or at least with a discussion of the possibility of divine judgment,” which he
regarded “as the sole subject of Kafka’s production [worthy of] being treated in a work of literature.” Kafka’s prose was a “moral reflection” of a “halakhist [a rabbinic legislator] who attempted a linguistic paraphrase of divine judgment” (Friendship 216) These affinities served to justify Scholem’s staunch conviction that Kafka did not belong in the “continuum of German literature” but in the “continuum of Jewish literature,” which he perceived as two discrete and mutually exclusive entities. As Scholem unequivocally asserted, “Here, for once, a world is expressed in which redemption cannot be anticipated—go and explain that to the goyim!” (216).

Scholem’s understanding of Kafka’s place on “the continuum of Jewish literature” is premised on its fundamental incompatibility with German literature. The idea that Kafka belongs on this continuum by virtue of his affinities to Job is somewhat dubious. Do Kafka’s allusions to the Book of Job truly point to a unique and exclusive Jewish sensibility that sets the author apart from his general European and German cultural context? As Jonathan Sheehan observes, “No book of the Bible was as widely commented on, or translated, in the English and German Enlightenments as that of Job” (“Poetics” 213). Scholem’s understanding of Kafka’s Jewishness is implicitly based on the idea that the Book of Job is the exclusive property of the Jews’ national literature, while ignoring the prominent role this work assumed in the context of modern European thought.

In contrast to Scholem, who perceives the Jobian dimension in Kafka’s writing as a mark of its Jewish exclusivity, Susman believes that insofar as the Kafka-Job nexus says something about Kafka’s Jewishness, it also attests to its ability to illuminate the human condition. Susman’s essay “What Can the Bible Still Mean to Us Today?” [Was kann uns die Bibel heute noch bedeuten?] reveals her disagreement with Scholem on the meaning of Job’s “Jewishness.” The essay’s opening question was whether an era, which was “fully immersed in its own
historicity and sealed off from eternity,” could still relate to the “eternal and living truth” of the Bible (299). The question regarding the Bible’s contemporary “truth,” Susman surmised, was in fact a question concerning its readers: were they still capable of recognizing themselves?

Susman went on to present the Book of Job as a scriptural mirror of the modern human condition. Noting that Job’s situation corresponded to the “fragmentary and solitary existence” of the individual in twentieth-century Europe, Susman exhorted her readers:

We recognize our historical, collective guilt. It is the guilt the prophets attributed to Israel: the worship of dead, self-fabricated idols, the falling away from God and his justice. And therein consists the vicious circle in which we find ourselves: our guilt becomes our punishment, and our punishment becomes our guilt. We cannot comprehend history’s divinely decreed judgment upon us. Our relationship to eternity is like Job’s. Job knows that there is no truth to the way his friends speak of the relationship between human guilt and divine retribution. He realizes that the general guilt for which he suffers is not his own, that he does not deserve his punishment... (300)

Commenting on this passage, Susanne Hillman perceptively notes Susman’s ambiguous use of pronouns. Who is Susman referring to when she speaks in the first-person plural? Does the “we” refer to Jews, Germans, or perhaps all humanity? Because Susman avoids any explicit self-identification, it remains unclear whether her “we” is one spoken on the behalf of “we Jews.” Hillman believes that the ambiguity is intentional and argues that Susman’s essay purposely
elides such identifications. A similar blurring of boundaries takes place in Susman’s later works, “Job and Our Times” and The Book of Job and the Fate of the Jewish People, where she again fuses “the Jewish” and “the European,” collapsing the binary distinctions that characterize the rhetoric of interwar German Zionism.

In her 1936 essay, Susman claimed that the Book of Job’s ability to illuminate “the human destiny in its singular fate” rendered it “the high song of suffering, one of great poems of humanity of all times” (336). Never before, she argued, had Job’s condition so powerfully approximated that of humanity. Job’s inexplicably horrendous fate powerfully resonated with the experience of modernity, which had brought about suffering on an unprecedented scale. Susman then turns from Europe’s spiritual and physical plight to the persecution of German Jewry under National Socialism. Using the Book of Job as an allegory for the Jewish fate, Susman drew an analogy between Job’s solitary suffering and the vilification and discrimination German Jewry experienced under Hitler. Toward the end of the essay she shifted back to the general European context with which she began, concluding that despite the fact that German Jews had been singled out for persecution, the historical and metaphysical significance of their suffering was inseparable from Europe’s collective-historical fate of [europäische Gesamtschicksal] (“Hiob” 343).

Susman returned to this argument after the Second World War in Das Buch Hiob (1946), where she claimed that the destruction of European Jewry could not be separated from the general human suffering experienced during the war. In fact, it was precisely in the context of the

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39 “Hiob und unsere Zeit” (1936)
40 Das Buch Hiob und das Schicksal des jüdischen Volkes (1946). From here on will also be referred to as Das Buch Hiob.
general human suffering that the uniqueness of the Jewish fate revealed itself. She again used the Book of Job to express the inextricable relationship that bound the two together, explaining that the Book of Job’s ability to illuminate the Jewish fate was bound to its significance as a document that shed light on the fate of humanity.

Just as the fate of Job mirrors the fate of the Jewish people and simultaneously that of the human fate as a whole, so is the essence of humanity inscribed in the people of Israel—a singular, historic people, who symbolize and represent all of humanity. (Hiob 50)

Susman constructed her argument by analogy: Just as the Book of Job served as the biblical figuration of the Jews’ trials and tribulations in exile, the Jews’ historical suffering mirrored the fate of mankind. She was not concerned with the political or sociological causes that had precipitated the persecution of the Jews, but was interested in the religious and ethical meaning of these events. From a trans-historical perspective the anti-Semitic developments in Germany were no historical accident, but a manifestation of the “Jewish fate.” Like Job, the Jewish people, were meant to suffer for sins that were not their own. Israel, according to the words of the prophets, was “not a people like other peoples.” They existed not for the sake of “self-realization” [Selbstverwirklichung] or by virtue of “national self-determination” [völkische Selbstbehauptung]. What constituted Jewish peoplehood was its dispersion, homelessness and powerlessness—their “self-surrender” [Selbstaufgabe] for the sake of humanity (343). The immensity of this task, which rendered the Jewish people homeless and volatile, turned them into the historical embodiment of Job. ⁴¹

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⁴¹ As several critics have noted, Susman’s theological interpretation of the Holocaust is ethically fraught. The idea
It is in light of her later readings that Susman’s understanding of the Kafka-Job correspondence may be regarded as a pointed critique of the ideological position taken by Scholem. In contrast to Scholem who tries to define Kafka’s Jewishness along clear-cut national, cultural, and aesthetic categories, Susman’s portrayal of Kafka’s Jewishness is so ambiguous and self-contradictory that it undermines the very possibility of unequivocally distinguishing the Jewish and German elements in his work. Like Scholem, Susman too claims that “no work bears the traits of Job’s ancient dispute with God as Kafka’s work.” Yet in contrast to Scholem, Susman interprets his writing as a site in which the Jewish and the non-Jewish elements merge and become practically indistinguishable from one another.

Her explication of Kafka’s Jobian qualities is meant to problematize the distinction Scholem makes between “Jewish” and “non-Jewish” literature. To the extent that Susman regards Kafka’s relationship to the Book of Job as a sign of his place on the “continuum of Jewish literature,” she also believes that it is inextricably bound to his place on the “continuum” of German and modern European literature. In Susman’s reading, Kafka’s Jewish particularity manifests itself at the point where it converges with the universal human condition—the individual’s confrontation with incomprehensible affliction. It is the point where Kafka’s writing intersects with the biblical Job, presumably the place where it reveals its singular “Jewish essence” that it becomes wholly indistinguishable from “world literature,” or “goyish” literature.

that the Jews died for the sake humanity comes unsettlingly close to the Christian doctrine of the death of Christ, which sees his passion as atonement for the sins of mankind. No less disturbing is Susman’s overall effort to provide a metaphysical frame-narrative for the murder of European Jewry. By interpreting the Shoah in light of the Book of Job, Susman divorces it from the historical, political, and social context in which it occurred, and thus giving it an aura of teleological inevitability. Susman’s Holocaust theodicy formalizes the Jews’ fate during the war into a supra-historical and metaphysical truth, which is presented as a divine revelation from its “negative aspect.” By suggesting that Jewish suffering during the war encapsulates a divine or metaphysical truth about Judaism’s place among the nations, Susman’s negative theodicy sidesteps the question of human agency and individual accountability with regard to these events. For an extensive discussion of this problem see Gesine Palmer’s essay, “Sinn-Sein durch Leiden: Ein Problem der Hiobinterpretation” in Grenzgänge zwischen Dichtung, Philosophie und Kulturkritik : über Margarete Susman (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012).
as Scholem might have it.

3. The “German-Jewish Symbiosis”

The irreconcilable differences between Scholem and Susman’s interpretations of reflect two profoundly divergent positions concerning the much-contested “German-Jewish Symbiosis.” One of the questions looming over German-Jewish cultural production since the time of the emancipation was the relationship between Deutschtum and Judentum, Germanness and Jewishness, which many perceived as two distinct—if not altogether antithetical—cultural and national entities. In this context, the question of Kafka’s “Jewishness” is part of an ongoing debate, which took place in both the German public sphere and Jewish intellectual circles about German-Jewish literature: was German literature written by Jews innately and discernibly different, and what place, if any, did it have in what Scholem called the “continuum of German literature”?

Andreas Kilcher has noted how the various conceptions of Jewish literature closely correspond to German Jewry’s diverging responses to modernity. He argues that the divergent answers given to the question “what is German-Jewish literature?” reflect the predominant ideological positions assumed by German Jews in response to modernity.\(^\text{42}\) Accordingly, the various conceptions of German-Jewish literature find their counterpart on an ideological spectrum that ranges from assimilation (the total renunciation of Jewish difference) to Zionism (the nationalist affirmation of Jewish particularity). Whereas the Jewish advocates of assimilation saw German-Jewish literature as a mark of acculturation and believed it was a part of the German literary canon, cultural Zionists saw German Jewish writing as forming a part of

\(^{42}\) Andreas Kilcher, “Interpretationen eines kulturellen Zwischenraums: Die Debatte um die deutsch-jüdische Literatur 1900 bis 1933.”
The Zionist and assimilationist positions represent the two predominant responses to the “Jewish Question.” Whereas the former camp argued that the solution to the Jewish Question was the resolute assertion of the Jews’ cultural and national particularity, the latter camp believed that it was only by renouncing their particularity that the Jews could claim their place as a legitimate part of the enlightened German-speaking world. Despite their undeniable differences, the assimilationist and Zionist position share a common point of departure: they both believe that the Jewish encounter with modernity requires an either-or response—one could be a Jew or a German, but not both. The binary character of this ideological debate is clearly discernable in two of the more notable responses to Moritz Goldstein’s provocative call to establish a German-speaking Jewish cultural autonomy in his 1912 essay, “The German-Jewish Parnassus.” Denying the very notion that Western Jewry constituted a people, Ernst Lissauer asserted that that German Jew had only two possibilities: “either you emigrate, or become German. But then, if you decide to stay you must avidly steep yourself with all your power in Germaness, and make it your own” (Parnaß 70). This conviction is echoed in the position taken by the proponent of cultural Zionism and son in law of Martin Buber, Ludwig Strauß, who claimed that the central question every German Jew inescapably had to confront was: “are you primarily a German or a Jew?” (Parnaß 104).

It is against the these two paradigmatic positions—the one calling for the total renunciation of Jewish difference, the other for an uncompromising assertion of Jewish particularity—that Susman seeks a third way. Her understanding of the German-Jewish culture collapses the binary terms that dominated this ideological debate. Susman’s essay, “Die Revolution und die Juden” (1919), investigated the question of the Jews’ relationship to German
culture. She was concerned, not with assimilated Jews like Ernst Lissauer who sought to eliminate every trace of their origins, but with those who still identified as Jews and were torn between the competing claims of “two fatherlands.” Zionism provided one answer to this problem. But in the wake of the Great War, Susman asked, was the national solution the right one for German Jewry?

We must ask ourselves which fatherland has a greater claim on us? … We live in Germany, we think and speak in German. The language in which we have realized our communal life is German… Through this language we have related to the world. Our concepts and culture and the lives we live as a result are all products of our life here. We have learned to love the German people, and many of us feel more German than Jewish… *(Freiheit 130)*

For Susman, “German” and “Jewish” do not represent two independent cultures and histories. The two are inextricably interwoven. While German nationalists and contemporary Zionist thinkers ignored the historical complexities of this convoluted relationship, and distinguished Germanness and Jewishness as if the two represented two stable ontological identities, Susman believed that the two had irreversibly merged. In *Das Buch Hiob* Susman illustrated the impossibility of separating the Jewish and German cultural elements that contributed to the making of German Jewry, by referring to the case of a well-known German scholar of Jewish descent, who threw himself in front of a moving train after Hitler’s rise to power. The man, who had been ripped in two, powerfully symbolized the indissolubility of the German-Jewish bond *(Hiob 66-67).*
In contrast to Susman, Scholem’s approach to the dilemma of German-Jewish modernity reproduces the binaries Strauß and Lissauer resorted to in their essays. In fact, there is a direct line connecting Scholem’s prewar stance on Kafka and his short piece entitled “Against the Myth of the German-Jewish Dialogue,” which appeared in a Festschrift published on the occasion of Margarete Susman’s ninetieth birthday (1964).43 Scholem’s essay was addressed to the editor, who had described the volume as a homage to the “German-Jewish dialogue, the core of which is indestructible.” Never one to mince words, Scholem belligerently declared: “I deny that there has ever been such a German-Jewish dialogue in any genuine sense whatsoever,” asserting that the much-celebrated dialogue died before it even began. Not unreasonably, Scholem understands “dialogue” to be a mutually reciprocal act of communication between two equal partners: “It takes two to have a dialogue, who listen to each other, who are prepared to perceive the other as what he is and represents, and to respond to him” (Crisis 61). This dialogue could never have existed because it was always contingent upon the Jews’ “expressed or unexpressed self-denial” of their Jewish identity (Crisis 62).

While Scholem’s polemical stance cannot be wholly removed from its historical post-Shoah context, it nevertheless exhibits striking continuities with the argument he already made in his 1931 Kafka letter to Benjamin. In both cases, Scholem hypostatizes an authentic Jewishness, which is largely defined by its independence from German cultural influence. His rejection of the German-Jewish “dialogue” replicates the distinction he made between the continuum of German and Jewish literature in comments on Kafka to Walter Benjamin. Scholem’s “post-assimilatory” understanding of Kafka’s Jewishness seems to presuppose the existence of a homogeneous and self-contained realm of Jewish culture. Although Scholem never directly commented on

Susman’s reading of Kafka, he did respond to her Jewish writings. In a 1972 essay, entitled “Germans and Jews,” Scholem criticized Susman’s “credulous demand” for Jewish “self-surrender,” describing it as the nadir of German Jewry’s “inner demoralization.” Susman’s position, he argued, epitomized “the readiness of many Jews to invent a theory that would justify the sacrifice of their Jewish existence” (Crisis 89).

Susman, in contrast, strongly rejected the idea that one could distinguish authentic Judaism from its inauthentic counterpart—a conviction that stood at the base of Scholem’s criticism. There was no possibility of distilling a pure, unadulterated form of Judaism, free of foreign cultural influences. The Jews, since the time of Moses Mendelssohn had “become deeply immersed in the German spiritual world [deutsche Geisteswelt]. They were profoundly shaped by the German tradition, which they helped sustain” (Hiob 66). And yet, assimilation did not merely represent the disintegration of the Jewish tradition; it also allowed the Jews to reencounter their ancestral heritage in the ethical and philosophical legacy of the European Enlightenment. The European Enlightenment, she argued, was a late-secularized product of Christian thought inherited from the Hebrew Bible’s proclamation that man was created in the image of God. European humanism, which had facilitated the Jews’ entry into German society, grew out of a Christian tradition that was deeply indebted to the Old Testament. Thinkers such as Moses Mendelssohn and Hermann Cohen realized this fact and recognized the Jewish essence that lay at the heart of Germany’s spiritual and cultural heritage.

Anticipating Scholem’s criticism, Susman perceptively observed that one’s assessment of the German-Jewish “cultural symbiosis” depended primarily on what one understood as authentically Jewish, and how one defined peoplehood (Frieheit 171). The historical and metaphysical significance of the “German-Jewish cultural synthesis” stood at the center of
Susman’s 1935 essay, “The Jews’ Spiritual Contribution to German Culture.” The piece was a tribute to the spiritual and intellectual legacy of a community on the brink of extinction. Her elegiac retrospective, written two years after Hitler’s rise to power, began with Moses Mendelssohn and ended with Franz Kafka. On first glance Susman’s essay seems to belong to the same genre as Moritz Goldstein’s “Deutsch-jüdischer parnaß” (1912) or Gustav Krojanker’s introduction to Juden in der deutschen Literatur (1922), which were among the many works that either listed the Jews’ achievements in German culture or sought to define the uniqueness of Jewish cultural creativity in the German language. Goldstein, Krojanker and many other cultural Zionist thinkers of the time sought to account for the ways Jewish difference manifested itself in German-Jewish writing, and define its ethnic, psychological, and stylistic distinction. Susman in contrast, found no common denominator in the works of the other German-Jewish writers she mentioned in her essay. Moreover she rejected the notion that Jewish writing attested to the existence of a common “Jewish character” of the kind Buber had spoken of in his Drei Reden über das Judentum.

An examination of the German-Jewish “cultural synthesis,” she declared, was an opportunity to reflect upon the question of what constituted Jewish peoplehood (Freiheit 170). If Jewish identity could be defined along national categories or as a “mere ethnic unity” [bloß ethnische Einheit], then surely assimilation was a fatal mistake that would lead to the disintegration of the Jews as a unified people, and needed to be opposed by all means possible.

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45 The Jews’ relationship to European culture in general and German culture in particular was an issue that preoccupied Susman at least since 1907, when she published her review essay of Jacob Fromer’s Vom Ghetto zur modernen Kultur, under the title “Judentum und Kultur” in the Frankfurter Zeitung. For more on Susman’s perception of the German-Jewish culture see Anke Gilleir, “Between Ghetto and Zion: Margarete Susman’s Meditations of Germany, Jewishness, and Culture, 1906-1916” and Roberta Malagoli, “Margarete Susman und der deutsch-jüdische Dialog.”
However, if the Jews’ exilic history provided any indication of what constituted their collective identity and universal vocation, then it was the very fact that the Jews transcended the narrow nationalist and ethnic definitions of peoplehood. Observing that the Jews had been dispersed amongst the nations since the destruction of the Temple, Susman argued that it was precisely the Jews’ historical rootlessness that defined their collective identity and religious-ethical calling. The “German-Jewish symbiosis” was a realization of the Jews’ transnational and trans-cultural history. It exemplified the manner in which the Jews’ fate was inextricably intertwined with the fate of those nations with whom they cohabited the earth.

In this sense, Susman’s 1935 essay was not merely a eulogy for German-Jewish culture but a polemic directed against the essentialist account of Jewish identity advanced by Zionism. In contrast to the Zionist narrative, which denounced assimilation for destroying the Jewish “ideal type,”46 Susman denies its very existence. Since the emancipation, the Jews had become so deeply enmeshed in their modern European environment that one could no longer speak of a distinct Jewish identity or culture. Once they had become full participants in Europe’s spiritual and cultural life, the Jews shed the external characters that had previously distinguished them as a community of faith. From Susman’s perspective, the Jewishness Scholem described in terms “of an unbroken historical consciousness” (Crisis 69) simply did not exist. For well over a century, the Jews had lived as part of the European nations, co-administering their pagan and Christian heritage, speaking their languages and sharing their intellectual traditions. If there was something that was still Jewish about the European Jew, it was a dark incomprehensible element

46 As Felix Weltsch laments in “Der Einzelne und das Judentum” (1926): “One of the most tragic aspects of our spiritual and cultural situation in Galut [exile] is that we have lost our ideal type [Idealtypus]—that ideal type that would correspond to our own spiritual character. We view ourselves through foreign eyes. We no longer recognize our own beauty. We no longer perceive it as beauty. We are disgusted with ourselves because we have lost the capacity to assess our Jewishness according to its own measures. This is the lowest point of our assimilation, the assimilation of values [Wertassimilation]” (Zionismus als Weltanschauung 17).
in his being that had dissolved and mixed with foreign archetypes. The consciousness of the modern day Jew was European through and through.

In light of this fact, Susman asks, in what way can the Jew of today acknowledge his Judaism? There were two aspects to this question: the first, what was it that constituted the “Jewish essence”? The second, what has remained of this essence and in what sense is it still recognizable after the secularization of Western-European Jewry? One merely needed to survey the such figures as Marx, Freud, Bergson, Cohen, Simmel, Husserl, Buber, Rosenzweig, Goldberg, and Kafka to realize that the Jews no longer possessed a common and distinctive spiritual character (*Hiob* 107). The Jews, she concluded, had become an “invisible people” [*ein unsichtbares Volk geworden*] (*Hiob* 66). They could no longer be regarded as an empirical community because they lacked the characteristics of an elementally unified group.

Susman’s 1946 account of the dissolution of European Judaism resonates with her interwar essay on Kafka, where her account of the individual’s fate in his novels substitutes her description of the fate of the Jewish people.

Kafka’s figures lack, even in their outward appearance, those qualities which would make them clearly delineated and capable of being looked at, understood and evaluated. They are enigmatic—each man an impenetrable riddle for the other. In their exteriors, too, they present to us not their figures, only their existences. Their sparse outlines suddenly appearing before us as if out of the confused fogs of life, at once powerfully determinate and dreamily unclear, are exactly of the stuff that our dreams are made of… They are *there*, are, like the

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47 In her description of the Jews’ formlessness as a collective-national body, Susman intentionally alludes to the proto-Zionist rhetoric found in Leon Pinsker’s political pamphlet “Auto-Emancipation” (1882), in which he calls the Jews in the Diaspora a “Ghostlike apparition of a living corpse… a people without unity or organization, without land or other bonds of unity, no longer alive, and yet walking among the living—this spectral form without precedence in history, unlike anything that preceded or followed it…” (196).
dream figures, irrefutably there, even when we turn away from them. They are
present, they push impolitely into the present moment; it is as if they were pure
present divorced from past and future alike. (“Kafka” 45)

Is Susman’s account of the formless dreamlike quality of Kafka’s characters a description of the
modern Jew, the Jewish people, or is it a metaphor for a more general experience of modernity?
If Susman considers Kafka’s prose to be an allegory for the modern Jewish fate, she also reads it
as a document that addresses the reified reality of European modernity. By merging these two
lines of interpretation, the Jewish and the non-Jewish, Susman’s Kafka commentary reproduces
the very ambiguity she identifies in the modern European Jew.

If Susman does not always identify Kafka’s fiction as an explicit cultural manifestation of
Judaism that is because she believes no such thing exists in the modern era. There is surely
something “Jewish” about Kafka’s writings, but this Jewishness has been so radically
transformed that it is no longer distinctly recognizable as such. The Jewishness of his stories
consisted of their absolute negativity. His works reflected the form the “Jewish spirit” had
assumed after the Jews’ absorption in the Western world and their subsequent disintegration as a
distinct and unified people. Susman repeated this claim in “The Jews’ Spiritual Contribution to
German Culture,” where her historical survey of the German-Jewish cultural symbiosis began
with the Luther Bible and closed with the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible translation. Following her
discussion of the Buber-Rosenzweig translation, Susman moved on to Franz Kafka, with whom
she concluded the list of representative figures of a German-Jewish cultural synthesis.
In addition to this Bible translation, and like Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*, in which, despite all doubts, the Name [of God] once again shines forth in the full radiance of certainty, another great Jew has spoken from the heart of the contemporary moment. His object was not the Name nor the certainty, but the ineffability of the Name—the unbridgeable abyss that stands between the divine name and the reality of our world. This was the poet Franz Kafka. He did not speak as a leader or guide. His voice, rather, came from the very abyss of this world. In his uncanny, tormented and meditative art God is totally silent. Indeed, God’s silence [*das Verstummtsein Gottes*] and its consequences are the ultimate object of Kafka’s art. *(Freiheit 180)*

Susman’s mention of Kafka following her discussion of the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible is telling. Her association of the two projects seems to suggest that she understands Kafka writing as a kind of biblical translation. While she acknowledged that Rosenzweig and Kafka represented two antipodal manifestations of the “Jewish spirit,” the latter’s radical negativity representing an inverse image of former’s positive affirmation of God, one can assume that her association of the two figures had something to do with the fact that the topos of exile that recurred throughout their writings. The state of transcendental and terrestrial homelessness that characterized Kafka’s writing was also the central trope of Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*, which argued that *being-in-exile* [*im-Exil-sein*] constituted the Jews’ religious and historical vocation as a people.

Kafka’s writing reflected of the general fate of German Jewry, assimilated to the point that it lost any sense of its religious origins—its exile was not merely physical, it had since the
secularization of Western Europe turned into a metaphysical phenomenon. The divine absence related in Kafka’s writing characterized the individual’s experience of God in the modern era. At the same time, Kafka’s *Deus Absconditus* also mirrored the dissolution of Jewish peoplehood and the disintegration of Judaism. The Jewish people, she explained, were not constituted by their reality [*Wirklichkeit*] but by their task [*Aufgabe*]. This task consisted of living an unworldly existence without territory or power in the midst of other nations who were rooted in this world. Only the Jew, who was fully and unquestionably devoted to the divine law, retained his homeland. Yet as the “fence around the Torah” [*Der Zaun um die Lehre*] grew, the law which had served as the “homeland for the homeless nation” became ever more convoluted and obscure (*Fernsein* 214). After the dissolution of the Western ghetto, the Jewish catastrophe [*jüdische Verhängnis*] began to assume its contemporary form—the Jews’ “twofold homelessness” [*doppelte Heimatlosigkeit*]. Their physical exile now augmented by their estrangement from God and his law.

### 4. Myths and Counter-Myths of Jewish Deracination

It was this twofold experience of exile that Kafka had given shape to. As Susman explained in her earlier Kafka-essay:

> One could say that Kafka’s unparalleled artistic achievement consists in having found the form of Nothing itself — not, to be sure, the “defense, the naturalization of the Nothing” … no, what he found was the form of a world which in fact is no longer accessible to any system whatsoever, the form of Nothing itself.

Strindenberg and Dostoyevsky pointed in this direction, they started what here
was completed, what in so radical a form could be completed only by a Jewish spirit. (“Kafka” 40-41)

In this passage, Kafka’s “Jewish spirit” represents a radical nihilism, a complete break with the past, the disappearance of collective memory, and the disintegration of traditional and communal continuity. Susman’s allusion to Kafka’s “Jewish spirit” taps into a long-standing anti-Semitic tradition of associating Jews and Judaism with rootlessness and non-belonging. Her reference to this trope is intentionally meant to resonate with the image of “Jewish deracination” found in the works of Richard Wagner, Heinrich von Treitschke, Werner Sombart, Wilhelm Marr, Otto Weininger, and Hans Blüher. By the time Susman had come to associate modernity and nihilism with the “Jewish spirit,” the identification of the Jew with the destructive forces of modernity had already struck a firm hold in the European imagination. In Sex and Character (1903), Otto Weininger observed that “the spirit of modernity is Jewish.” For Weininger, both modernity and Jewishness represent economic, intellectual and ideological forces that threatened the social cohesion and spiritual well being of the German nation.

Similarly, Hans Blüher’s Secessio Judaica (1922) accused the Jews of contaminating the German host nation with “corruptive patterns of thought” [korruptiven Gedankengänge], such as those propagated by Marx, Einstein, and Freud. According to Blüher, all Jews, assimilated and unassimilated alike, were carriers of a spiritual character that was inherently and wholly antithetical to the “German essence” The “Jewish character-type” [jüdischen Menschentypus], Blüher warned, posed a grave threat to the Germany Volk and needed to be annihilated (55). Weininger and Blüher’s anti-Jewish tirades belong to the same genre as Wagner’s “Judaism in Music” (1850) and Heinrich Treitschke’s “A Word about our Jews” (1880), in which the Jews
are not merely disparaged as a people, but as the representatives of a spiritual essence associated with capitalism, materialism, and abstract rationalism. In their writings, “Jewish” denotes the deracinated and degenerate character of the actual Jew, but at the same time also refers to a spiritual predisposition that may be transmitted to the non-Jew.

The figure of “Jewish deracination” played a no less important role in the self-perception of German Jews, Zionists and assimilationists alike. More often than not, Jewish intellectuals accepted this stereotype as a matter of fact, addressing its causes and contemplating the prospects of recovery. According to Hans-Joachim Schoeps, the Jews’ revolutionary nihilism was a result of their renunciation of Judaism.

All too often do deracinated Jews [Entwurzelte Juden] become born-again revolutionaries, escaping from the ordered world of their fathers and forefathers into an unfettered freedom—a life which occidental nations have accustomed themselves to centuries ago. This false emancipation has allowed certain Jews to become revolutionaries. They perceive their struggle against the “reactionary” shackles of society as a fight against all forms of association as such. (Wir Deutschen Juden 30)

Schoeps attributes the destructive character of the Jewish revolutionary to his secularity: having turned his back on his own tradition, the “deracinated Jew” devoted himself to undermining the tradition of others. Whereas some German-Jewish intellectuals, like Schoeps, attributed the modern Jew’s nihilism to the fact that he had lost touch with his traditional past, others saw it as a sign of the fact that the modern Jew, despite his progressive acculturation, was still too Jewish.
The two opposing camps acknowledge the anti-Semitic image of Jewish deracination, using it as a foil for their own ideological purposes.

In his essay on the myth of “Judaization” [Verjudung], Steven Aschheim traces the various definitions given to the “Jewish spirit” in nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-Semitic discourse, where it denoted anything from capitalism and communism to intellectualism and materialism. In its numerous variations the threat of “Judaization” was meant to connote a “condition in which the ‘Jewish spirit’ had somehow permeated society and its key institutions, one in which Jewish Geist had seeped through the spiritual pores of the nation to penetrate and undermine the German psyche itself” (212). The myth reflected a conviction that emancipation, instead of turning the Jews into Germans had achieved the exact opposite: it had “Judaized” German society. Emancipation was corroding German society, which was liable to dissolve under threat of foreign cultural, economic, and spiritual influences introduced by the Jews. The myth of Verjudung was essentially a myth of contagion. Simultaneously referring to the Jew as “concrete embodiment and symbol” the myth was based on the idea that the “Jewish spirit” was both an inherent quality of the Jew, but that it was also detachable, capable of being transmitted to non-Jews (215). As Aschheim explains,

The transformation of the Jew in to a collective symbol was present in all versions of the Verjudung myth. The ‘Jewish spirit,’ moreover, could encompass a wide and often contradictory, range of human qualities. How were such attributes discovered? In the myth the specific characteristics of Jewish Geist were always deduced from the nature of the object under criticism—liberalism, capitalism, secularism, or whatever—and then identified as such. (220)
Susman too accepts the associations between Jewishness and a deracinated modernity. This is not however, because she considers the Jew to be an agent of destructive anti-traditional forces, as Hans Blüher, Otto Weininger or even Hans-Joachim Schoeps suggest, but because European Jewry, through its role in Europe’s historical development was also deeply implicated in its dissolution. The “destructive element in the Jewish spirit” [das Zersetzende im jüdischen Geist] (Hiob 68) was caused by the fact that the Jews had experienced the disintegration of the modern world in two ways: the loss of the European heritage and their own. The Jews helped complete the disintegration in which they lived and in the process they had dissolved as a people to the point where they were no longer recognizable as distinct national collectivity.

In light of the ever-changing accusations leveled at the Jews, Susman asks: “Wherein lies the Jews’ guilt?” The contradictory accusations leveled against the Jews revealed the contemporary link to their biblical origins. Both Job and the Jews suffered and atoned for a guilt that was not their own, but the guilt of mankind. Echoing the various libels the Jews were accused of, Susman asked: Were the Jews guilty of having stubbornly survived throughout history? Was it because they had assimilated into the nations or because they had set themselves apart? Was it because they had turned to nationalism or because they had rejected it? Was it their rigid legalism or the fact that they had abandoned the law? Was it the Jews’ arid intellectualism or their ardent materialism? None of these accusations could be wholly refuted, but the fact that they contradicted one another, proved that the Jews were not guilty of one thing in particular. The distorted image of the Jewish people was merely a composite of the ills of humanity as a whole (Hiob 58).

According to Susman,
It is difficult to recognize a unified type [einheitliche Typus] in a race that encompasses Jesus and Judas, Spinoza and Shylock (a poetic figure, but one that is nevertheless true), St. Paul and an urban businessman. When one combines all of these one arrives at the image of man in general. (Hiob 59)

The vehemence of the hostility towards the Jews and the irrational character of the accusations against them made it clear that it was an expression of nothing other than “metaphysical hatred” (Hiob 62). It was not directed at an empirical community, but against the principles upon which it was founded. The impotence that the Jews experienced in face of their accusers recalled Job’s fate. It had also been captured in Kafka’s “prophetic story,” The Metamorphosis, in which a man was mysteriously transformed into a giant insect only to find himself alienated from his family and expelled from society (Hiob 108). Gregor Samsa’s absolute isolation in The Metamorphosis was a contemporary reflection of the Jobian fate the Jews experienced as a people alienated from their own tradition and severed of all human bonds.

If modernity was “Jewish” it was not by virtue of an insidious plot planned by the Jews to destroy Europe’s social and cultural foundations, but because the Jewish fate encapsulated the experience of physical and transcendental homelessness that had become the lot of all moderns. According to the same logic, Kafka’s “Jewish spirit” epitomized the experience of existential groundlessness, which characterized the modern human condition.  

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48 W.H. Auden voiced a similar sentiment twelve years later, in a New Republic review article devoted to Kafka, entitled “The Wandering Jew.” Kafka, he claimed, “is important to us because the predicament of his hero is the predicament of the contemporary man. An industrial civilization makes everyone an exceptional reflective K. It was fit and proper that Kafka should have been a Jew, for the Jews have for a long time been placed in the position in which we are now all to be, of having no home. In so far as the criticisms that are made of the Jews are just, they signify only this: that the reflective man, the wanderer, can never find it easy to have faith, but that if he loses it he is lost. What the contemporary anti-Semite sees in the Jew is an image of his own destiny, of which he is terrified;
she calls the “Jewish spirit,” nor does she use it as a constructive category that denotes the common grounds for Jewish peoplehood. In contrast to her Zionist contemporaries, Susman’s notion of Jewishness does not amount to a repository of various character traits, positive or negative, physical or psychological, underlying Jewish difference. In fact, Susman wholly rejects the idea that the Jews might be defined as a separate cultural, national or ethnic entity. She believes that since the emancipation, the Jews (as a people) and Judaism (as a religious, cultural and spiritual tradition) have simply ceased to exist in any pure, unadulterated, clearly definable or coherent form.

A staunch critic of political Zionism, Susman argues that the Jews belong in the Diaspora, because they are meant share to share the fate of the nations. She also rejects the “diasporic nationalism” advocated by cultural Zionists, who argued that the Jew’s Jewishness consisted of inborn, psychic character traits that distinguished him from the non-Jew. Susman’s allusion to Kafka’s “Jewish spirit” is not meant as an affirmation of Jewish difference or national self-determination, but symbolizes an experience of absolute estrangement. She makes no effort to circumscribe the boundaries of Jewishness or define the contours of Jewish identity in national, ethnic or cultural terms. In fact, hers is an attempt to deconstruct the ideal of Jewish identity posited as a stable and coherent entity.

In Susman’s work, Jewishness becomes the cipher for a radically diffuse and fragmented identity, representing a site of deep ambivalence and indeterminacy.

In this sense, she recalls Otto Weininger’s description of the Jew’s “duplicity” and “multiplicity.” Weininger characterizes the Jews’ psyche as “an eternal wandering back and forth accordingly he tries to run to the same refuge, Race. With neither courage nor hope, he cannot listen to a voice which is equally Jewish and Christian: ‘There are many places of refuge, but only one place of salvation; yet the possibilities of salvation are as many as all the places of refuge.’” (186)
before the gate of reality. There is nothing with which the Jew can truly identify… because anything undivided, anything whole, is alien to him… *Inner ambiguity, I repeat, is absolutely Jewish, simplicity is absolutely un-Jewish*” (293). By referring to “Jews” and “Judaism,” Weininger explains that he neither means a specific race, nation or religion, nor is he designating a particular individual or a collective, but “a cast of mind, a psychic constitution, which is a possibility for all human beings” (274). Weininger speaks of Judaism as an abstract Platonic idea, its essence: that of total inessentiality. In Weininger’s work, as well as other versions of the myth of Verjudung, the “Jewish spirit” is perceived as a transmissible essence, capable of infecting non-Jews. The seamless move from literal to figurative portrayal of the Jew, from actual person and allusive symbol, pervades the different versions of this myth. This duality is retained in Susman’s writings as well, where the Jews are turned into a collective symbol for the alienation and dislocations of modernity.

Responding to such Weiningerian accusations Cultural Zionists sought to overcome the “tragedy” of German Jewry’s bifurcated and fragmented existence by withdrawing from German culture and possibly even from Germany itself. Susman, in contrast, saw the Jews’ so-called “bifurcated” and “split” existence as the constitutive component of the modern Jew’s Jewishness. Susman’s account of the Jewish people’s “invisibility” and “formlessness” takes Weininger’s “Platonic” anti-Semitism as its starting point, but reworks it into a positive, ethical ideal. She is less interested in Judaism as particularistic tradition or identitarian category, but what she calls its “spirit.” For Susman, the meaning of Judaism is not found in its specific historical manifestations, but in its relationship to the “primal human condition” and its ability to illuminate the “human destiny.” Its universal message consists of the commandment, “Hear O’ Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Susman identifies all of Judaism with this one verse,
and its message concerning humanity’s divine origins. “We do not know what new forms the Jewish spirit will assume. Yet we do know that that the Jewish spirit shall continue to prevail throughout the ages as long as the inner essence of ‘Hear O’ Israel’ is still perceived by a human ear,” writes Susman in her 1933 essay, “Der jüdische Geist” (Fernsein 223). Susman deliberately speaks of the “Jewish spirit” instead of the “Jewish people,” because it is not the preservation of the Jews as a separate national or religious collectivity that she is concerned with.

The meaning of the “Jewish creed” [jüdische Bekenntnis] had nothing to do with “degenerate nationalism,” which stood in direct conflict with its universal message, or with “outdated forms of religion” which had become irrelevant in a secular world that had broken away from all transcendent horizons. Its true significance revolved around the “problem of humanity” [Menschheitsproblem] (Hiob 25-26). As Susman notes in the closing chapter of Das Buch Hiob: “From a human perspective, there appears to be no solution to the Jewish problem, just as there is no solution to the problem of humanity. The Jewish problem is inextricably bound to that of humanity as a whole—because it ultimately encapsulates nothing but the problem of being human” (Hiob 228).

Susman shifts the emphasis from Jewish “peoplehood” to the “Jewish spirit.” For Susman, “Jewish continuity” is not a matter of preserving a community of common descent, but of perpetuating the universal values of a religious tradition that became an inextricable part of European culture since the Enlightenment. Susman’s account of Jewish self-negation is meant to undermine the conception of Jewish identity advanced by Zionism. Her negative paradigm of Jewishness is intended to disrupt the very possibility of creating a positive or stable notion of Jewish identity. The Jew in Susman’s writing materializes as a metonymy for the quintessential outsider, a figure who destabilizes the boundaries of identity and communal belonging.
Reversing the negative connotations associated with “Jewish deracination,” Susman posits the Jew’s non-belonging as the embodiment of an ethical-cosmopolitan ideal of the sanctity of man. “To be a Jew, means to exist on the outer-most boundaries of reality, and nevertheless resolutely affirm life” (Hiob 25).

Susman’s refusal to isolate the “Jewish problem” from its greater political, moral and humanitarian implications is echoed in her Kafka essay, where his novels are said to reflect the manner in which the “Jewish spirit” has fused with foreign cultures. In this regard her 1929 essay contains the kernel for her subsequent reflections on the tensions and contradictions underlying modern Jewish existence. What Kafka’s writing signified for Susman was the extent to which Judaism had become irreversibly Germanized and fallen under the sway of European cultural influences. These cultural legacies had interpenetrated Judaism over the past millennium to the point where it could no longer be disentangled from them. Thus, instead of trying to categorically differentiate the “Jewish spirit” and isolate it from the general cultural and historical environment in which the Jews live, Susman problematizes the notion of Jewish cultural autonomy. She deconstructs the Zionist belief in an “ideal Jewish type,” presenting the Jews spiritual achievements in the German-speaking world as the product of their transnational and transcultural legacy as a diasporic people. She turns the cultural and political concerns of German Zionism on its head. Rather than look for a way to isolate and circumscribe Jewish culture, she emphasizes its protean, boundary-crossing character.49

49 Susman’s “synthetic” reading of the way Judaism merges with non-Jewish cultures strongly recalls Hannah Arendt’s position in “The Jew as Pariah” (1944). In the essay Arendt criticized the tendency to “compile long lists of European worthies who might conceivably claim Jewish descent.” Against such efforts to isolate these cultural achievements as uniquely “Jewish,” Arendt claimed that the writers “who really did most for the spiritual dignity of their people” were those “great enough to transcend the bounds of nationality and to weave the strands of their Jewish genius into the general texture of European life.”
Susman’s account of modern Judaism’s inherent ambiguities challenges the position advocated by Gershom Scholem and Max Brod. As proponents of Jewish dissimilation Scholem and Brod seek to resolve this ambiguity by drawing a clear-cut boundary between what they consider to be authentic and inauthentic forms of Jewishness. Susman rejects the binary approach to the question of Kafka’s Jewishness. In fact, she insists that the Jewish element in his writing cannot be isolated from its modern European influences, just as she argues that the “Jewish fate” is inextricably bound to that of universal humanity. Kafka’s “post-assimilatory” critics try to identify the spiritual and cultural sensibilities that distinguish his writing as Jewish literature. Susman, in contrast, does not look for what is uniquely and exclusively Jewish about Kafka, but rather, what is inclusively and universally Jewish about his work. Instead of trying to circumscribe Kafka’s Jewishness, Susman dissolves the boundaries separating Jewish and non-Jewish culture. Kafka’s writing is so deeply implicated in the cultural currents of European modernity that it cannot be isolated as the product of a homogenous Jewish culture.
“The Theological Secret of Perfect Prose”
Gershom Scholem and the Dialectics of Jewish Secularization

1. Introduction

“Can I contemplate the foundations of our existence?” reflects the canine narrator in Kafka’s “The Investigations of a Dog.” Seeing “decline everywhere,” the brooding dog grieves the “overburdened memory” of his generation and the incapacitating “weight of the centuries” that prevent him from comprehending the perplexing “edifice of dogdom.” The “true word,” which had been available to his forefathers, is beyond the grasp of his historical present. “I can understand the hesitation of my generation,” muses the narrator, “indeed it is no longer mere hesitation; it is the thousandth forgetting of a dream dreamt a thousand times and forgotten a thousand times” (CS 300). The narrator’s nostalgic lament over his lost cultural heritage strongly evokes the dilemma that preoccupied Kabbalah scholar, Gershom Scholem (1897-1982) throughout his career: “Can one find a clear, objective basis for a new Jewish translation of our generation, which is a translation of experiences of no less significance than those of other generations?” For this is a generation which has lost the basis upon which the earlier ones stood firm” (Mysticism 16).

Throughout his writings, the noted scholar of Jewish mysticism repeatedly returns to the question of Jewish historical continuity. In what sense, he asks, can one still associate the modern-secular Jew with his abandoned religious heritage? In face of secularization and the dissolution of rabbinic law as the defining element of Jewish life, the dilemma that recurs in Scholem’s lifework concerns the religious legitimacy of modern Jewish existence. Scholem found a literary correlate to this question in Kafka’s writings, which he believed disclosed a
certain truth about the religious nihilism of his age, yet paradoxically did so in a way that bore uncanny affinities to the Kabbalistic tradition.

Although Scholem never produced a comprehensive literary explication of Kafka’s work, his enduring interest in the author is well documented. In his memoir From Berlin to Jerusalem, Scholem notes the “tremendous impression” Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” had on readers of his generation, noting that, “In modern literature… the works of Kafka have meant more to me than any other” (80). Kafka’s name recurs throughout Scholem’s correspondence, beginning with his extensive epistolary exchange with Walter Benjamin during the interwar years and up to the early nineteen-eighties in his letters to Elias Canetti and George Steiner. Scholem also made occasional references to Kafka in his scholarly publications and public lectures, where one finds the Prague writer mentioned in key passages of “Reflections on Jewish Theology,” On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism, and “Ten Unhistorical Theses on the Kabbalah.” Scholem consistently read Kafka in terms of the fundamental categories of historical Judaism, interpreting his writing through the concepts of revelation, tradition, law, and commentary.

In an epistolary confession sent to the publisher Zalman Schocken in 1937, Scholem explains his decision to devote his life to what was regarded at the time as the “dubious field” of Jewish mysticism.50 Revolting against the overarching trajectory of Jewish philosophy, spanning from Maimonides to Hermann Cohen, which had sought to exorcise the mythic and pantheistic elements in Judaism, Scholem believed that the Jewish mystical tradition was the site that embodied the core vitality of historical Judaism. It is in the “mystical theses which walked the

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50 This letter, which was given the title “A Candid Word about the True Motives of My Kabbalistic Studies” [Ein offenes Wort über die wahren Absichten meines Kabbalastudiums], was first published in David Biale’s Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History (pp. 31-32). Ironically enough the letter, which proclaims to be a “candid” confession reads more as an aphoristic riddle than an unambiguous statement of Scholem’s personal stance on Jewish esoteric doctrine. Despite the oblique style Scholem adopts whenever it comes to shedding the objective veneer of historian and accounting for the personal stakes in his scholarly work, the letter nevertheless provides us with a general sense of Scholem’s appreciation of the Kabbalah’s role in Jewish history.
fine line between religion and nihilism” that Scholem identifies “the secret life of Judaism.” Having found “the most perfect unsurpassed expression of this fine line” in Kafka, Scholem believed his writings constituted “a secular statement of the Kabbalistic world-feeling in a modern spirit” (*Counter-History* 31). Kafka’s ability to express the “fine line between religion and nihilism” seemed to wrap his writings in “the halo of the canonical” [*Kafka’s Schriften fast mit dem Glanze des Kanonischen umkleider*] (*Counter-History* 31). This recognition later led Scholem to advise his students to read Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* in order to understand the modern reader’s relationship to the Kabbalistic text (*Friendship* 152).

It would be difficult to overlook the blatant contradiction in Scholem’s association of Kafka and Kabbalah. How can nihilism, the negation of all religious authority, be reconciled with the concept of canon, the body of authorial texts that unite a community of believers? When Scholem attributes a canonical quality to Kafka’s writing, he does so precisely in order to challenge the orthodox connotations of canon. It would appear that if Scholem employs Jewish religious categories in order to interpret Kafka, the opposite might also be said to be true—it is through Kafka that Scholem formulates his own understanding of Jewish theology. Scholem’s notion of that which is Jewish in Kafka interchangeably attests to what he perceives to be Kafka-like about Judaism. This reciprocal relationship has been noted by Harold Bloom, who asserts that “our understanding of Kabbalah is Kafkan,” since Gershom Scholem was profoundly influenced by Kafka, and “no one will be able to get beyond Scholem’s creative or strong misreading of Kabbalah for decades to come” (*Halo* 3).  

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51 Bloom’s observations are confirmed by Kabbalah scholar Moshe Idel, whose essay “Heiroglyphs, Mysteries, Keys: Scholem Between Molitor and Kafka” deals with the European cultural influences that shaped Scholem’s vision of the Kabbalah. Towards the end of the essay, Idel, Scholem’s former student writes: “But Scholem’s vision of Kafka as representative of a secularized Kabbalah seems to me to be based upon a comparison of things that are fundamentally different. Kafka decisively inspired Scholem’s understanding of the ‘unfulfillability’ of revelation, which, in my opinion, by no means represents the view of the Jewish mystical elites throughout the centuries. There is little of Kabbalah to be found in Kafka. Although I do not claim he was unaware of or not influenced by
observation is the extent to which Scholem’s interpretative orientation has influenced our understanding of Kafka, especially Bloom’s, who like Scholem, sees the “spiritual form of Kafka’s self-conscious Jewishness” as revolving around “the Negative” (19).

To the extent that Jewish theology provides Scholem with an interpretative framework for his reading of Kafka, it is in relation to Kafka that Scholem comes to articulate his own unorthodox conception of the historical and metaphysical vicissitudes of the Jewish tradition. In posing the question of Kafka’s place in the Jewish tradition, Scholem transposes his commentary on Kafka into an inquiry about the very possibility of the Jewish tradition’s historical transmissibility in an age in which the majority of Jews no longer abide by its religious precepts.

The possibility of incorporating the rupture with the world of the Halachah, that is, rabbinic Jewish law, within a continuous narrative of the Jewish history is the main challenge that looms over Scholem’s reflections on Kafka. By framing Scholem’s interpretation of Kafka within the broader context of his work, this chapter seeks to read his literary criticism as constituting the work of religious self-representation, which proceeds through Scholem’s imaginative synthesis of theological, literary, and philosophical sources.52

Kabbalah, in my opinion his unparalleled insights into the nature of reality differ dramatically from Kabbalistic ideas. Much more of Kafka is found in Scholem’s own understanding of kabbalah than is found of Kabbalah in Kafka. The latter’s impact on Scholem is best represented by his statement: ‘what is laid upon us is to accomplish the negative: the positive is already given” (Mirrors 118-119).

52 Scholem’s concern with the historical viability of tradition and its transmissibility in the secular age was shared by Kafka himself, figuring prominently in his diaries and letters. Kafka’s “Letter to His Father” is one of the most poignant expressions of the historical predicament of his generation’s fraught encounter with its ancestral tradition. In the letter Kafka associates his father’s tyranny with the superficial religiosity he imposed on his family. The diluted tradition that Hermann Kafka observes and tries to pass on to his son consists of the father’s indifferently preformed “flimsy gestures.” The father’s Judaism, both inconsistent and perfunctory, appears to Kafka as a hollow tradition devoid of meaning: “You really had brought some traces of Judaism with you from the ghetto-like village community… but it was too little to be handed on to the child; it all dribbled away while you were passing it on.” Hermann Kafka, whose incomplete assimilation into Czech society left him clutching onto the “insignificant scrap” of Judaism, passes down a bastardized inheritance much like the kitten-lamb received from the father in Kafka’s story “A Crossbreed.” In the story, the “remarkable” legacy the father bestows upon his son in the form of a hybrid lamb-kitten is so perplexing and incomprehensible that the son contemplates the possibility that “the knife of a butcher would be a release for this creature.” The adulterated Judaism Hermann Kafka transmits to his son that Kafka asks: “How one could do anything better with that material than get rid of it as fast as possible I could not
2. Reading Kafka, Debating Revelation

In 1932, the young Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem published an “Open Letter to the Author of Contemporary Jewish Faith” in the Bayerischen Israelitischen Gemeindezeitung. The letter was a scathing critique of a theological manifesto, entitled Jüdischer Glaube in Dieser Zeit, written by the twenty-three year old Jewish Prussian-nationalist Han-Joachim Schoeps.

Influenced by the Swiss-Protestant thinker Karl Barth, Schoeps called for a radical revision of Jewish theology that went “beyond orthodoxy and liberalism” [Jenseits von Orthodoxie und Liberalismus], German Jewry’s two prominent denominations at the time (Jüdischer Glaube 4).

Schoeps claimed that the crisis of Jewish traditional observance in the twentieth-century was an opportunity to return to a more authentic form of Judaism founded upon what he described as the core dogmas of “biblical faith.” Like Buber, Rosenzweig, and many of his German-Jewish contemporaries, Schoeps aimed his critique at the rational theology of nineteenth-century liberal Judaism. Against German Jewry’s pervasive leaning towards the religious humanism of the Reform movement, Schoeps propagated a religious-existentialism that conceived of divine revelation as an utterly irrational communication from God, an event that stood beyond the scope of human comprehension. Claiming that the authentic biblical covenant had been distorted by rabbinic legalism on the one hand and liberal theology on the other, Schoeps urged his coreligionists to recognize that revelation was utterly inaccessible to human reason. According to Schoeps, “There is no theology—Jewish or Christian—that has any other goal besides the attainment of the divine word” (67). But this “word” was not reducible to law or any ethical

understand; precisely the getting rid of it seemed to me to be the devoutest action.” Scholem, who could not have read Kafka’s letter to his father before it was published in 1953, intuitively identified his writings with the “dialectic of continuity and revolt” that he attributed to historical Judaism. Underlying Scholem’s reading of the author is the question: “Are we able to continue even though we deny many of the religious values of our forefathers?” (Mysticism 160).

53 The letter, “Offener Brief an den Verfasser der Schrift Jüdischer Glaube an dieser Zeit,” is reproduced in Hans-Joachim Schoeps’s memoir Ja, Nein, und Trotzdem. All citations of this letter refer to the Schoeps text.
doctrine. The word of God, as Schoeps saw it, addressed the individual believer. Because of the disparity between God and man revelation could not be translated into a universally valid form of human law, but could only manifest itself as a personal encounter with God.

In the “Open Letter,” Scholem, himself a staunch critic of German-Jewish liberal theology, accused Schoeps’s “explicit rejection of tradition as the essential category of religious life in Judaism” as amounting to no less than a “neutralization of Jewish historical-consciousness” (40). While admitting that he did not observe orthodox Jewish law, Scholem argued that one could not simply discard “the whole spiritual complex of the Halachah,” the religious law of the Oral Torah, as Schoeps had done, since such an attitude would lead Judaism to complete subjectivism (42). Schoeps’s existentialist theology had misconstrued the historical nature of Judaism, which was deeply rooted in the Halakhic tradition. Countering the dichotomy Schoeps made between the divine revelation, as the authentic word of God, and religious law, which represented its distorted human form, Scholem argued that in Judaism the two were inseparable. A key passage in his letter elaborates this point:

Revelation while a singular occurrence is nevertheless a medium. It is absolute, meaning-giving, but in itself meaningless, and given to interpretability—the first moment in a continuous relationship to time, in which tradition unfolds. The word of God in its absolute symbolic fullness would be destructive, if it were not simultaneously and immediately substantial. It is the dialectic of these facts, upon which the idea of the Oral Torah is founded, and which is left unrecognized in your book. Nothing oriented towards historical time is more in need of concretization than the “absolute concreteness” of the word of Revelation. It is
precisely the absolute concrete of the utterly unrealizable [absolute Konkrete das Unvollziehbare schlechthin], whose interminable reflections depend upon the contingencies of its implementation. Here it is first provided with the index of applicability, which the absolute lacks: a human deed—concrete and graspable. The voice that we hear, that is the medium, in which we live, and where it is not so, there it is hollow and takes on a ghostly character, in which the word of God no longer functions, but … is instead sidestepped. (43)

As Scholem explains, revelation, while in itself belonging to the realm of the absolute, and thus wholly inaccessible to man, can nevertheless only be realized within a historical tradition, where it is rendered meaningful through human interpretation. In ignoring these facts, Schoeps threatened to “rip apart” [aufreißen] the dialectic of Judaism’s historical existence (40). Scholem contended that Schoeps’s ahistorical conception of revelation dismissed two millennia of rabbinic commentary, thereby neutralizing the historical-consciousness of Judaism.54 Judaism, argued Scholem, did not recognize the possibility of individual access to divine revelation outside the historical framework of received tradition.

Two years later, in an animated letter to Walter Benjamin, Scholem related his interpretation of Franz Kafka back to his critique of Schoeps’s conception of revelation. In the letter, Scholem famously described Kafka’s world as the “world of revelation” seen “from that perspective in which it is returned to its own nothingness” [die Welt der Offenbarung…in der sie auf ihr Nichts zurückgeführt wird]. Scholem elaborates upon his evocatively obscure conception of Kafka’s “nothingness of revelation” in equally cryptic terms, explaining that

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54 For a more extensive account of the Scholem-Schoeps polemic see David Biale’s Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History (pp. 128-130).
The nonfulfillability [Unvollziehbarkeit] of what has been revealed is the point where a correctly understood theology (as I, immersed in my Kabbalah, think, and whose expression you can find more or less responsibly formulated in that open letter to Schoeps you are familiar with) coincides most perfectly with that which offers the key to Kafka’s work… And yet the main point raises itself so noticeably and bluntly—namely, in the terminology of the Law… You had the moral world of Halachah right before your eyes, complete with its abysses and its dialectics. (Correspondence 126-127)

In his extensive response to an early draft of Benjamin’s 1934 Kafka-essay,55 Scholem outlined his understanding of the theological “key” to Kafka, whose writing provides a reflection of the “abysses” and “dialectics” that pervade Jewish religious law. Scholem’s poetically abstruse formulation of revelation’s “nonfulfillability,” not to mention the “abysses” and “dialectics” of the law, hearkens back to his “Open Letter,” which took issue with Schoeps’s understanding of the relationship between divine revelation and tradition. The “nonfulfillability” of revelation that recurs in Scholem’s letters to Schoeps and Benjamin would receive its mature articulation in his 1962 Eranos lecture entitled “Tradition and Commentary as Religious Categories in Judaism.”56

In the lecture, which later became one of his hallmark essays, Scholem explored the inherent paradox that stood at the heart of the Jewish tradition. According to Scholem, the


fundamental question that Judaism grappled with throughout the ages was how to reconcile the scores of religious commentary, all historically contingent and at times contradictory, with the event of revelation on Mount Sinai. How could the Jewish tradition legitimate itself as the word of God that derived its authority from Sinaitic revelation, when its religious legislation digressed from and conflicted with the prescriptions of the Written Torah? This dilemma, explains Scholem, created a “significant tension in the religious consciousness of the scholars themselves, between the process by which the tradition actually developed and the interpretation of that process” (Messianic 288). The desire for historical continuity, and the need to establish the theological validity of tradition’s ongoing transformations led to the formation of mystical theses that tried to resolve this tension.

For the Kabbalists, explains Scholem, the Torah appeared to be a texture woven from the name of God that contained an infinite richness of meaning but that was in itself meaningless. They did not perceive of revelation as a “concrete communication of positive, substantive, and expressible content,” but saw it as the authorial divine origin that guaranteed the possibility of meaning (Messianic 284). According to this Jewish mystical doctrine, revelation already contained the interpretations that would come to be derived from it throughout the course of history. Returning to the formulation he had already used in his letters to Schoeps and Benjamin, Scholem states,

Theologians have described the word of God as the “absolutely concrete” [absolut Konkrete]. But the absolutely concrete is, at the same time, the simply unfulfillable [Unvollziehbare schlechthin]—it is that which in no way can be put into practice. The Kabbalistic idea of tradition is founded upon the dialectic
tension of precisely this paradox: It is precisely the absoluteness that effects the unending reflections in the contingencies of fulfillment. Only in the mirrorings in which it reflects itself does revelation become practicable and accessible to human action as something concrete. There is no immediate undialectic application of the divine word. (Messianic 296)

Revelation, despite its inherent meaninglessness provided the legitimizing foundation for rabbinic law. Its divine authority vouchsafed the freedom of its interpreters to recast and remold the meaning of revelation in accordance with their historical reality. As Scholem had already argued in his “Open Letter” to Schoeps, the divine word was an infinite, inexpressible absolute that required mediation and depended on commentary in order to become humanly meaningful. What Scholem characterized as revelation’s “nothingness” in his letter on Kafka forms the core of his 1962 Eranos essay. This influential essay sheds light on what Scholem implied in his letter to Benjamin—Kafka’s work captured an underlying metaphysical truth of revelation as a site of pure medially—a divine message, which lacked all positive content. What Scholem, in his 1934 letter to Benjamin, had elliptically described as Kafka’s “nothingness of revelation” later came to frame his general understanding of the theological paradox underlying the Jewish tradition—it was precisely the “nothingness of revelation,” which founded the historical legitimacy of tradition.

That Scholem’s early reading of Kafka both anticipates his mature reflections on revelation and refers back to his polemic with Schoeps makes it clear that he engages Kafka with a particular theological question in mind—the question of Jewish continuity in the modern era and its relation to the tradition of the past. When Scholem relates his reading of Kafka to such
concepts as revelation, law and tradition, he is not only pointing to Jewish theology as the
necessary entry-point for a proper understanding of Kafka, but is also framing Kafka’s writing as
a site that introduces its own set of theological problems. Scholem’s notion of the
“nonfulfillability” of revelation recalls Kafka’s well-known parable, “The Imperial Message.” In
the story an emissary bearing a message from the dying emperor rushes to deliver the news, yet
because the messenger progresses through a continuously expanding labyrinthine space, he
moves forward without actually reaching his destination. The parable questions the very
possibility of arrival: can the message from the emperor ever reach its destination? The story
addresses a theological problem—akin to Scholem’s metaphysical reflections on the
“nonfulfillability” of revelation. The theological questions that Scholem identifies in Kafka’s
writing touch upon the authority of the law and its relationship to revelation. Scholem
understands Kafka’s theological significance in light of the religious crisis characteristic of his
era—in which the binding character of revelation in the form of religious law has disappeared.

The implications of Scholem’s reading of Kafka in terms of Revelation and Law become
clearer once we consider how these terms correspond to the polyvalence of the word “Torah.” In
its narrow definition, the word “Torah” denotes the Pentateuch, yet in its broader meaning it
designates a whole body of religious law and commentary produced throughout Jewish history.
Torah, then, can interchangeably mean law, teaching, instruction and doctrine. The translation of
the word “Torah” is a value-laden question, reflected in the history of an ongoing theological
polemic between the Jews’ self-understanding of their religious heritage and its divergent
representation by gentiles. The contested meaning of the word “Torah” reflects an ongoing
political and metaphysical dispute about the theological validity and historical relevance of
Judaism. The religious and philosophical debate spanning from St. Paul to Hegel and Buber
about the meaning and content of Jewish law reflects an ongoing inter and intra-religious
dialogue that seeks to articulate the essence of Jewish identity and define the contours of Jewish
difference.

In *Two Types of Faith*, Martin Buber responds to the common misrepresentation of Torah
as limited to its legalistic sense:

In the Hebrew Bible Torah does not mean law, but direction, instruction, 
information. Moreh means not law-giver but teacher… The Torah of God is
understood as God's instruction in His way... To render Torah by “law” is to take
away from its idea this inner dynamic and vital character. Without the change of
meaning in the Greek, objective sense the Pauline dualism of law and faith, life
from works and life from grace, would miss its most important conceptual
presupposition. (56-57)

According to Buber, St. Paul’s repudiation of Judaism is founded upon the Septuagint’s
mistranslation of the word “Torah” into “nomos” [νόμος]. The Pauline polemic, as Buber
explains, distinguishes between the Jewish submission to the yoke of the law and Christian grace
attained through faith. The dualism between the law (nomos) and faith (pistis) in Pauline
theology is sustained by narrowing down the meaning of the word “Torah” to its legalistic
sense.57 St. Paul’s Gnostic critique of Judaism resurfaces in its secularized form in the German

57 In his book *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History*, Schoeps make a similar
argument noting that, “It is well known that the Old Testament idea of the ‘Torah’ is best explained as instruction
embracing both law and doctrine. In the LXX [The Septuagint] there takes place with the translation הָרֵאשׁ—νόμος—
a shift of emphasis towards legalism. And the Torah comes to imply a moral way of life prescribed by God… Thus,
for instance, in the LXX translation of Prov.14:27, πρόσταγμα takes the place of יִרְאֵת which twists the meaning of
the whole sentence. Apart from the passages where he has allegorized in the manner of Philo, Paul implies such an
understanding which is in harmony with the LXX rather than the original. Only so can he tirelessly insist on
Idealist tradition, most prominently in *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, where Hegel describes the Jews as captive to an arbitrary and dogmatic law, rendering them an anachronistic people removed from the progressive course of history (185-187).

It is against this historical-theological backdrop that Scholem’s reading of Kafka as a writer with “deep roots in the tradition of Jewish mysticism” unfolds (*Mysticism* 12). When Scholem brings Kafka in order to expound upon the theological significance of revelation and law he effectively addresses a historically charged debate about the “essence of Judaism” that took place in post-emancipatory Europe. Read through a Scholemian prism, Kafka becomes an interlocutor in an intra-Jewish dialogue over the definition of Judaism. The emancipation, which began in the early 1800s, brought about a radical transformation in Jewish life. From members of a segregated, autonomous community, Jews became equal citizens of the modern German nation-state. In an era in which Jewish communal life was governed by rabbis and organized substituting for the Jewish law a new law, νόμος τοῦ πνεύματος (Rom. 8:2). We shall see later that the source of many Pauline misunderstandings with regard to the evaluation of the law and covenant is to be sought in the legalistic distortion of the perspective for which Hellenistic Judaism was responsible” (29).

The irony of both Schoeps and Buber’s respective responses to the Pauline critique of Jewish law is that they end up reproducing its binary logic when they speak of the Halachah. Buber’s understanding of revelation as the “immediated word of God” (111) is shared by Hans Joachim Schoeps, whose religious existentialism similarly denies the divine origins of the law in favor of a direct personal experience of God. Rosenzweig’s critique of Buber’s *Three Addresses on Judaism* revolved precisely around this point. In his open letter, “The Builders: Concerning the Law,” Rosenzweig faults Buber for his reductive attitude to Jewish law, which he accuses Buber of reducing to “the Law of Western orthodoxy of the past century” (77). Rosenzweig notes that Buber may have liberated the modern Jew from the constricting hold of Jewish law by equating it with the rabbinic law, but in doing so left no objective basis with which to answer the question “what are we to do?” (77). “The problem of the Law,” argues Rosenzweig, “cannot be dispatched by merely affirming or denying the pseudo-historical theory of its origin, or the pseudo-juristic theory of its power to obligate… We can reach both the teachings and the Law only by realizing that we are still on the first lap of the way, and by taking every step upon it, ourselves. But what is this way to the Law?” (79-80).

Like Scholem’s critique of Schoeps, Rosenzweig’s open letter takes issue with Buber’s effort to distinguish revelation from legislation. “I do not believe that revelation is ever a formulation of law,” argues Buber, who believes that “It is only through man in his self-contradiction that revelation becomes legislation” (111). Rosenzweig, for his part, asks “Can we really draw so rigid a boundary between what is divine and what is human? We must keep in mind the obvious fact that a Law, that the Law as a whole, is the prerequisite for being chosen, the law whereby divine election is turned into human electing … The only matter of doubt is whether or to what degree this Law originating in Israel’s election coincides with the traditional Jewish law” (119).
around religious law, the question of the “Jewish essence” was irrelevant. But with the
dissolution of the premodern ghetto community and the decline of religious observance, the
external manifestations of Jewishness had become much less apparent. To preserve its ancestral
heritage, European Jewry was faced with the challenge of redefining its collective identity and
received tradition. In *How Judaism Became a Religion*, Leora Bat笄nizky outlines the
contradiction inherent to the attempt to reconcile their religious identity with political liberalism.
According to Bat笄nizky, the paradox of this endeavor was that Jewish Enlightenment and Post-
Enlightenment thinkers essentially sought to define Judaism according to the modern Protestant
category of religion—that is, as a distinct, private sphere—whereas Judaism had been
historically defined as a religion of law and practice (4).

For Scholem, the contemporary significance of the Torah—the most persistent question
posed by modern Jewish thinkers—emerged in full force in Franz Kafka’s writings. Scholem
found a deep affinity between the legal crises recounted in Kafka’s narratives and the religious
predicament of his own generation. As Stéphane Moses explains, “Scholem saw Kafka’s work as
the reflection of the crisis of tradition that he considered characteristic of our age. It presented
not only the challenge to the contents of religious belief… but also the deterioration of … its
transmission” (145-146). Could one conceive of Judaism as a living tradition—that is, a shared
body of knowledge that binds the past to the present in some meaningful way—at a time when
such a notion no longer seemed viable? Scholem’s reflections on Kafka are thus best understood
as a spiritual response to the disintegration of rabbinic Judaism in post-Enlightenment Europe. In
this regard, it is also worth mentioning Daniel Weidner’s claim that Scholem’s understanding of
Kafka’s Jewishness diverges from the Germanic concept of “Kultur” propagated by early
twentieth-century philosophers. Whereas Scholem’s contemporaries think about the concept of
culture in dichotomous terms, contrasting its living “core” to its rigid “shell,” Scholem for his part, rejects this binary logic, which reproduces the Pauline distinction between the “spirit” and “letter.” Weidner’s reading reinforces the point that Scholem recognizes Kafka’s Jewishness, not in the doctrinal or ethical content one finds in his stories (as Brod claims), but in the discursive character of his writing, in which the distinction between the primacy of narrative and supplementarity of commentary is blurred—thus replicating the dialectical relationship that binds revelation and tradition in Judaism, or at least Scholem’s version of it.

Scholem identifies a certain discursive quality, which he believes “offers the key to Kafka’s work” and which reproduces the “moral world of the Halachah…complete with its abysses and its dialectics” (Correspondence 126-127). The image of the key reappears in Scholem’s 1937 letter to Zalman Schocken, where he conceded that the key to understanding Jewish mysticism “seemed to have been lost, if one is to judge according to the obtuse standard of Enlightenment.” Scholem’s reference to Kafka’s in that same letter, however, attests to his belief in the perseverance of “the secret life of Judaism” (Counter-History 31-32). Like Scholem, Max Brod also spoke of a “key” to understanding Kafka’s art and its Jewish context, yet described this key in moral-religious terms, which he called Kafka’s “humanistic Zionism.” In his essay “Humanistischer Zionismus im Werk Kafkas,” Brod reads The Castle as an expression of Kafka’s “religious socialism,” a reflection of a humanistic-Jewish Weltanschauung.

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58 Scholem, as his Student Moshe Idel reminds us was fond of using the key metaphor, and one of the places where the Kabbalah-Key-Kafka trinity reappears is his introduction to On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism. In the book Scholem describes the historical state of the Kabbalah in the era following the emancipation of European Jewry as resembling “an overgrown field of ruins… The key to the understanding of the Kabbalistic books seemed to have been lost” (2). The Kabbalah, which literally translates as “received tradition,” is described in terms of a devastated historical heritage. The mystical tradition, which for centuries had been so central to Jewish self-understanding as the vessel of collective historical memory, began to lose its significance when European Jewry resolutely turned to the Enlightenment, which by the turn of the twentieth century had devolved into complete illegibility. Yet for “a generation that has witnessed a terrible crisis in Jewish history,” Scholem suggests, “the ideas of these medieval Jewish esoterics no longer seems so strange.” According to Scholem, the Kabbalistic tradition, which had seemed like a relic of the past, could once again become meaningful to an age that had witnessed the Shoah.
Scholem, on the hand, reads Kafka in a Kabbalistic key. In Kafka’s writings Scholem recognizes the Kabbalist’s relationship to the sacred text. In an age in which the “key to the understanding of the Kabbalistic books seemed to have been lost” (Symbolism 2), Scholem finds traces of this mystical tradition in Kafka, a writer, who “walks the fine line between religion and nihilism” (Counter-History 31).

According to Scholem the mystic maintains a dialectical relationship to the sacred text, simultaneously conservative and revolutionary. Not only does the revolutionary mystic transform the reinterpret the meaning of the law. In some cases, he goes so far as to abolish religious law in the name of the religious authority the law is meant to uphold. “It is this perspective, destructive, yet not unrelated to the original impulse of the mystic, which enables us to understand the borderline case of the nihilistic mystic as an all too natural product of inner mystical upheavals” (Symbolism 11). It is the mystical belief in the transformative capacity of Torah and its ability to assume an infinite array of meanings that encapsulates Kafka’s “canonicity” for Scholem. On the occasion of being awarded the literary prize of the Bavarian Academy of Arts in 1974, Scholem told his audience that there were only three books, which he “read and reread with true attentiveness, with an open heart, and with spiritual tension,” since arriving in Israel in 1923. The three works were the Hebrew Bible, the Zohar, the sacred text of the Kabbalists, and the collected works of Franz Kafka. While the relationship between the Hebrew, Aramaic and German language texts was not immediately apparent, Scholem argued that all three shared a certain kind of “canonicity.” For Scholem these texts were canonical by virtue of being “subject to infinite interpretation; and many of them, specifically the more impressive among them, in themselves constitute works of interpretation” (Mysticism 23).
A religious canon commonly denotes a finalized body of divinely ordained texts that have been consecrated as sacred. Yet Scholem’s notion of the canonicity deviates from its traditional-authorial definition. Scholem shifts the emphasis from the text’s status as a document that substantiates religious authority to its transformative potential. A text’s canonicity lies in its capacity to take on multiple meanings through interpretation, even those that may eventually lead to the subversion of its own authority. When Scholem speaks of Kafka’s “canonicity,” it is not to endow his writing with religious authority. As Benjamin reminds us, “Kafka was a writer of parables, but he did not found a religion.” Scholem would have agreed with Benjamin’s observation, which was aimed at “the unbearable posturing of the theological ‘professionals,’ who—you won’t deny—have held sway over all Kafka interpretations to date and whose smug manifestations are yet to come” (Correspondence 128). Kafka’s “canonicity” is not a consequence of any instructive religious content his writing conveyed. The canonical character of Kafka’s work, as Scholem saw it, was its capacity to take on innumerable meanings. In contrast to those critics, whom Benjamin branded as Kafka’s “abominable theological exegetes,” Scholem does not attribute any normative, prescriptive or ethical content that might be labeled as Jewish to Kafka’s writings. Scholem associates the canonical character of Kafka’s writing—that is, its “Jewishness”—with the fact that it cannot be reduced to one definitive interpretation. It is in its ability to assume any number of meanings that Scholem sees it as a contemporary manifestation of the Jewish tradition.

3. Contesting Kafka’s Law: Scholem, Schoeps, Benjamin

In the years that preceded Scholem’s charged debate with Walter Benjamin on Kafka, the historian of religion Hans-Joachim Schoeps, who co-edited the first posthumous collection of
Kafka’s short stories alongside Max Brod, had himself published a number of articles, which related Kafka’s work to the religious crisis of modern Jewish existence. In his 1932 essay “The Forlorn Law” [Das Verlorene Gesetz], Schoeps emphatically argued that Kafka’s stories were thinly veiled parables that reflected the metaphysical crisis of Western Jewry. According to Schoeps, Kafka’s narratives lamented the disintegration of the “Law of Revelation” [Gesetz der Offenbarung], a process that transposed the Jews’ “history of salvation” [Heilsgeschichte] into a “worldly-profane history” [Unheilsgeschichte] (Im Streit 192). Interestingly, the Scholem-Schoeps “revelation debate” finds its literary correlate in their respective Kafka interpretations. While Scholem had already criticized Schoeps for his use of the term “salvation history,” which was “a concept taken from Christian theology, which Judaism, thank God, does not recognize” (43), their disagreement regarding Kafka’s Jewish-theological significance goes far beyond that point.

Although their commentaries both relate to Kafka through the religious categories of revelation and law, Schoeps and Scholem employ these concepts to very different ends. Their disagreement about the Jewish-theological significance of revelation and law is reflected in their religiously inflected readings of Kafka. While Scholem’s “nothingness of revelation” ostensibly resembles what Schoeps called Kafka’s “negative actualization of Judaism’s concept of revelation” (Im Streit 172), their readings stand in stark opposition, and represent two irreconcilable visions of Jewish theology. The “Jewish doctrine of revelation” that Schoeps projected onto his reading of Kafka corresponded to the revisionist theology he presented in

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59 In 1929 Brod invited the twenty year old Schoeps to collaborate on an upcoming edition of Kafka’s unpublished stories, sketches, aphorisms, and other biographical materials. In 1931 the work appeared under the title Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer: Ungedruckte Erzählungen und Prosa aus dem Nachlaß. The collaboration between Brod and Schoeps ended dramatically before they completed their work on the second volume. The relationship soured after the young protégé had irreverently attacked Brod’s Zionism, and what he believed was Brod’s attempt to appropriate Kafka’s writing for the Zionist cause. I give a more elaborate account of this dispute in the chapter on Schoeps.
Jüdischer Glaube, the object of Scholem’s critique in the “open letter.” When Schoeps speaks of the loss of the “Law of Revelation” in Kafka’s stories he is in no way referring to traditional Jewish law, or the Halachah. To the contrary, rabbinic law and traditional ritual practice were the culprits in Schoeps’ narrative of Jewish decline. The distinction that Schoeps makes between the transcendent origin of “biblical revelation” and its corruption in the form of “rabbinic law” was based on an implicit acceptance of the Pauline distinction between works and faith. This Pauline distinction, which Schoeps came to by way of Martin Buber and Karl Barth is expressed in his reading of Kafka as representative of a Jewish dogmatic-theology. The opposition that Schoeps drew between revelation and law was unacceptable to Scholem, whose “Open Letter” had already accused Schoeps of knowing more about modern Protestant thought than about historical Judaism. Scholem concluded his letter by noting that without accounting for rabbinic law and commentary, Schoeps’s call to “return to biblical revelation” amounted to a historical “leap into nowhere” (Ja 40). According to Scholem, revelation did not stand outside of or against history, as Schoeps claimed, but, in fact, could only realize itself within history, in the form of tradition.

The dividing line with Schoeps can be seen in Scholem’s critique of Benjamin’s Kafka essay, which took issue with Benjamin’s claim that Kafka’s “assistants are sextons who have lost their house of prayer; his students are pupils who have lost the Holy Writ” (SW 815). According to Scholem, Kafka’s pupils “are not so much those who have lost the Scripture…but rather those students who cannot decipher it!” (Correspondence 127). It is precisely the “nothingness of revelation” which according to Scholem, “characterize[s] the difference between these two positions” (Correspondence 142). Scholem emphatically rejected Benjamin and Schoeps’s position—it was not that the “Law of Revelation” was lost but that it asserted itself in a way in which it appeared to be meaningless, having “validity but no significance” [Geltung ohne
Bedeutung] (Correspondence 142). Benjamin believed that whether the pupils had lost the law or were unable to decipher it was a hair-splitting distinction, which was ultimately insignificant (Correspondence 135). What Benjamin dismissed as a mere stylistic matter constituted “the central Jewish nerve” Scholem found in Kafka’s work (Correspondence 141).60

In a letter from 1931, Scholem admonished Benjamin about the “Jewish” significance of the law in Kafka’s work, noting that “It would be an enigma to me how you as a critic would go about saying something about this man’s world without placing the Lehre [teaching], called Gesetz [law] in Kafka’s work, at the center” (Friendship 216). Commenting on The Trial, Scholem suggests that Kafka’s linguistic world displays a certain affinity to the language of the Last Judgment, speculating that Kafka’s writing was a “moral reflection” of a halakhist [rabbinic legislator] who “attempted a linguistic paraphrase of a divine judgment.” The impossibility of such an endeavor represented the metaphysical significance of Kafka’s linguistic world, which reflected the unrealizable nature of the Written Torah.61 What distinguishes Scholem’s

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60 The distinction Scholem made between lost and undecipherable scripture in 1934 is, perhaps, illustrated in a later reference to Kafka found in On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism, where he explains: “The holiness of the texts resides precisely in their capacity for such metamorphosis. The word of God must be infinite, or, to put it in a different way, the absolute word is as such meaningless, but it is pregnant with meaning. Under human eyes it enters into significant finite embodiments which mark innumerable layers of meaning. Thus mystical exegesis, this new revelation imparted to the mystic, has the character of a key. The key itself may be lost, but an immense desire to look for it remains alive. In a day when such mystical impulses seem to have dwindled to the vanishing point they still retain an enormous force in the books of Franz Kafka. And the same situation prevailed seventeen centuries ago among Talmudic mystics, one of whom left us an impressive formulation of it. In his commentary on the Psalms, Origen quotes a ‘Hebrew’ scholar, presumably a member of the rabbinic academy in Caesarea, as saying that the Holy Scriptures are like a large house with many, many rooms, and that outside each door lies a key—but it is not the right one. To find the right keys that will open the doors—that is the great and arduous task. This story, dating from the height of the Talmudic era, may give an idea of Kafka’s deep roots in the tradition of Jewish mysticism” (12).

61 The impossibility of such an endeavor represented the metaphysical significance of Kafka’s linguistic world, which reflected the unrealizable nature of the Written Torah. The contours of this impossibility are hinted at in Scholem’s reference to his early essay “Twelve Theses on the Order of Justice,” as the key to his understanding of the nature of the law in Kafka’s work. The tenth thesis of the essay, which bore the subtitle “The Basic Relationship [Grundbeziehung]: Canon—Symbol—Interpretability,” states the following: “The Written Torah cannot be applied. That is the decisive idea of and from tradition. Particularly in the concept of justice, without which the Torah remains essentially incomprehensible, will again tradition reach its deepest layers and finally establish itself. Revelation and the messianic era are in the oral teachings inseparably bound” (Tagebücher 1917-1923 535).
theological interpretation of Kafka from Schoeps is designated in the “the teaching called law” [die Lehre bei Kafka Gesetz genannt]. Scholem agrees with Schoeps that Kafka’s writings reflect the religious crisis of the age. But for Scholem, it is more than a mere expression of metaphysical crisis; it is a reflection of the unrealizable nature of the Torah. For Scholem, Kafka’s writing

During the period Scholem wrote the Theses, he concentrated his intellectual efforts on the concept of Lehre [teaching], the foundational theological category that stood at the center of his reflections on the historical mutability of the Jewish tradition. What is immediately apparent from Scholem’s notes and essays from that period is that Lehre is intentionally used as a correlate for the word Torah. Scholem’s resort to the term Lehre indicates the primary importance he attributes to Torah as transmissible teaching. Scholem uses the concept of Lehre in order to challenge the inadequate construal of the word “Torah” as law, which limits it to its legalistic aspect. Scholem’s Lehre interchangeable designates teaching, doctrine, law and system. Lehre thus simultaneously refers to that which is studied, received through teaching, and taught. Scholem employs this concept in such a way that blurs the distinction between the act of transmission and reception of the teaching. The intentional duality inherent to Scholem’s use of this concept is central to his endeavor to sketch out tradition’s capacity to evolve and transmute itself through its inter-generational transmission. 61

Scholem’s conception of Lehre during those years was deeply indebted to Benjamin, who placed this term at the center of his theological writings between the years 1915 and 1927 (See Story of a Friendship, p. 69). That Benjamin understood the concept of Lehre as one pertaining to the religious sphere is apparent from his 1917 letter to Scholem, where he states, “It is so difficult to speak about education because its order completely coincides with the religious order of tradition.” In the essay-length letter written to Scholem in response to an article he had published in Blau-Weiss Brille, Benjamin outlines a philosophy of education that rejects the notion of teaching as “learning by example,” and the idea of a teacher as one who “learns before others.” “I am convinced,” says Benjamin, “that tradition is the medium in which the person who is learning continually transforms himself into the person who is teaching, and that this applies to the entire range of education. In the tradition everyone is an educator and everyone needs to be educated and everything is education.” Benjamin’s understanding of education-tradition is premised upon the idea that it is not some predetermined “thing” that is in the possession of one generation that then passes it down to the next. No generation is closer to some metaphysical truth, by virtue of its precedence over succeeding generations. “The only thing that matters to the wave,” which Benjamin understands as a metaphor for the individual’s place in the tradition, “is to surrender itself to its motion in such a way that it crests and breaks. This enormous freedom of the breaking wave is education in its actual sense: instruction-tradition becoming visible and free tradition emerging precipitously like a wave from living abundance…Instruction is the only nexus of the free union of the old with the new generation. The generations are like waves that roll into each other and send their spray into the air.”

The theologically tinged anarchism of Benjamin’s notion of tradition echoes throughout the “Ninety-Five Theses on Judaism and Zionism,” which Scholem wrote and dedicated to him a year later. Scholem conceptualizes Lehre as a transformative encounter in which the act of transmission and reception become interchangeable—the students become teachers in the very act of study. Teaching and learning are inextricably intertwined in Lehre. The inter-generational transmission of Lehre does not transpose within a linear sequence of time. Rather, Lehre exemplifies the “eternal present” that underlies the Judaic conception of tradition, which is continuously transformed in the process of its transmission. The idea of transmission’s linearity is reversed in the temporality of Lehre, which in Scholem’s words is the “medium through which the learners transform into teachers” [Lernende in den Lehrer verwandelt]. Study is not merely the passive reception of doctrine, but the creation of meaning in the act of interpretation. The time of interpretation, which Scholem calls “the inner form of the Teaching” (Thesis 31), is not given to the past—it remains a horizon of a yet unfulfilled promise. The temporality of Lehre stands under the sign of Umkehr, reversal. In it the past no longer determines the present or future. A causal understanding of the relationship that runs between past, present, and future represents the temporal order Scholem designates as the time of myth, where everything is already predetermined by fate. Lehre stands in opposition to myth, which it negates through a notion of non-cumulative, non-sequential history that is the ultimate expression of unfettered human freedom.
manifests the “theological secret of perfect prose” (Friendship 216) by virtue of its ability to mirror the dialectical character of Jewish Law—providing a glimpse of the anarchic-multiplicity that lurks behind what is ostensibly thought to be the cohesive and unified body of the Jewish tradition.

While Benjamin, for his part, noted that “Kafka’s constant insistence on the Law” was the point where his work seemed to come to a “standstill” (Correspondence 135-136), his Kafka-essay tells another story altogether. In “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death,” Benjamin describes Kafka’s parables as having “a relationship to religious teachings similar to the one Haggadah has to Halachah” (802). Benjamin’s elucidates his understanding of Kafka prose by drawing an analogy to the relationship between the codified body of Jewish religious law, the Halachah, and the homiletic narrative teachings of Jewish lore, collectively known as the Aggadah (or “Haggadah” as Benjamin calls them in the essay).

Benjamin’s use of these terms is borrowed from the 1916 essay “Halachah and Aggadah,” written by the founding father of modern Hebrew poetry, Hayim Nachman Bialik. Bialik’s essay, translated by Scholem into German in 1919, addressed the commonplace distinction between two parts of the Oral Torah—its legal code, collectively known as the Halachah and the homiletic narrative teachings of the Aggadah—in order to overturn this very dichotomy. The immediate context of Bialik’s essay was a response to the early twentieth-century debates over the relationship between modern Hebrew letters and the traditional Jewish canon. Bialik’s essay addressed the fraught relationship between secular Hebrew culture and rabbinic Jewish tradition—what role did the Halachah play in secular Jewish life? Bialik formulated this question as aesthetic problem, asking whether Aggadah could preserve an integrated and consistent form once it was severed from the Halachah.
“Halachah and Aggadah,” Bialik argued, “are two things, which are really one, two sides of a single shield… Halachah is the crystallization, the ultimate and inevitable quintessence of Aggadah; Aggadah is the content of Halachah” (46). The two, he concluded, were “twin forms of literature and of life” (85). Bialik, of course, was not proposing to reestablish the authority of rabbinic law, but was trying to show how the law itself was not reducible to its prescriptive element. The essay showed how the Halachah as a whole exceeded the sum of its interdictions and decrees, constituting a “kaleidoscope of pictures, large and small, of actual Hebrew life over a period of a thousand years and more” (74). Bialik points to the interdependence of the narrative and legislative components that make up tradition:

Aggadah serves us air to breathe; Halachah gives us solid ground to stand on. The one provides the element of fluidity and motion, the other that of fixity and stability. Where Aggadah has no aftermath of Halachah in the national life, the nation will wander endlessly in the vague, and will be in danger of forgetting the straight and only way from will to action, from aspiration to achievement. (82)

Towards the end of his essay, Bialik, who views Halachah and Aggadah as the two pillars that sustain Jewish “national life,” poses a rhetorical question: “What will be the end of an Aggadah which has not its Halachah close by its side?” (85).

An indirect answer to this question emerges from Benjamin’s reading of Kafka. Although it is unclear whether Benjamin read Bialik’s essay or merely heard about it from Scholem, Benjamin’s use of the terms Halachah and Haggadah in his reading of Kafka intersects with the
Kafka’s writings are by their nature parables. But it is their misery and their beauty that they had to become more than parables. They do not modestly lie at the feet of the doctrine, as the Haggadah lies at the feet of the Halachah. Though apparently reduced to submission, they unexpectedly raise a mighty paw against it. (Correspondence 225)

By resorting to the traditional Jewish concepts designating law (Halachah) and lore (Haggadah) in his interpretation, Benjamin draws a relationship between Kafka’s modernist literary form and the Jewish tradition. Kafka’s stories represent narratives that no longer serve the law they were

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62 Both Scholem and Benjamin’s exchange of letters about Kafka’s law revolves around the relationship between “Halachah and Aggadah,” or “Nomos and Narrative” in the terms of legal theorist Robert Cover. Cover’s famous essay by that title opens with the following statement: “We inhabit a nomos—a normative universe. We constantly create and maintain a world of right and wrong, of lawful and unlawful, of valid and void…. No set of legal institutions or prescriptions exists apart from the narratives that locate it and give it meaning. For every constitution there is an epic, for each Decalogue a scripture. Once understood in the context of the narratives that give it meaning, law becomes not merely a system of rules to be observed, but a world in which we live” (4).

According to Cover, the social world is founded on a shared normative understanding, which thereby allows a community to mediate the relationship between its members and make sense of its reality. The common grounds of this shared social discourse are sustained through the imbrication of law and narrative. The two are codependent. Narrative provides the law with an imaginative and experiential framework, rendering it meaningful to collective life, whereas the law facilitates the social ethos narrated through history and literature with the unity of an end goal, a telos, by decreeing certain normative prescriptions and moral demands. Cover’s description of the intertwinement of nomos and narrative, or Halachah and Aggadah for that matter, reorients our understanding of what constitutes a legal hermeneutics. Accordingly, the interpretation of the law is not merely the attempt to understand how it applies in a limited juridical context, but in fact reveals how “the normative universe is held together by the force of interpretative commitments” (7). These interpretative commitments determine the prescriptive aspect of the law but they also determine the normative grounds of the society that abides by them.

The law becomes a resource of signification, creating social meaning and imbuing individual and collective action with significance. Whether this action is consistent with the prescribed norms of a given society or not, it nevertheless acquires meaning in its relation to the existing normative grounds that sustain a shared communal discourse. It follows that a legal tradition in this sense outlined by Cover takes on a role greater than that of a codex of regulatory demands to encompass a whole discursive infrastructure that upholds a normative universe. Within the law are embedded myths, narratives, and histories that allow society to negotiate its normative reality and establish a cohesive and meaningful social totality.

63 Benjamin makes a similar observation in a radio lecture entitled “Franz Kafka: Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer” from 1931, when he stated that “Like the haggadic parts of the Talmud, these books, are stories; they are a Haggadah that constantly pauses, luxuriating in the most detailed descriptions, in the simultaneous hope and fear that it might encounter the halachic order, the doctrine itself, en route.” (Selected Writings Vol. 2 496)
meant to justify and sustain. Benjamin’s statement hearkens back to the motif of “Umkehr” or “reversal” that he had already introduced in his 1934 Kafka essay. Here too Benjamin’s metaphor revolves around a reversal of sorts, one in which the Haggadah no longer serves as the handmaiden of the Halachah, but instead raises “a mighty paw against it.” Benjamin uses this metaphor in order to characterize Kafka’s work as representing “tradition falling ill,” that is conveying a state in which “the consistency of truth” transmitted by tradition had been lost. Kafka’s “real genius,” claims Benjamin in the letter, was that he responded to this loss of truth differently from most of his contemporaries, by sacrificing this truth “for the sake of clinging to transmissibility” (225).

The religious categories invoked in his reading of Kafka attest to Benjamin’s deep conviction that the crucial question around which Kafka’s work revolves is that of the transmissibility and continuity of tradition. He thus reads Kafka as a testimony to a process by which the fabric of tradition interwoven of nomos and narrative, or alternatively Halachah and Haggadah begins to unravel. In Kafka, the two elements that provide a shared sense of historical continuity—the narratives meant to justify the law, and the laws meant to give form to narrative—have fallen apart. For Benjamin, Kafka encounters tradition at the point at which “There is no doctrine that one could learn and no knowledge that one could preserve” (225).

In contrast to Walter Benjamin’s bleak diagnosis that reads Kafka’s narratives as representing “tradition falling ill,” Scholem believed that “such an enfeebling is rooted in the nature of the mystical tradition itself” (236 Correspondence). Accordingly, “it is only natural that the capacity of tradition to be transmitted remains as its sole living feature when it decays” (236). Against Benjamin’s claim that “the work of the Torah—if we abide by Kafka’s account—has been thwarted” (Correspondence 135), Scholem considered tradition’s decay to be a
necessary stage in its historical development. Scholem later elaborated on this paradox in the first of his “Ten Unhistorical Theses on the Kabbalah” (1957) where he explained how the truth of the Jewish mystical tradition could only be recognized in its decay (Judaica 264). For Scholem, Kafka’s writings did not represent the fact that the consistency of truth had been lost, as Benjamin argued, but that this truth, Kabbalistically-speaking, could not be known until it had decayed. Even after it had disintegrated and had been severed from the source of its vitality, tradition still maintained a fragment of the truth that it formerly held, and it was only in its decay that a trace of its hidden truth could be discovered.

In a brief manuscript from 1926, Scholem wrote down his first impressions from Kafka’s The Trial as a book that “shed light upon the theological contents of experience in the realm of language.” Scholem emphatically notes, “never did any Jew attain such a fashioning of his world from such an inner and profound center of Judaism” (Mysticism 193). Proof of Kafka’s footing in the Judaism comes from the penultimate chapter of The Trial, which Scholem describes as “the peak of the theological capacity which may be attained by artistic prose.”

Many readers have certainly already listened to the voices which bust forth from this chapter, from these few pages. The parable which describes the guardian of the law is like a kind of summary of Jewish theology, which in its unique dialectic is not destructive but, on the contrary, radiates powerful inner melancholy. Here the true Talmudic thinking breaks its light into a rainbow of colors. (Mysticism 193)
Scholem never cites the passages that inspire him to elaborate on Kafka’s theological qualities, and yet it might be worth speculating that it is the priest’s exegesis of the parable “Before the Law,” which Scholem is thinking of in these notes. In this unfinished novel, Joseph K. hopes to find answers to his inexplicable and convoluted experiences with the court and its elaborate bureaucratic structure. In response to K.’s puzzlement, a priest he meets in the cathedral cites a parable from “the introduction to the Law.” The parable tells the story of a man from the country who comes before the gates of the law hoping to gain entry, but is refused by a gatekeeper, who nevertheless does not deny the possibility that entry will be granted at some later indefinite point. Expecting to eventually gain access, since “the law should be accessible to all,” the man from the country spends his days outside the law, awaiting admission, which is never granted. The parable ends abruptly at the moment of the man’s death with the gatekeeper’s thundering exclamation, “this entry was meant only for you. I am now going to close it” (CS 4).

But is the man from the country really outside the law? In the story, the law seems to be spatially constituted through its boundaries, one can either be inside or outside the law. However, on a closer reading, it is in fact the collapse of this division that becomes the law’s constitutive trait. Besides the gatekeeper’s verbal prohibition, there is no physical barrier that might stop the man from the country from entering into the law. Standing before the law, the man already submits to its authority. He awaits admission on its threshold. His relation to the law is that of suspended expectation—“not now,” as the gatekeeper tells him.64

The unconsummated relationship of “not now” or “not yet” determines the law’s structural dynamic as one of indeterminate postponement, which is, in fact, its only quality. The

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law’s ever-suspended state, its utter negativity, renders it completely void—but simultaneously rife with meaning. Absolute, yet ambiguous, it is present, but only through its absence—thus relating to the man only in its non-relations to him. The law in Kafka’s parable has dissolved its own defining boundaries. It is no longer clear what is internal or external to it. Consequently, what gets lost is any clear demarcation between law and lawlessness. If the law’s only apparent quality is its forbidden threshold, and if its only discernable essence is the prohibition of its own presentation, then it contains nothing but its prohibitive exteriority. The closed-openness, which characterizes the unrealizable nature of the law in this parable, reflects Scholem’s understanding of the underlying nature of the Torah-Revelation—it may be studied and expounded upon, but its essence cannot be reached or realized. In contrast to Heinz Politzer’s interpretation that sees the Mann vom Lande as an am ha’aretz—the Jewish term for one who is unlearned—for Scholem, the question is not whether the man from the country is educated or not. It is that the Written Torah, allegorically represented in the gates to the law, is by definition inaccessible. As Scholem states in the third of his “Ten Unhistorical Theses,” since the Torah is God, it cannot be grasped by human consciousness.65 “The Torah is the medium in which awareness is reflected—darkened like the essence of tradition with which it is concerned, and shining in the pure realm of the Written Torah, that is, the Torah which is of no use. It is only usable when it is ‘oral,’ that is, when it is transmissible.” Although the gate to the law is open, its openness merely conceals the

65 “Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala” appeared in 1958 in a Festschrift published in honor of Dr. Daniel Brody’s seventy-fifth birthday. During Scholem’s lifetime the essay was never translated into Hebrew, the primary language in which he published most of his scholarly work. According to Scholem’s student Yosef Dan, Scholem did not circulate the essay among his students, sharing it only with those who discovered it themselves. This was not uncharacteristic of Scholem, who selectively published his work, leaving his more incendiary writings for his German-speaking interlocutors. Some of his more controversial writings pertaining to the Gnostic-nihilistic elements in Jewish theology such as “Der Nihilismus als Religiöses Phanomen” or the essay published in honor of Adorno’s sixtieth birthday “Die Metamorphose des haretischen Messianismus der Sabbatianer in religiosen Nihilismus im 18. Jahrhundert” were intentionally omitted from his rich legacy of Hebrew scholarship.
fact that it is utterly inaccessible. The inaccessible nature of the law in the parable is reflected in the priest’s bumbled explication that follows.

As the priest proceeds to interpret the parable for K., he repeatedly inverts each one of his interpretations with the facility of a Talmudic sophist. This rabbi-priest provides K. with an extensive exegesis of the parable’s intricacies, only to overturn every judgment he presents. The exegetical debate between K. and the priest remains inconclusive at best, because every time they progress in their understanding of the parable, they upend their previous interpretative assumptions. The infinitely regressive character of the priest’s explanation precludes the possibility of sealing the law’s meaning. The priest’s commentary thus frustrates the very possibility of reaching any interpretative closure, leaving the parable and its law open to endless interpretations.

It is the inaccessibility of the gate to the law and the inconclusive nature of the priest’s exegesis that Scholem describes as “a kind of summary of Jewish theology.” The priest’s repeated, yet failed attempt to unlock the meaning of the parable radiates with a “powerful inner melancholy.” In the priest’s ongoing explication of the law, Scholem recognizes the “essence” of Judaism as interminably evolving through its interpretative explication of the “nonfulfillable” Torah. The priest exposes the law’s radical instability, its uncontrolled, and de-centralized nature. The attempt to stabilize the law’s meaning, to sustain it on the basis of some hierarchical principle, ultimately fails because its radical plurality cannot be constricted. Scholem describes the priest as a “a disguised halakhist, a rabbi, who knows how to transmit—if not the Law itself—at least the traditions circulating about the Law, in the form of a parable” (Correspondence 127n). The priest’s attempt to interpret the law, and thus convey its definite meaning to K., inversely exposes its fundamental groundlessness.
In this regard, Scholem’s position clearly distinguishes itself from Orthodoxy, which believes in the binding authority of the Halachah, that is, the rabbinic legislative aspect of tradition. “To be sure,” admits Scholem, “the Halachah is certainly an overwhelmingly important aspect of Judaism as an historical phenomenon, but it is not at all identical with the phenomenon of Judaism per se. Judaism has taken on varied forms, and to think of it as only a legislative body of precepts seems to me as an historian and as an historian of ideas to be utter nonsense” (Mysticism 115). At the same time, Scholem also distances himself from the religious-existentialism of Buber and Schoeps, who believe in the possibility of a direct-inspirational relationship to God, unmediated by tradition. In contrast to both these positions Scholem views tradition as the locus of historical Judaism, the realm in which its religious drama is played out through its inner-tensions and ongoing controversies. The figure of Kafka-as-Kabbalist encapsulates Scholem’s conception of tradition. The unanticipated resurgence of Kabbalistic thought in Kafka’s work represents the nature of tradition’s historical transmission as a process rife with discontinuities, and ruptures. What Scholem finds so appealing in Kafka’s work is that it appears to confirm his own understanding of Judaism’s capacity to transform itself in the act of interpretation.


Although Scholem makes no direct reference to Kafka’s short story “The Problem of Our Laws,” it seems to exemplify his understanding of the subversive dynamism inherent to Jewish law. The story is told from the perspective of a first-person narrator who reflects upon the law legislated by the nobles. The narrator notes that despite his subjection to the law, its actual contents remain unknown to him. He tries to justify this situation, yet it the very attempt at
rationalization that precipitate the law’s collapse into meaninglessness. The narrator’s interpretation of these unknown laws has the semblance of logical reasoning, but it is rife with contradictions and arbitrary observations. “Who doubts the wisdom of the ancient laws?” (CS 437). What begins as a rhetorical statement, a pledge of confidence, abruptly devolves into a profession of disbelief: “The very existence of these laws, however, is at most a matter of presumption… a mere tradition sanctioned by age” (CS 437). “The Problem of Our Laws” moves from epistemological skepticism to ontological doubt. The laws cannot be known or understood by the people who then come to question the very existence of these laws. Are these secret laws legislated by the nobles or are they a collective fiction produced by the people and attributed to the nobles who rule them? Can these laws be said to exist in the world, or are they mere objects of cognition? The narrator provides no definitive answer to these questions, closing the story with a quote from “a writer” who once said, “The sole visible and indubitable law that is imposed upon us is the nobility, and must we ourselves deprive ourselves of that one law?” (CS 438).

In this regard, it is worth noting Hans-Dieter Zimmermann’s commentary on this story. In his essay “Jüdisches, Unjüdisches,” Zimmermann argues that Kafka plays with the double meaning of the law, which he refers to in both its jurisprudential sense and as religious allusion to the Torah (227). “The Problem of Our Laws” can be understood as a critique of the noble’s use of state law as an instrument of domination over the people, Zimmermann concedes, but suggests that the nobles can also be understood as referring to the rabbis, the intellectual aristocracy of premodern Jewry. According to this reading, the nobility represents a group of dominant rabbis learned in the law, whose knowledge of the law is the basis of their power. According to this interpretation, the story may be understood as one that touches upon the
modern Jewish perception of religious law. In it, the law, which previously served as a source of reassurance for the people, has turned into a site of ambivalence and doubt (230). Zimmermann reads the story as a parable that represents Jewish secularization as an incomplete process that left European Jewry in a no-man’s-land—skeptically clinging to their old customs, despite their meaninglessness to the modern Jew.

Following Zimmermann’s interpretation, “The Problem of Our Laws” readily lends itself as a parabolic representation of Scholem’s understanding of the “abysses” and “dialectics” that characterized the historical transmission of Jewish law, an issue he confronted most intensely in his studies of the Sabbatian movement. A sense of what was at stake in Scholem’s study of Sabbatianism is found in his account of evening he spent discussing his work with Franz Hessel and Walter Benjamin.

In Abraham Miguel Cardozo’s writings in defense of the Sabbatian heresy, which I talked about… smoldered a flame that leaped from me to my first audience. The perennial question as to what Judaism was all about—a question that had been given an entirely new turn in my studies… Was Judaism still alive as a heritage or an experience, even as something constantly evolving, or did it exist only as an object of cognition? (Friendship 165)

“The Problem of Our Laws” epitomizes the dialectical-discursive quality Scholem found so appealing in Kafka’s work. The paradox that runs through this hermeneutic-narrative is that the narrator’s rationalization of the law becomes inextricably bound up with a line of interpretation that threatens to dissolve the law’s authority in the attempt to justify it. The equivocal quality of
Kafka’s interpretative-narratives appeals to Scholem’s own understanding of Judaism’s capacity to transform itself through interpretation.

According to Scholem, the Kabbalistic interpretation of the Torah is ostensibly meant to reinforce its authority, by attributing a mystical significance to rabbinic law. Yet by pointing to a reality that stands beyond the prescriptions of the Halachah, the Kabbalist ultimately undermines the law’s authority. What begins as the mystical validation of the law, leads to the law’s annihilation. Scholem is referring to the mystical doctrine of Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534-72). Luria’s influential myth of tzimtzum related creation to an act of divine concealment. According to this mystical theory of creation, God needed to contract himself and negate a part of his infinite perfection, in order to make room for a world of matter that would exist within finite time. Luria’s mystical theology of divine exile revolved around three central stages: tzimtzum (divine self-limitation), shevirat ha-kelim (the breaking of the vessels), and tikkun (redemption-reparation). After God had exiled himself, he formed vessels that would receive his divine light on earth, yet these vessels shattered since they could not contain the light of divine perfection. The breaking of the vessels and the dispersion of the divine light explained the disorder that existed in the world. There was nothing that remained in its proper place after the breaking of the vessels, leaving the world in a state of chaos, which would only be repaired with the coming of the messiah (Messianic 45).

According to Scholem, the compelling power of this myth was that it recast the Jewish experience of exile, Galut, into cosmic terms that defined the state of the world as a whole. In its popularized version, the Lurianic myth of tzimtzum, served as a theodicy that rationalized the world’s imperfections and explained the contradictory experience of life in an unredeemed reality. Lurianic Kabbalah provided Galut with a cosmic framework in which the plight of the
people of Israel stood for the condition of that befell the world as a whole from the time of
creation. It thus became the historical role of the Jews to repair the fundamental imperfection of
the world by observing the commandments of the Torah. The Torah and the mitzvoth, the
religious commandments, acquired universal significance as the means of repairing the world
and amending the innermost layers of the divine. But this Kabbalistic myth that strengthened the
Halachah by claiming that the fulfillment of the commandments affected the highest spheres of
divinity in ways incomprehensible to the believers, ultimately served to displace the centrality of
the Halachah, which became secondary to the divine processes described by the Kabbalists.
Kabbalistic doctrine seemed to endorse the Halachah but ended up destroying it from within—a
process, which according to Scholem ultimately led to forms of Enlightenment religion, such as
Reform Judaism that were neither rabbinic, nor mystical.

Scholem developed his most comprehensive account of the dialectical historical process
by which mysticism led to the transvaluation of religious law in his scholarship on Jewish
antinomian messianism. Scholem’s 1936 essay “Redemption through Sin” [Mitzvah Haba’ah
Be’Averah], explored the dialectical logic of Sabbatian and Frankist theologies that regarded the
transgression of the Torah as its ultimate fulfillment [Bitulah Shel Torah Zehu Kiyumah].
According to Scholem, the nihilistic impulse that guided these messianic movements stemmed
from the mystical doctrine of Lurianic Kabbalah. In Scholem’s view, Sabbatianism, the
messianic-heretical movement that swept world Jewry in the seventeenth-century, must be taken
seriously as a constituting a coherent and systematic theology derived from a radical
reinterpretation of the Kabbalistic tradition. While the seeds of Sabbatianism may have grown
into stray weeds that threatened to smother the “well-ordered house” of rabbinic Judaism, they
were nevertheless sown and nurtured within the bounds of received Jewish tradition. Even as it
overturned rabbinic law on its head, Sabbatianism was “a specifically Jewish phenomenon to the end” (*Messianic* 84).

As Scholem explains in the fourth of his ten unhistorical theses:

> The accusations against the heretical theologians of Sabbatian Kabbalah, as if they had materialistically misinterpreted the spiritual mysteries, explicitly show the path one might take, when attempting to follow the inner logic of these images. From the beginning there is a dialectical moment in the materialism of the teaching of *tzimtzum* and *the breaking of the vessels*. The representation of the Sabbatian Kabbalah of Nathan of Gaza… is only the most radical appropriation of the process of dialectical materialism with regards to God himself. To perceive the mystical Kabbalists as materialist mystics with a dialectical tendency might be thoroughly unhistorical, but it would not be meaningless. (*Judaica* 266-267)

The Sabbatians tailored the mystical consciousness of radical dualism between God and world, which they found in Lurianic Kabbalah, into a doctrine of antinomian libertinism. Since God was wholly absent from the unredeemed world, the laws of the pre-messianic Torah were declared void in the age of redemption, which had been pronounced by their self-proclaimed messiah Sabbatai Sevi. Since Sabbatai Sevi’s appearance on the stage of history marked the epoch of messianic redemption, the Halachah, the inheritance of exilic Jewish existence, was to be abolished.
In Scholem’s view Sabbatian nihilism shattered the authority and ideological coherence of Orthodoxy, paving the way to Jewish secularity. By the time its messianic impulse was exhausted, Sabbatianism had managed to destroy the walls of the Jewish ghetto from within.

The leaders of the school of Mendelssohn, who were neither Sabbatians themselves, of course, nor under the influence of mysticism at all, to say nothing of mystical heresy, found ready recruits for their cause in Sabbatian circles, where the world of rabbinic Judaism had already been completely destroyed from within, quite independently of the efforts of secularist criticism. Those who had survived the ruin were now open to any alternative or wind of change; and so, their ‘mad visions’ behind them, they turned their energies and hidden desires for a more positive life to assimilation and the Haskalah, two forces that accomplished without paradoxes, indeed without religion at all, what they, the members of the “accursed sect,” had earnestly striven for in a stormy contention with truth… (Messianic Idea 141)

According to Scholem, the existential catastrophe experienced in the wake of Sabbatai Sevi’s apostasy instigated the collapse of Orthodox observance, and rabbinical Judaism. In Scholem’s Faustian re-articulation of modern Jewish history, Sabbatian antinomianism prepared the grounds for Reform Judaism, and the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment. Paradoxically, the religious reform that followed the Jewish Emancipation was “the progeny not only of the rational mind,” but a product of the “lawless heresy” pronounced by Sabbatianism. Scholem’s critical
assessment of the Sabbatian legacy is rooted in a dialectical, if not paradoxical understanding of the historical unfolding of tradition.

In the paradoxical inner-workings of Kafka’s law, Scholem recognizes the dialectical dimension inherent to this heretical-mystical tradition that interpreted the Kabbalah in ways that lead to the transvaluation of rabbinic law. In the last of his “Ten Theses,” Scholem draws a direct link between Kafka and the Frankists.

A hundred years before Kafka, Jonas Wehle from Prague wrote (through his son in law Löw von Hoenigsberg) his unpublished letters and writings, which were carefully collected by his Frankist students. He wrote for the last followers of a Kabbalah transformed into the heresy of nihilistic messianism, who sought to articulate it in the language of the Enlightenment. He is the first who presented himself with the question (and answered it in the affirmative), whether with the banishment of man, Paradise had not lost more than man himself. This side of the matter has not yet been resolved. Is it merely the sympathy of souls [Sympathie der Seelen], which one hundred years later brought Kafka to such profoundly similar reflections? Perhaps it because we do not know what happened to Paradise that he began to contemplate the Good, which is “in a certain sense disconsolate.” These reflections certainly appear to be the outcome of a heretical Kabbalah.

Indeed, Kafka gave an unsurpassed expression to the borderline between religion and nihilism. For that reason his writings, which give a secular representation of a Kabbalistic sensibility [Weltgefühls] (unknown to him), appears to some readers of our day as emitting something of the strong light of the canonical—of the
fragile absolute [dem strengen Glanze des Kanonischen—des Vollenken, das zerbricht]. (Judaica 271)

The imaginative link Scholem draws between Kafka and the Frankists requires some elaboration. The relationship, which Scholem points to but does not spells out, is based on his understanding of the Frankist movement and its theology. The final thesis of Scholem’s semi-biographical sketch on the historical relevance of the Kabbalah presents his belief in the enduring power of the Jewish mysticism and its ability to resurface unexpectedly in the present without apparent historical connections. Scholem finds in Kafka a re-articulation of Frankist nihilism, even though he admits that Kafka himself was unaware of the affinities his writings bore to these mystical revolutionaries. Scholem’s essay “The Metamorphosis of Sabbatian Heretical Messianism into Religious Nihilism in the Eighteenth-Century,” published in a Festschrift on the occasion of Adorno’s sixtieth birthday, might give us a clue as to Kafka’s “sympathy of souls” with the Frankist heresy.

The Frankists, a Polish-Bohemian messianic movement led by Jacob Frank (1726-1791) in the mid eighteenth-century, were the last followers of Sabbatianism. Following the example set by their leader, thousands of Frank’s followers were baptized in 1759, but kept their own decisive Jewish identity for decades after their pseudo-conversion to Christianity. For Scholem, the Frankists were “a prime example of the dialectical development of history”—a movement that broke out of the “strictest frame of rabbinic Judaism.” (“Metamorphosen” 21-22). What Scholem finds so remarkable about this chapter in Jewish history is the unfathomable paradox of a movement that preached heretical nihilism and “opened the path into a new age of
Enlightenment and the French Revolution from within,” yet stemmed from the heart of Judaism, “a religion structured around strict observance of the law” (22).

While Sabbatian theology was grounded in the Scriptures and the Kabbalah, Jacob Frank emphasized his ignorance of rabbinic law and took pride in his religious illiteracy. He discarded the Kabbalistic language of the Sabbatians translating his messianic mission into popular language and images taken from Jewish and Polish folklore. As Scholem explains, “He translated the theosophical and mystical symbolism of his Sabbatian predecessors into popular poetic images” [volkstumlichen poetischen Glanz erhält] (“Metamorphosen” 23). And yet where Frank called for the destruction of tradition, he based his teachings on the Psalms and the Talmud. He took the traditional archetypal representation of Jacob and Esau, the first a symbol of religious devotion, the second an emblem of worldly life, violence and profanity, and turned it on its head. Although Esau traditionally represented the Catholic Church, in the transvaluation of all Jewish values, Frank coupled the historical experience of Polish Jewry with the profane world of Esau (25). The Bible states that Jacob promised to visit Esau, but nowhere is it actually reported that he went. The “Path to Esau” would lead to redemption, but necessitated a mass-conversion to Catholicism on the way to an anarchistic life in which all religions and all laws would eventually be overturned. In outwardly accepting Catholicism, the Frankists saw themselves as reenacting the biblical story of Jacob deceiving Isaac. Jacob who wore Esau’s garments and laid goat-skins on his arms symbolized the Frankist mission that necessitated an outward conversion to Christianity. As Scholem explains, “the true Frankist puts on Esau’s clothes, but carries Jacob in his heart, putting on a false appearance and deceiving the world while carrying true faith in one’s heart” (26-27).
The Frankist interpretation of Scripture was aimed at deciphering the encoded messianic meanings of the Torah, which they read in accordance with their eschatological vision. They justified their transgression of the Halachah, and found support for their antinomian lawlessness by engaging with the Scriptures through a secondary hermeneutic. The Sabbatians, and their Frankist successors, accepted the Torah, but rejected its rabbinic interpretation. According to these messianic movements, the age of redemption warranted a new interpretation of the Torah, one that conformed to a new messianic chapter in history. The holiness of sin proclaimed by the Sabbatians revealed the radical instability of rabbinic nomos, which could no longer maintain its coherence in light of the messianic narrative of redemption.

5. Conclusion

The idea of the Kabbalah’s ability to unexpectedly resurface throughout history is apparent in Scholem’s introduction to On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism. The historical state of the Kabbalah in the era following the emancipation of European Jewry is described as resembling “an overgrown field of ruins, where only very occasionally a learned traveler was surprised or shocked by some bizarre image of the sacred, repellent to rational thought. The key to the understanding of the Kabbalistic books seemed to have been lost” (2). Scholem describes a seemingly irreversible process whereby the Kabbalah, formerly the vessel of collective historical memory, had devolved into complete a devastated field of ruins. Yet for “a generation that has witnessed a terrible crisis in Jewish history,” Scholem suggests, “the ideas of these medieval

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60 Philosopher Hans Jonas, whose work on Gnosticism deeply influenced Scholem in the thirties, describes the formation of Jewish law as a direct outcome of crisis: “… The Babylonian Exile forced the Jews to develop that aspect of their religion whose validity transcended the particular Palestinian conditions and to oppose the creed thus extracted in its purity to the other religious principles of the world into which they had been cast. This meant a confrontation of ideas with ideas … thus the very uprooting brought to fulfillment a process which has started, it is true, with the older prophets” (Gnostic Religion 15). Jonas describes how the crisis of exile brought about the codification of Jewish law in the Babylonian Talmud, as necessary for the survival of Judaism under the political
Jewish esoterics no longer seems so strange.” According to Scholem, the Kabbalistic tradition, which had seemed like a relic of the past, could once again become meaningful to an age that had witnessed the atrocities of the Shoah.

Tradition then, was never consistent, unified or self-contained to begin with. Its multiplicity and contradictions are an expression of crisis, but they are also a manifestation of its capacity to expand and encompass an infinite range of meanings. “The crisis of tradition,” an expression often employed to describe the philosophical, moral and historical contours of modernity, represents nothing new to Judaism, since crisis is the Jewish tradition’s most consistent trait. The rupture within tradition, and the weakening of its authority merely represent another stage in an ongoing process of its many historical transformations. The historical narrative Scholem weaves around Jewish secularization, and in which Kafka plays a central role, disrupts the crude dichotomy between tradition and modernity as two opposite poles.

Scholem’s reading of Kafka materializes as part of his ambitious attempt to formulate a philosophy of Jewish history that will account for the modern-secular break with tradition as a rupture occurring within that tradition. Kafka, thus, plays a key role in Scholem’s ambitious effort to reshape the historical narrative of Jewish secularization as an event occurring within the dialectical continuum of the Jewish tradition. His reading of Kafka reflects the trajectory of his radical revision of Jewish history, which allows him to recast secularization as part of continuous
dialectic unfolding within the bounds of the legitimate bounds of historical Judaism. Kafka, whom Scholem read as a modern-secular representative of Kabbalistic thought, becomes a paradigmatic figure in Scholem’s daemonic vision of Jewish history, which frames secular-modernity and the rebellion against rabbinic Judaism as theologically legitimate manifestations of the Jewish tradition.

6. Kurzweil Contra Scholem (Chapter Postscript)

“Gershom Scholem’s commentary to Walter Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ recalls Max Brod’s interpretation of Kafka. Both Scholem and Brod feed on the writings of their dead friends. The two are a testimony to the ways in which our national resurrection lives off of the dead”

— Baruch Kurzweil

Baruch Kurzweil (1907-1972), one of Gershom Scholem’s harshest and most perceptive critics, was quick to note the ideological stakes involved in Scholem’s historiographical project. Kurzweil, an orthodox Jew who taught Comparative Literature at Bar-Ilan University, was strongly influenced by Central-European culture—a fact that is readily apparent from his writing, which is fashioned after the abrasive journalistic style of Karl Kraus. Kurzweil was highly skeptical of Scholem’s historiography, which depicted the secularization of European Jewry and the emergence of the Zionist movement as end results of an internal-immanent process that took place within the bounds of the Jewish tradition.

Drawing on the ideas presented by Franz Rosenzweig in The Star of Redemption, Kurzweil argues that when one “historicizes” Judaism it loses its authority as an unchanging entity that transcends time and place. In dragging Judaism into “the secular flow of history,” Scholem’s scholarship transforms the ontological status of Judaism, which loses its stable and consistent essence. Kurzweil sees Scholem’s work as “the most profound and fascinating
expression of the shift that is occurring in the historical consciousness of our people” *(Values x)*. His methodology assumed a sacramental attitude towards history that was derived from the German Romanticism and *Lebensphilosophie*. The religious anarchism and irrationalism that Scholem celebrated as the constituting the “secret life of Judaism” were for Kurzweil a sign of a dying culture. The European turn to mysticism, which Scholem was a part of, was a sign of its cultural sickness. Despite Scholem’s effort to distance himself from the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, his scholarship belonged to the same tradition that had begun with the nineteenth-century academic study of Judaism. Both Scholem and the *Wissenschaft* were responsible for relativizing Judaism as a form of spiritual creativity amongst many. Their comparative approach to religion had nothing in common with traditional Jewish thought, argued Kurzweil.

In “Notes to Gershom Scholem’s *Sabbatai Sevi,*” Kurzweil points out the covert agenda, which is concealed by Scholem’s “dialectical sharpness, peppered with all of the signs of paradoxical daemonism” *(Values 100)*. There is no act, immoral or inhumane, that cannot be justified by the antinomian logic underlying Scholem’s historical account of the Sabbatian movement. Scholem’s scholarship was no more than a grandiose effort to ideologically justify secular Judaism and Zionism in particular, bestowing upon them the validity of continuity, as if they were developments immanent to traditional religious life. In Scholem’s version, secularity developed from within. It was not the European Enlightenment that brought about the disintegration of Jewish faith in its traditional forms, but Judaism itself—through its mystical channels, the Kabbalah and the messianic movements of the Sabbatians and the Frankists—that generated this dialectical development and by extension secularity. According to Kurzweil the “dialectic of continuity and revolt” that framed Scholem’s historical narrative was an attempt to sidestep the simple fact that Jewish secular culture was the product of a spiritual world wholly
foreign to pre-modern Jewry. Scholem’s depiction of Sabbatianism as the historical progenitor of the *Haskalah* was nothing but a retroactive attempt to legitimize secular national movement as an outgrowth of traditional Judaism, and present it as continuous with historical Judaism (*Continuity* 83).

Kurzweil saw a reflection of the internal contradictions that characterized Scholem’s work in modern Hebrew literature. In *Our New Literature: Continuity or Rebellion?* (1959), Kurzweil addresses the question of continuity in Modern Hebrew letters. Noting that the writings of Bialik, Feirberg, and Agnon are rife with biblical allusions and references to rabbinic literature, Kurzweil argues that the intertextual character of their work is, in fact, the strongest evidence of their secularity, because their use of canonical sources is devoid of religious faith, and serves to portray a reality devoid of all transcendence. In the book, Kurzweil was especially critical of literary scholars who relied on Scholem’s historiographical approach in order to demonstrate the “traditionalism” of modern Hebrew letters (*Continuity* 78). “Is modern Hebrew culture truly the outcome of Sabbatianism as Scholem claims?” asks Kurzweil (83). Reversing the dialectic logic at work in Scholem’s historiography of continuity through rupture, Kurzweil notes,

This dialectical tension is the tragic element in our literature. It is the product of the historical paradox, in which at that moment when the certainty of faith has ceased to be the ultimate value of the nation, the nation begins to identify with its past, which requires it to reclaim its essence, even though it can no longer do so according to the accepted categories. And for that reason, it grapples with the past with all its vitality in an attempt to redefine it… This mystical romanticism falls
into cloudy terminology such as “the Jewish fate,” “Jewish exceptionalism,” “the origins of the nation,” “the literature of the nation.” But these do not deflect the severity of our spiritual situation; no turn to neo-Hassidism will solve this problem. There is no ignoring the tragic condition of our new literature, because it is missing the one legitimate element: religious belief. (*Continuity* 31-32)

Like Scholem’s “return to history,” modern Hebrew literature was an attempt at national self-affirmation that belonged to the legacy of European Romanticism. Paradoxically, this “national awakening” had arrived too late—a situation that Kurzweil describes by alluding to Kafka’s “The Hunter Gracchus,” which tells the story of the living dead.

Interestingly, Kurzweil’s critique of Scholem’s historiography is mirrored in his understanding of Kafka. According to Kurzweil,

> Kafka lives his Judaism as a remnant, a prehistoric fossil, in a foreign and lively environment that is completely indifferent to this fact. This interminable process of decay moves Kafka’s sensitive soul… He is a Jew for whom Judaism is meaningless, a Judaism that his lost its vitality. (*Continuity* 134)

Kurzweil, who is ideologically averse to Scholem’s revivalist approach to secular Jewish culture, sees in Kafka a fellow critic of the “ersatz religiosity” that he himself denounces as a pale replacement for the traditional belief in a living God. How is it, asks Kurzweil, that Kafka is celebrated as a religious prophet, when it is the demise of all religious realities that is the basic presupposition of his literary project? (*Novel* 318). Kurzweil’s indignation is directed primarily
at “Brod’s pseudo-religious readings of Kafka” (323), but his critique of Kafka’s religious
interpreters may equally apply to Scholem. “Kafka’s Sphinx-like writings tempt his postwar
readers to find in them an antidote to their present day reality. This is how the oddest
identifications come to find their own validation in Kafka’s writings” (340). The problem with
Kafka’s religiously inclined interpreters, Kurzweil explains, is that they “confuse textual analysis
with philosophical preaching which is not immanent to his writings.” They turn his works into
“the experimental grounds for new atheist-ontological, or neo-religious ontologies that combine
Heidegger and Tillich,” ultimately ignoring the uniqueness of the literary text and the specificity
of his language in order to validate their own theoretical approach” (Novel 341).

Kurzweil’s orthodox conception of Judaism and its boundaries epitomizes the ideology
Scholem set out to challenge in his scholarly work. As Scholem reminded his audience in a talk
in he gave in 1974,

Judaism cannot be defined according to its essence, since it has no essence.
Judaism cannot therefore be regarded as a closed historical phenomenon whose
development and essence came into focus by a finite sequence of historical,
philosophical, doctrinal, or dogmatic judgments and statements. Judaism is rather
a living entity which for some reason has survived… (Mysticism 114)

Arguing that Judaism constitutes an evolving historical phenomenon, Scholem rejects
Kurzweil’s dogmatic views on Jewish theology and tradition. Where Kurzweil sees rupture,
Scholem finds continuity. The difference is rooted in what each understands to be the
consequences of secularization on the “essence” of Judaism. For Kurzweil it is theonomy, or
religious Judaism’s focus on God, whereas for Scholem Judaism manifests its “essence” in a particular canonical-interpretative tradition. Thus, even as the Jews’ worldview of change with time, their reinterpretation of the Torah in light of their contemporary sensibilities establish an ongoing continuity between the generations, of the kind he identifies in Kafka’s “canonicity.” Scholem and Kurzweil’s diametrically opposed visions of Judaism and modernity are succinctly encapsulated in their respective views on the Jewish message conveyed in Kafka’s prose.
Conclusion: Jewgerman is Germanjew

In an obituary for his close friend Franz Kafka, Felix Weltsch asserted that Kafka’s writings were “Jewish through and through” (27). Kafka’s future readers, he declared, “have yet to uncover the intrinsic connection to Judaism that inspired the work of this great Western-Jewish poet of the German tongue” (27). Weltsch’s challenge epitomizes the fundamental question that Scholem, Schoep, Susman and Brod pose in their interpretations. Is there anything inherently Jewish about Kafka’s writing, and if so, how can it be accounted for? Underlying their criticism is an ideologically heated debate concerning two highly contested concepts: that of the “German-Jewish dialogue” and the “German-Jewish symbiosis.” Their interpretations reflect their conflicting views on the nature of German-Jewish cultural interaction and what they respectively understand to be “German” and “Jewish.” While they all acknowledge the essential Jewishness of Kafka’s writing, they disagree when it comes to pinpointing its presence in his fiction or even defining what they mean by its Jewishness.

In all of the Kafka commentaries I discuss in this project, the “Jewish” is conceptualized through its relationship to the “German,” which is often cast in the role of its dialectical other. Kafka’s “Jewish essence”—whether it is conceived in national, cultural, or theological terms—is defined vis-à-vis the German or the “non-Jewish,” from which it is said to differ. This dynamic is reflected in Scholem’s 1931 letter to Benjamin, which asserts Kafka’s “position in the continuum of Jewish literature” by contrasting it to “the continuum of German literature.” This holds true for Kafka’s cultural Zionist commentators—Brod, Weltsch, Baum, and Politzer—as it does for his anti-Zionist critics, Schoeps and Susman. Yet the effort to claim Kafka for the Jewish canon through an act of negation, defining him by what he is not, bespeaks an anxiety of influence.

More significantly perhaps, Scholem’s reading captures a deep-seated ambiguity that
characterizes all of the “Jewish” readings discussed in this study, in which the construction of “the Jewish” is inextricably bound to “the German.”

Kafka’s interwar commentators are not disinterested readers. Their contradictory interpretations are a reflection of the ideological agendas they bring to bear on his work. In all of these cases, interpreting Kafka becomes an activity that allows his critics to meditate upon the meaning of modern Jewish identity. They are simultaneously the subject and object of their interpretations, struggling to understand Kafka and at the same time make sense of their own complex cultural situation as German Jews. The respective answers given to the question “what is Jewish about Kafka?” reflect the cultural dilemmas and ideological investments that preoccupied German-Jewish thinkers during the interwar era. That these readings are “ideologically tainted” in no way detracts from their insightfulness and originality as works of literary interpretation. To criticize these commentaries because they were shaped by the extra-literary concerns of their authors is to assume that there is some Archimedean vantage point from which Kafka can be read “objectively.”

It is precisely this myth of critical objectivity that Israeli literary critic Gershon Shaked rebuffs in the preface to his own essay anthology on modern Jewish literature, where he writes:

> Literary critics sometimes live under the illusion that they represent a rational conceptual approach to the realm of literary texts. In this conventional view, the texts themselves are regarded as intense fusions of unconscious primary processes and secondary conscious processes. The function of criticism seems to be only a secondary process: the objective reformulation of a fictitious world of imagination. Fiction has biographical and subjective sources, while criticism tries
to be above and beyond the critic’s personal life and biography. This is of course a concept that does not pass the test of reality. Genuine criticism originates from the same sources and resources as authentic fiction. The difference is only the genre of communication: The selection of texts, the extraction of critical issues, and the ideological arrangement of critical terms are as conditioned by the biographical, psychological, and ideological background of the critics as literary works are by those of the artist. (xi)

In the spirit of Shaked’s observations, my interest in this particular subset of Kafka commentaries has been motivated by the desire to understand how literary criticism relates to, and is informed by the alternate visions of modern Jewish identity held by his critics. This project sought to account for the role Kafka’s writing played in an ongoing dialogue concerning that imagined entity, which his critics commonly refer to as the “Jewish essence.” The figures I examined in this study all believe that Kafka’s work somehow embodies this “essence,” yet their explication this “essence” has less to do with Kafka’s own relationship to—or understanding of—Judaism and more to do with their own preconceived views on Judaism. The paradox inherent to all these interpretations is that in their attempt to recuperate Jewishness as a cultural and religious resource for collective self-understanding, they end up reifying this category by distilling it into one singular principle or ideal.

Kafka’s critics are right in identifying various “Jewish” influences in his writing. Yet the

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67 It is worth quoting Hermann Goldschmidt’s astute observations in this regard: “German Jewry’s quest to define its essence—its attempt to name the ‘essence of Judaism’—was perhaps its most characteristic endeavor. The word ‘essence’ invokes both the distinctive uniqueness and weakness of German Jewish society, and of German intellectual life as a whole. German and Jewish intellectuals shared a predilection for abstraction and a tendency toward inner withdrawal... Yet the phrase we are about to consider, “the essence of Judaism,” also signifies one of the most important debates in world Jewish history, though in quite German fashion, the phrase itself became the title of but a single book. The controversy over ‘the essence of Judaism’ ultimately produced one of the most crucial intellectual breakthroughs and victories of Jewish modernity.” (123)
motifs, metaphors and allusions upon which they base their interpretation do not add up to a coherent or cohesive conception of Judaism. Moreover, their identification of a particular facet in Kafka’s text with the “essence of Judaism” results in the very reduction and over-simplification of modern Jewish identity. In Schoeps’s case, Kafka’s writing is said to exemplify the “Jewish” paradox of faith, rendered in Protestant-Barthian terms; Scholem associates Kafka’s style with the nihilistic potential inherent in the Jewish mystical tradition; Brod and other members of the “Prague Circle” identify his novels with a communal ethic and a desire for “national rejuvenation,” which they perceive as the primary mission of Zionism; Susman sees Kafka’s writing as a contemporary expression of the Jews’ “diasporic vocation,” a reminder that Jewish peoplehood is rooted in the experience of exile.

Brod’s recovery of Kafka’s writing for a Jewish-national agenda illustrates the ways in which his political and ideological convictions shaped his literary analysis. The underlying irony of all this is that Brod’s vision of Jewish particularity is taken directly from an intellectual tradition whose influence he would most likely disavow, German Romanticism. His conception of Kafka’s Jewishness is deeply indebted to the Herderian idea that an author’s work expresses a Volksgeist unique to the nation to which he or she belongs. His interpretation imposes an ideological coherence on Kafka that never existed there in the first place, but that also glosses over the complex and contradictory ways German-speaking Jews understood their own Jewishness in the early twentieth century. Brod’s reading accurately reflects cultural Zionism’s rejection of the “German-Jewish symbiosis.” The terms he uses to portray Kafka’s Judaism are meant to convey the idea that “Jewish” and “German” represent mutually exclusive cultural entities.
Gershom Scholem’s rejection of the “German-Jewish symbiosis” was even more adamant. In his now famous piece, “Against the Myth of the German-Jewish Dialogue” (1964), the Berlin born scholar belligerently declared: “I deny that there has ever been such a German-Jewish dialogue in any genuine sense whatsoever,” asserting that the celebrated dialogue died before it even began. Scholem understands “dialogue” to be a mutually reciprocal act of communication between two equal partners: “It takes two to have a dialogue, who listen to each other, who are prepared to perceive the other as what he is and represents, and to respond to him” (Crisis 61). This dialogue, he argued, could never have existed because it was always contingent upon the Jews’ “self-denial” of their Jewish identity (Crisis 62). Scholem’s understanding of Kafka’s identity as “Jewish writer” is premised on the notion that his writing is fundamentally incompatible with the German literary canon. Scholem’s postwar stance against the “myth of the German-Jewish dialogue” exhibits striking continuities with his conception of Kafka’s Jewishness, as expressed in his letters to Benjamin from the 1930s. Like Brod, Scholem understands Kafka as a “Jewish writer” in a way that presupposes the existence of a homogeneous and self-contained realm of Jewish culture. In both cases, Scholem hypostatizes an authentic Jewishness, which is largely defined by its independence from—and opposition to—German culture. His staunch refusal to recognize the existence of a “German-Jewish dialogue” echoes the distinction he makes between the “German” and “Jewish” literary continuums in his commentary on Kafka.

The fundamental dualism underlying Brod and Scholem’s readings of Kafka is similarly present in the commentaries of Hans-Joachim Schoeps. Even Schoeps, an advocate of the “German-Jewish symbiosis,” begins his apologetic reconciliation of Germanness and Jewishness by positing the two as discrete entities. Their Kafka commentaries correspond to a phenomenon
that Dan Diner, referring to the postwar era, has characterized as the “negative German-Jewish symbiosis.” The Holocaust, Diner claims, has become the starting point for German and Jewish self-understanding. German and Jewish identities, he observes, are co-constituted and inextricably linked to one another by fact of the Shoah. Although Diner’s argument refers to a later period than the one I focus on, his idea of a “negative symbiosis” captures the rhetorical bent of Scholem and Brod’s readings. Drawing a clear-cut boundary between Germanness and Jewishness, these two critics try to isolate Kafka from the European and German cultural environment in which he lived and wrote.

Of the Kafka-commentators I explore in this project, the one figure, who consciously seeks to avoid reifying Kafka’s Jewishness and turning it into a fixed formula is Margarete Susman. Yet her figurative account of the “modern Jewish condition” as reflected in Kafka’s writing turns out to be equally reductive. Susman identifies the Jewish dimension of Kafka’s work with the experience of metaphysical and ontological exile. Her interpretation constitutes a cogent critique of the Zionist readings, which articulate Kafka’s Jewishness in affirmative identitarian categories. Yet her own tropological conception of Jewishness-as-the-epitome-of-exilic-existence is no less one-dimensional. Her key argument is that Kafka’s Jewishness does not correspond to any fixed identity, yet she too slips into the realm of gross generalizations by conceptualizing it as a metaphor for rootlessness, an image, which she then reads as the quintessentially Jewish aspect of modernity.

Kafka’s commentators all interpret his literary work under the assumption that its ostensible Jewishness is readily identifiable and may be accounted for in terms of a specific theological principle or cultural characteristic, which they then define as essentially Jewish. They are not content with acknowledging the presence of disparate “Jewish” elements that run through
his work, but seek to translate their intuition of that “Jewish something,” as Hans Kohn called it, into a singular organizing principle. In the effort to find the “key” to Kafka (a metaphor both Scholem and Brod invoke), these critics overlook the blatant inconsistencies and ambiguities that already undermine the neat categorical definitions, which they use to interpret his writing. Their readings presuppose that Kafka’s writing corresponds to some consistent “spirit” or “essence.” Yet the idea that his prose communicates a fixed ideological message is dubious at best. It is with this interpretative fallacy in mind that Hermann Goldschmidt writes:

I should like to avoid reducing Kafka’s Judaism to a limited formula—which would also reduce Judaism to a formula; for the precise sense in which Kafka and we who continue to share his epoch are Jews, will be determined only by our future history, when we have lived it to its end. But even so, it must be conceded that not a great deal is to be got from a special Jewish interpretation of Kafka. Not individual details—such as the family of the Castle messenger Barnabas, so easily seen as “Jewish”—but his whole work breathes a Jewish air. (134)

Recent scholarly work on Kafka’s Jewishness seems closer to Goldschmidt’s sensibilities than to those held by the first generation of Kafka’s “Jewish readers.” In When Kafka Says We: Uncommon Communities in German-Jewish Literature (2009), Vivian Liska observes that although Kafka’s prose clearly broaches the questions of communal belonging and collective identity, it is impossible to translate his literary meditations these issues into a consistent ideological position, “because rather than trying to present a clear, fixed answer, he moves into a realm where ambiguity does not need to be avoided” (2). Acknowledging the diversity of
approaches that seek to reconstruct Kafka’s Jewishness, which span the biographical, allegorical, and inter-textual, Liska notes: “Impressive as many of these translations of Kafka’s text into the different registers of Judaism are, the sheer number of possible alternatives leaves the search for the ultimate hermeneutic criteria open and questions of interpretative accuracy unanswered” (17).

On similar note, David Suchoff in *Kafka’s Jewish Languages: The Hidden Openness of Tradition* argues that Kafka’s writing already decentered the rubrics of national identity that his critics often try to force him into (19). Instead of trying to “contain” Kafka’s Jewishness as constituting a fixed point in his text, Suchoff suggests exploring the ways in which Kafka’s writing brings the “Jewish” into dialogue with other cultural and literary traditions. In this sense, Suchoff’s reading goes against the grain of Kafka’s Jewish commentators, who wish to distill the author’s “Jewish essence” into a singular principle. Suchoff, in contrast, argues that Kafka’s writing questions the myth of national and cultural authenticity, by parodying the idea of a pristine, self-enclosed cultural canon in his literature.

While Liska and Suchoff provide us with a far subtler image of Kafka’s Jewishness, their readings do not emerge in a historical or cultural void. In fact, one might argue that their readings are equally susceptible to the present cultural and academic Zeitgeist. The cosmopolitan and cross-cultural sensibilities they identify in Kafka’s writing and which they associate with his “Jewishness” might easily be subsumed as part of a greater trend that Shaul Magid investigates in his recent work, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (2013). Magid’s book identifies a shift in the cultural politics of American Jewry, which has moved away “from the particularism of the traditional Jewish ideology of chosenness to a new universalism—a global consciousness…that prompts Jews to offer their spiritual insights to the
world” (xi). At the core of what Magid describes as the “postethnic” moment in American Jewish history is the recognition that “new rubrics will be required to navigate the dislocation of ethnicity and construct a Judaism that is no longer tethered to a notion of peoplehood as previously understood” (4). The general thrust to think past the normative, binding and homogenous categories that have historically defined Jewish identity is similarly apparent in the twenty-first century criticism on Kafka’s Jewishness.

Moreover, even if we concede that Kafka’s interwar commentators draw on a language that tends to be dubiously essentialistic, the very rhetoric they employ attests to the profound cultural heterogeneity informing their respective conceptions of “the Jewish.” The diverse cultural and intellectual currents that intersect in their commentaries reveal, above all else, the complex and hybrid character of modern Jewish identity. This paradox is succinctly captured in Scott Spector’s observation that

The delicately self-contradictory, but nonetheless self-affirming and subjective, experiences of modern German-speaking Jews may often have articulated themselves in terms of essential identities, of binary and exclusive opposition, and of processes like assimilation. Yet, these simple formulas betrayed the subtle chemistry that gave them substance. (“Forget Assimilation” 361)  

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68 In the essay, Scott Spector proposes doing away with the concept of “identity” altogether. Even the most flexible and open models of German-Jewish identity, those that incorporate a full range of identities and forms of identification, ultimately fall into the well-entrenched binary that distinguishes between “authentic” and “inauthentic” forms of Jewishness. The idea that one can understand the Jewish responses to German culture on a spectrum that ranges from nationalist self-determination to full assimilation wrongly presupposes the ability to distinguish between those elements that are said to be “intrinsic” and those that are “foreign” to Jewish identity. This problem, notes Spector, is a result of the very way questions concerning German-Jewish cultural production are posed. As Spector points out in *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka’s Fin de Siècle* (2002), “Part of the problem resides in the question itself, which unapologetically ascribes a stasis and fixity to nationality that is ontologically naive as well as anachronistic. The focus ought not to be on what the national identifications of these young people were, but instead on how such identifications—and resistances to
It is perhaps the intellectual and cultural resources that Kafka’s critics draw upon in order to articulate their conceptions of Jewishness that most clearly demonstrate their indelible “Germanness.” Whether they employ the rhetoric of cultural pessimism, German Romanticism, Crisis Theology, or Lebensphilosophie, these thinkers envision Kafka’s Jewishness in a philosophical register that is informed by their surrounding environment and which is deeply implicated in the intellectual currents that predominated interwar Europe. Their interpretations reflect an effort to rethink the meaning of terms that might respectively be referred to as “Jewish peoplehood,” “Jewish ethics,” “Jewish tradition,” “Jewish faith,” and “Jewish culture.” Yet even as they reinterpret these concepts and provide them with a modern definition, their “Jewish” commentaries illustrate, above all else, a profound dependence upon the discourses of their “non-Jewish” environment. As such, the conflicting interpretations of Kafka’s Jewishness reveal a cross-cultural dynamic that applies to all articulations of modern Jewish identity.

In “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida concludes his extensive meditations on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, with a series of questions:

Are we Greeks? Are we Jews? But who, we? Are we… first Jews or first Greeks? … To what horizon of peace does the language which asks this question belong? From whence does it draw the energy of its question? Can it account for the historical coupling of Judaism and Hellenism? And what is the legitimacy, what is the meaning of the copula in this proposition from perhaps the most Hegelian of them—actually operated” (42). As a way to accommodate for the complex and contradictory experiences of German Jews and the diverse ways in which they understood themselves to be Jewish and German, Spector urges scholars to explore the “Jewishness” and “Germanness” of their historical subjects on their own terms, rather than trying account for it as part of an abstract and generalized collective phenomenon.
Derrida’s central point is that Levinas’s ethical-Judaic intervention draws on the same Western philosophical tradition it condemns. According to Derrida, Levinas’s “Jewish” critique of the “Greek” is indebted to its universalistic discourse of logos, without which it would have been incapable of articulating itself. The “Jewish,” he observes, cannot be conceived without the “Greek,” and vice versa. Hence the allusion to James Joyce’s famous line from *Ulysses*, “Jewgreek is greekjew.” Athens and Jerusalem represent two interdependent and co-constitutive traditions. Each already presupposes the existence of its counterpart, which it imagines as its absolute other. The self-definition of both Jewish and Greek owes itself to an ongoing dialectic that moves between the poles of universalism and particularism. The concept of the “copula,” which Derrida uses to illustrate the mutual interdependence of the “Jew” and the “Greek,” exemplifies the underlying dynamic of reading Kafka “Jewishly.” To build on Derrida’s appropriation of Joyce, Kafka’s interwar commentators enact a double-bind, their attempt to isolate his “Jewish essence” inevitably demonstrates the fact that “Jewgerman is Germanjew.”
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