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SACRAMENTAL EXISTENCE:
EMBODIMENT IN MARTIN BUBER'S PHILOSOPHICAL AND HASIDIC WRITINGS

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For Laurel

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Source Abbreviations

(All works by Martin Buber)

- BMM* *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965).
- MBB* *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten*, edited by Grete Schaeder, 3 volumes (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1972-75).
- DP* *Das dialogische Prinzip* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2002)
- EG* *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1999).
- HMM* *Hasidism and Modern Man*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon Press, 1958).
- ID* *Ich und Du* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983).
- IT* *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
- KM* *The Knowledge of Man: Selected Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).
- MBW* *Martin Buber Werkausgabe*, 21 volumes (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2001-2018).
- OhG* *Or ha-Ganuz: Sippurei Ḥasidim* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1968).
- OJ* *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1967).
- OMH* *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966)
- TH* *Tales of the Hasidim*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken, 1991).
- Werke* *Werke*, 3 volumes (Munich: Kösel Verlag and Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1962-1964).

INTRODUCTION

Prologue: Buber's Resistance at Eranos

“We represent no political or social interests, only spiritual ones,” Carl Jung explained in June 1942.¹ Jung was responding to Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn's inquiry about how to proceed in a situation where esteemed scholars of religion who happened to be Nazis needed letters from her in order to obtain permission to participate in the Eranos conference that summer in beautiful Ascona, Switzerland. Fröbe-Kapteyn, the founder and organizer of Eranos, was concerned that it might look bad in years to come if the group had engaged in such official communication with the National Socialists. However, Jung, the intellectual and charismatic core of Eranos in those years, assured her that their group's investigations into spiritual phenomena needn't be obstructed by the merely sociopolitical matters of the day.²

Scholars have long debated the relationship between Eranos and National Socialism. On one hand, there were indeed Nazis who both lectured and listened at Eranos from the group's inception in 1933. Jung dabbled in anti-Semitic and fascist ideologies, however ambivalently or temporarily. Fröbe-Kapteyn's private journals reveal that she herself, as late as 1945, was still keen to spiritualize the symbol of the “black swastika” as “the dark aspect of the Self,” which she located in her own being and even mused euphorically that this archetype illuminated “the root,

¹ Quoted in Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Christopher McIntosh (London: Routledge, 2014), 75-76.

² William McGuire notes: “In the [Eranos] event, Olga Froebe aimed to proscribe politics at Eranos, either in the lectures or in the ensuing discussions.” William McGuire, *Bollingen: An Adventure in Collecting the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 26. This dualism of “spirituality” and sociopolitical reality has been sustained as well by Hakl in his own writings on Eranos. For example, he notes: “Basically it was her [Fröbe-Kapteyn's] wish that the meetings should be kept free from the political issues of the day” (Hakl, *Eranos*, 61).

the deepest root of my identification with Germany!!!”³ On the other hand, Fröbe-Kapteyn envisioned Eranos as an open “tent of encounter” between all wisdom traditions of the world, insisting that “there are no barriers here between different faiths and different races.”⁴ In this spirit, she made a genuine effort to include Jews at Eranos when it was feasible to do so. And Jung apologists remind us that he himself had some close Jewish associates, some of whom he was even willing to lend a helping hand. Unfortunately, however, such vague, all-lives-matter or some-of-my-best-friends-are-Jewish sentiments proved insufficient to embolden Eranos leadership to take a stronger stance than “neutrality” vis-à-vis National Socialism.⁵ Thus, Nazis continued to present at Eranos, as long as they were fit to speak inspiringly about “religious reality.”⁶

In his book of 1999, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*, Steven Wasserstrom suggested that the moral and political impotence of the group was inseparable from the theoretical and methodological frameworks there. First of all, Eranos entertained a great fascination with “symbolism,”⁷ and it was virtually a doctrine

³ Quoted in Hakl, *Eranos*, 99. Strangely, Hakl claims that “the intensity of the above quotation shows without a doubt that she could not have written these words as a follower of the National Socialist regime,” and then affirms definitively and unequivocally that “no sympathy for National Socialism can be attributed either to her [Fröbe-Kapteyn] or to Eranos” (ibid., 100). Such simplistic apologetics are common in Hakl’s treatments of Eranos and National Socialism.

⁴ As quoted in Hakl, *Eranos*, 97. See Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn’s introduction to *Eranos-Jahrbuch 1935: Westöstliche Seelenführung*, edited by idem (Zürich: Rhein Verlag, 1936).

⁵ In the same June 1942 letter from Jung to Fröbe-Kapteyn quoted above, Jung wrote: “I would not like to make life more difficult for these people [who are associated with National Socialism and require letters to participate in Eranos]. Ultimately, we in Switzerland are neutral, and moreover in such official matters we cannot afford to pursue a one-sided policy.” Quoted in Hakl, *Eranos*, 74.

⁶ Of course, this problematic attitude still persists today. Indeed, one contemporary historian has argued, without any detectable irony, that Fröbe-Kapteyn’s “main concern...was less with the *political* attitudes of the lecturers than with the *spiritual* content of their teachings and researches.” Hakl, *Eranos*, 65. Emphasis added.

⁷ According to Jung’s student R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, Eranos was, “as it were, a gigantic symposium on Symbolism.” Quoted in Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 85.

there that symbols are “transparent.” That is, religionists should be able to gaze through symbols, as it were, into the psychic expansiveness of the Self. As Wasserstrom put it, “*Through the wall of time...* the Historians of Religion leapt. But where they landed was not in any actual historical communities of the past. Rather, they arrived at an ‘ideal’ transparence, outside of societies of the past or the present.”⁸ Thus, “Transparence became, as it were, the color of Eranos itself.”⁹ This fascination with symbols was also bound up with Gnosticism, which was stupendously in vogue at Eranos.¹⁰ Much like their ancient gnostic forebears, these modern gnostics viewed the world dualistically and anticosmically, as they gathered to plumb “an archetypal reality more real than ordinary reality.”¹¹ All in all, the so-called Historians of Religion at Eranos tended to neglect concrete considerations such as law, ritual, and social history, preferring instead to plunge directly into what they saw as the mythical and mystical marrow of religious structures. In so doing, Wasserstrom suggests, Eranos intellectuals produced captivating portraits of a deethicized religion, or “a monotheism without ethics.”¹² In this light, it is indeed significant that Eranos launched in 1933, the year Hitler took power: Those gatherings in the scenic serenity of Ascona were retreats in a strong sense—escapes from the mundanities of everyday life, the clamor of politics, and the noise of turbulent times.¹³

As it turns out, Martin Buber was sensitive to these moral-cum-methodological issues at Eranos already in 1934. His well-known essay “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” which

⁸ Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 98.

⁹ Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 96.

¹⁰ On the prevalence and place of Gnosticism in contemporaneous thought, see Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination Between the World Wars* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 30.

¹² Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 5.

¹³ See especially Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 102-103, 109-110.

appears repeatedly in his German, Hebrew, and English volumes on Hasidism,¹⁴ is based on his Eranos lectures, and I propose that it is the crystallization of a certain spiritual-political resistance that he waged there—an instance of esoteric writing in a time of persecution.¹⁵ This is especially clear when we take into account the stenographer’s typescript of Buber’s original lectures, as well as the historical details surrounding his speeches.

When Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn first invited Buber in October 1933 to speak that summer at Eranos, he declined.¹⁶ Later that month, however, amidst intensifying anti-Semitic legislation, Buber resigned from his professorship at the University of Frankfurt, anticipating the removal of Jews from teaching positions. When Fröbe-Kapteyn extended another invitation to him in March,

¹⁴ The sheer number of volumes in which Buber included this essay is a testament to the piece’s significance in his eyes. In the thirty years between its composition and the end of his life, Buber published “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz” in four German collections: *Eranos-Jahrbuch 1934: Ostwestliche Symbolik und Seelenführung*, edited by Olga Fröbe Kapteyn (Zürich: Rhein Verlag, 1935), 339-367; Martin Buber, *Deutung des Chassidismus – Drei Versuche* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1935), 65-93; idem, *Die chassidische Botschaft* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1952), 128-156; *Werke*, 3:829-849. He also published translations of the essay in four different English volumes: “Symbolisms and Sacramental Existence in Judaism,” in Martin Buber, *Mamre: Essays in Religion*, trans. Greta Hort (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1946); “Symbolical and Sacramental Existence in Judaism,” in idem, *Hasidism*, trans. Greta Hort (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1948); “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” in *OMH*; and “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence in Judaism,” trans. Ralph Manheim, in *Spiritual Disciplines: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, edited by Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 168-185. He published it also in Hebrew as “*Havayah Simlit ve-Havayah Saqramentalit*,” in Martin Buber, *Be-Fardes ha-Ḥasidut: ‘Iyyunim ba-Maḥshavatah uva-Havayatah* (Tel Aviv: Mossad Bialik, 1945), 79-96.

¹⁵ The fact that Buber would write in this way in 1934 should not be surprising. Indeed, he had already mused to his publisher, Lambert Schneider, in 1933: “What is required of writers like us is to write so subtly that those currently in power won’t immediately detect our resistance and grab us by the scruff of the neck—so subtly that many people will have read us before one can be held responsible.” Quoted in Martina Urban, “Persecution and the Art of Representation,” *Maimonides and His Heritage*, edited by Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, Lenn E. Goodman, and James Allen Grady (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 154. Cf. Anthony David, *The Patron: A Life of Salman Schocken* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014), 220-222. On Buber’s writings as spiritual-political resistance, see also Samuel H. Brody, *Martin Buber’s Theopolitics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 81-210 and *passim*; cf. Michael Fishbane, “Religious Authenticity and Spiritual Resistance: Martin Buber and Biblical Hermeneutics,” in Shonkoff, ed., *Martin Buber*, 219-232.

¹⁶ See Fröbe-Kapteyn’s October 1, 1933 letter to Buber in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 221, folder 1.

she noted, “Perhaps the reasons [that stood in your way before] are no longer present.”¹⁷ She also lamented that she had always wanted Leo Baeck to come lecture in Ascona, but he could not make it. “This year, however, I absolutely want to have a representative (*Vertreter*) of Judaism,” she insisted. Given his present circumstances, Buber agreed to be the token Jew at Eranos, well aware from Fröbe-Kapteyn’s letters that he would be lecturing and lodging alongside Nazis.¹⁸

The theme of the conference that summer was “Eastern-Western Symbolism and Spiritual Direction.” In the two mornings leading up to Buber’s presentation, Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, a notable Nazi and scholar of Germanic spirituality, presented his lectures entitled, “Symbolism and Experience of the Self in Indo-Aryan Mysticism (*Symbole und Erfahrung des Selbstes in der indoarischen Mystik*).”¹⁹ In meticulous and mesmerizing detail, Hauer described the symbols that flowed intergenerationally and transpersonally through the Indo-Germanic *Volk*, from the Upanishads through Nietzsche.²⁰ (We might recall that the Nazi symbol of the swastika itself was “reclaimed” from this same spiritual stream.) According to one Nazi intelligence report, Hauer proceeded in the discussion following his lecture to reflect on the current situation

¹⁷ Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn’s letter to Buber on March 7, 1934, in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 221, folder 1.

¹⁸ For the information that Buber gleaned from Fröbe-Kapteyn about who would participate at Eranos, see especially her letters (including enclosed documents) from October 1, 1933; March 9, 1933; August 3, 1934; and August 13, 1934. Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 221, folders 1-2.

¹⁹ This is the title of Hauer’s essay in Fröbe-Kapteyn, ed., *Eranos-Jahrbuch 1934*. According to a draft of the Eranos conference program in March 1934—that is, five months prior to the gathering—Hauer’s lectures were entitled, “Symbole und Erfahrung des Selbst im *Indischen Yoga*” (emphasis added). It is possible that he (or Fröbe-Kapteyn) accentuated the Aryan focus of his study due to ongoing pressures from his National Socialist party, which almost led Hauer to withdraw his essay from the *Jahrbuch*. We shall discuss these matters in more detail below. The draft of the conference program can be found in Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn’s letter to Buber on March 9, 1934, in the Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 221, folder 1.

²⁰ On Hauer’s notions of how “Archetypen” or “menschheitliche Symbole” “von Generation zu Generation in das Unbewußte der Einzelnen und der Geschlechter eingesenkt wurden,” so that they become part of “die Symbole von Rassen und Kulturen” and “der geistigen und religiösen Geschichte der Völker,” see Hauer, “Symbole und Erfahrung des Selbstes in der indoarischen Mystik,” in Fröbe Kapteyn, ed., *Eranos Jahrbuch 1934*, 60.

in Germany, painting National Socialism in a positive light. According to the same report, Jung also exhibited “a degree of understanding for Germany and the National Socialist movement” that was rare for a Swiss. Buber, to whom many eyes were undoubtedly turned at this moment, allegedly changed the subject of conversation to Meister Eckhart.²¹ In fact, Buber had already clashed with Hauer less than two years earlier over the very idea of the “*völkische* state.” Buber had thought it quite audacious, evidently, when Hauer invited him to a symposium in order to engage in discussion with a National Socialist interlocutor about the “Jewish question” in the context of “the *völkisch*-state structure.” In a letter to Hauer, Buber had declined the invitation, and commented, “As important as *Volkstum* is to me, I consider the idea of the *völkischen* state problematic, and its absolutization, which is common today, the direct path to the coming catastrophe.”²² Now, twenty-two months later, and nineteen months into Hitler’s dictatorship, we

²¹ On this report, see McGuire, *Bollingen*, 26; Junginger, *Von der philologischen zur völkischen Religionswissenschaft*, 137; Hakl, *Eranos*, 85. Note: McGuire claims that “Hauer was not invited again” as a result of this episode (*Bollingen*, 26), but this is false. Fröbe-Kapteyn did indeed invite Hauer again, and he was even listed on early drafts of the 1935 program, according to a version that Fröbe-Kapteyn mailed to Buber in September 1934. In fact, Hauer was scheduled to lecture on the Edda, a body of Icelandic literature that he celebrated as a primal manifestation of the Germanic spirit, much like the Indo-Aryan material he had discussed at Eranos in 1934. However, Hauer did ultimately break from Eranos before the 1935 conference due to pressures from the National Socialist regime, but this predicament had obviously nothing to do with his words of support for Nazism the previous summer! The tentative program for the 1935 conference, including Hauer’s name and lecture titles, is enclosed in Fröbe-Kapteyn’s letter to Buber from September 26, 1934, in the Martin Buber Archives, MS. Var. 350 008 221, folder 2. Regarding Hauer’s perspective on the Edda as representative of Germanic faith, we might note that he reflected in 1934-1935 in his journal *Deutscher Glaube*, “Just as the Edda once touched me in my youth, like the sound of a distant home, so my heart was grasped by India, that is, above all by the old Indo-Aryan India,” and “While the detailed thoughts of Edda, Eckhart, and Nietzsche are different, they share the same basic attitude that is determined by the same blood-like and psychological-intellectual substance.” Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, “Skizzen aus meinem Leben,” *Deutscher Glaube* (1935), 9; idem, “Deutscher Glaube?,” *Deutscher Glaube* 1 (January 1934), 5. These translations are drawn from Karla O. Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 81, 72.

²² Letter from Buber to Hauer on October 4, 1932, in *Letters of Martin Buber*, 389; German: *MBB*, 448. Emphasis in the original. The original letter can be found in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 297.I.

can only imagine what surged within Buber that morning in Ascona—but we can indeed see how he channeled those stirrings into his largely extemporaneous lecture the next day.²³

Before he even took the podium, the very title of Buber’s presentation, listed in the program, hinted that he would undermine the conference theme of “symbolism (*Symbolik*).” Although his essay title would eventually be rendered into English as “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” the German term that he employed here was not the Eranos buzzword *Symbol*, but rather *Sinnbild*, literally an “image of meaning.” Clearly, Buber knew that this title would befuddle members of the 200-person audience,²⁴ for, according to the stenographer’s typescript, he began his lecture as follows: “You have noticed that it is not my intention to speak today about symbols, but rather about [*Sinnbilder*]..., or as I would put it in a more limited sense, *sinnbildliche* existence.”²⁵ And, he clarifies, “I mean something completely simple, namely...human existence, the real existence of a human person between bodily birth and bodily death—that is *Sinnbild*... Not *Symbol*, if it belongs to the essence of the *Symbol* to detach from this concreteness, to float and stretch out above the times.” Moreover, in his opening statements,

²³ The extemporaneity of Buber’s lectures is clear from the language in the stenographer’s typescript. This is also indicated by the fact that when Buber was finalizing his decision to participate in the conference, he asked Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn if there would be a stenographer present, and she assures him that she will indeed take care of finding a good typist. Presumably, this helped Buber justify the addition of this event to his busy schedule, as the stenographer would enable him to speak somewhat extemporaneously and then compose his essay from the resultant documents for the *Eranos Jahrbuch*. See Fröbe-Kapteyn’s letter on March 11, 1934, in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 221,

²⁴ Almost every other lecture in the program contained the word “symbolism” somewhere in its title, and certainly no one, except Buber, used an alternate term. On the size of the crowd at the 1934 conference, see Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn’s August 3, 1934 letter to Buber, in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 221, folder 1. She also encloses therein an official list of participants, which includes about 150 names.

²⁵ See the stenographer’s typescript of Buber’s “*Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum*,” in the Martin Buber Archives (Ms. Var. 350 04 10, 1), I:1. It has also recently been published in *MBW* 17:429-449, but my citations here follow the pagination in the archival document. Note that the roman numerals in page numbers refer to Buber’s first or second lectures, which he delivered at 11:00 on the mornings of Thursday, August 23, and Friday, August 24.

Buber provocatively contrasts his own conception of *Sinnbild* with “a symbol that is above the times...as Hauer spoke [about] yesterday.”²⁶ Standing before the Eranos crowd, Buber declares,

Corporeality, not spirituality. All language is only a refraction of these images (*Bildes*) [of the living, personal *Sinnbild*]... Corporeality, not spirituality—for only the body can be transparent and *sinnbildlich*, only the born, living, mortal, ephemeral body, and nothing else.²⁷

Without a doubt, this refrain, “Corporeality, not spirituality (*Leiblichkeit, nicht Geistigkeit*),” was directed at Jung and his followers. What is truly most holy and consequential, Buber intimates, is what is happening here and now in the very complex coarseness of this moment—“this ephemeral body (*Leib*), and nothing else,” he says. Just a year later, Buber would complain to Jung’s student Hans Trüb that Jung “does not deal at all with the dimension of existence. It is as if, instead of a body (*Körpers*), its projection onto a screen becomes a thing. Concerning myself, as you know, for a long time already I do not concern myself much with psychological projection, only with existential corporeality (*existentielle Körperlichkeit*).”²⁸ In the context of Eranos in 1934, Buber’s polemic against disembodied symbols was hardly just a theoretical quibble. It is as if he called upon his listeners to sober up from numinous meditations and to look into the eyes of the speaker standing before them, look at his Jewishness, look at history—do not stare through bodily being into psychic timelessness. “Only the body can be transparent,”²⁹ Buber says, in an unmistakable subversion of Eranos-esque symbolism. And he concluded his lecture that day with the following words:

²⁶ Buber, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum” (stenographer’s typescript), I:2-3.

²⁷ Buber, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum” (stenographer’s typescript), I:1-2.

²⁸ Martin Buber, *Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy*, edited by Judith Buber Agassi (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 166-7, emphasis in original; German: *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten*, vol. 2, 573.

²⁹ In the published version of Buber’s lectures, Buber expresses his opposition to such “transparence” with references to Gnosticism’s “seeing through the contradiction of being” and “the gnostic ability to see through the contradiction.” See “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence, *OMH*, 178, 180.

It may be—indeed, it is the case—that [what I am describing] differs from what one...normally calls a *Symbol*. It seems to me, however, that no *Symbol*...can ever really attain reality, except in such *sinnbildlichen* corporeality (*Leiblichkeit*)—[in] living and dying human existence.³⁰

With that, Buber left his audience for the next twenty-three hours, until his second lecture the following morning.

From the published version of Buber's Eranos talks, it is clear that he spoke out against Gnosticism. He casts Gnosticism therein as a "despair of the world" that has always been a "rebellion" against the ethical and ontological foundations of the Hebrew Bible.³¹ He also emphasizes more than ever before that Hasidism represented a decisive break from the gnostic orientations of medieval Kabbalah—a protest against both "the schematizing" and the "magicizing of the mystery."³² In short, for Buber's Hasidim, there is no holy knowledge or power to be gained in looking through materiality—what is essential, rather, is to hallow the everyday. In his oral lectures at Eranos, however, Buber spoke out even more forcefully against Gnosticism. For example, whereas he notes in his published essay that the Hebrew prophets were "against all informational knowledge of the future, whether of a dialectical or gnostic origin,"³³ Buber stressed in his oral lecture that they were "against all informational knowledge of gnosis and Gnosticism... Gnosis vanishes."³⁴ And whereas Buber writes in his published essay that

³⁰ Buber, "Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum" (stenographer's typescript), I:17b.

³¹ See Buber, "Symbolic and Sacramental Existence," *OMH*, 175.

³² *OMH*, 178-179. To be sure, he had already started in the 1920s to emphasize the divergence of Hasidism from Kabbalah, most notably in the introduction to his 1922 anthology, *The Great Maggid and His Succession*. However, he did so in less bold terms. See "Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement," *OMH*, 122ff.

³³ *OMH*, 160; German: see Fröbe-Kapteyn, ed., *Eranos Jahrbuch 1934*, 346.

³⁴ Buber, "Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum" (stenographer's typescript), I:11.

Hasidism was a “protest against the Kabbalah,”³⁵ he asserted more provocatively in his oral lecture that Hasidism was “against all Gnosis.”³⁶

Finally, there is no doubt that Buber affirmed at Eranos an inextricable link between religion and ethics, in contrast to what Wasserstrom described as the “suspension of the ethical.” It is hardly necessary to look beyond the title of Buber’s lectures, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz.” His insistence on the two-word locution “*sinnbildliche Existenz*” is itself a statement that no symbol—or any other religious phenomenon—should be seen as autonomous from the temporal terrain of human existence. Moreover, Buber’s expression “sacramental existence” certainly challenges any religious paradigm that neglects the centrality of praxis.³⁷ When he characterizes Hasidism as “sacramental existence,” Buber is not pointing to the laws of *Halakhah*, but to what he sees as the more fundamental issue: that a religious identity floating above the concreteness of ethical life is vacuous, at best. Spiritual meaning should never be divorced from corporeal existence—and, in fact, Buber defines *Sakrament* precisely as “the

³⁵ Buber, *OMH*, 178.

³⁶ Buber, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum” (stenographer’s typescript), II:20. In general, Buber referred explicitly to Gnosticism far more frequently in his live lectures, and always in negative terms. He even delved into an extensive discussion of how the relatively tempered, “anti-dualistic” Gnosticism of Kabbalah continued to affirm the divinity of “Creator” and “Creation”—an unmistakable swipe at the Neo-Marcionism of Buber’s time. See “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum” (stenographer’s typescript), II:17-18. A related discussion appears in Buber’s published essay, but whereas Buber had referred repeatedly in his oral lectures to “Schöpfung,” “Schöpfer,” etc., that terminology is conspicuously absent in the published version. See Buber, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum,” in Fröbe-Kapteyn, ed., *Eranos Jahrbuch 1934*, 360-363.

³⁷ In adopting the term “sacrament,” as he understands it, Buber simultaneously appeals to his Christian audience and polemicizes against whatever Pauline sensibilities or Neo-Marcionite Gnosticism they may hold. Indeed, “There is hardly a Christian sacrament that has not had a sacramental or semisacramental Jewish antecedent,” Buber claims (*OMH*, 172-173). And in his oral lecture, Buber identified Jesus’s bread-sacrament as “an old...sacrament of his people,” in the mode of “the Israelite person.” “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum” (stenographer’s typescript), I:3.

binding of meaning (*Sinn*) to the body.”³⁸ In the closing words of his final lecture at Eranos, Buber concluded:

Thus, we say to take seriously this single opportunity, i.e., to take seriously—to take sacredly—the lived hour with total involvement. For less than that does not fulfill with total involvement what the occasion of this hour, this unforeseen hour, . . . demands.³⁹

On this charged note, Buber concluded his Eranos lectures and returned from that lakeside retreat to his vulnerable home in Heppenheim.⁴⁰

In her preface to the volume of essays from the 1934 conference, Fröbe-Kapteyn obscures any real diversity of thought among the contributors. There is, she proclaims, “the one goal for East and West, the one way in its endless variations, and the same oneness behind all eastern and western symbolism. For, ultimately, in the west as in the east, it is about the psychological experience of the Self, and this experience leads right to the true metaphysical

³⁸ Buber, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum,” in Fröbe-Kapteyn, ed., *Eranos-Jahrbuch 1934*, 251-352.

³⁹ Full German: “Also, dieses, sagen wir Ernstnehmen dieser einzigen Möglichkeit, d.h. das Ernstnehmen, das Heilig-nehmen der gelebten Stunde und sich ganz hergebend, denn weniger als das gilt nicht sich ganz hergebend erfüllen was die Gelegenheit dieser Stunde dieser nicht vorhergesehenen Stunde, dieses Neue, noch nirgends geschriebene Wort, diese neue, noch nicht Laut gewordene Ansprache, dieser neue Anspruch des Ansprechenden an mich, von mir heischt.” “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum” (stenographer’s typescript), II:22.

⁴⁰ We know from his correspondence with Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn that Buber did not stay at Eranos for the duration of the conference. In fact, Buber had to plead with her to speak during the first week of the two-week conference. She—and especially Jung—were reluctant to make this change, for they wanted Buber to speak during the second week with the other “theologians,” as opposed to the first week with the “orientalists.” Presumably, this rationale was quite irritating to Buber, given his general distaste for “theology” and his consistent celebrations of the Hebrew prophets and the Hasidic *Ostjuden* as “oriental.” Also, given the fact that “orientalism” at this Eranos conference was so bound up with Hauer’s charged reflections on “Indo-Aryan” tradition, Buber may have been especially gratified to wedge his own “oriental” religiosity into that week’s discussion. In any case, we know that Buber did not remain for the whole conference (and neither did Jung, in fact). On Buber’s resistance to being identified as a “theologian,” see below in chapter one. On his orientalist perspective on Judaism, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Fin de Siècle Orientalism, the *Ostjuden*, and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation,” in idem, *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 77-132.

realities.”⁴¹ Naturally, it took some effort on her part to police this vision of “the one goal” and “the one way” at Eranos. Although Fröbe-Kapteyn expressed genial gratitude to Buber for his 1934 lecture and invited him to participate again the following year, she did seek to prevent a repeat of his resistance. The next conference theme would be “Western-Eastern Spiritual Direction,” and when Buber shared his proposed lecture title, “Spiritual Direction: Its Obstacles and Dangers,” Fröbe-Kapteyn objected. “I find that too negative,” she wrote to him, “for there is, after all, a positive side to this issue. I would be glad if you spoke directly about spiritual direction, as that is basically our main topic.”⁴² And, she added reassuringly—or perhaps threateningly—“I was... [recently] in Berlin and visited Dr. [Leo] Baeck and told him about the last conference. I always hope that he will be able to come sometime.”

In any case, Fröbe-Kapteyn did not have to worry for long about Buber. Just weeks after she pleaded with him to be less “negative,” the police informed him that he was now banned from all public speaking—apparently, the political subtext of Buber’s recent lecture in Berlin had

⁴¹ Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, “Vorwort,” in *Eranos Jahrbuch 1934*, 7-8. Fröbe-Kapteyn’s dissolution of difference was not lost on her most anti-Semitic critics. Indeed, in response to her preface, one nationalist writer scoffed that, given Martin Buber’s presence at Eranos, it is clear that the “‘synthesis of all spiritual cultures’ also has a warm place in its heart for the religion of Jehovah in its Mosaic and Talmudic form.” H. Rehwaldt, as quoted in Hakl, *Eranos*, 87.

⁴² February 5, 1935 letter from Fröbe-Kapteyn to Buber, in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 221, folder 2. Of course, Fröbe-Kapteyn was not the only one to notice that Buber stood ideologically apart from other participants at Eranos in 1934. In his article “Die Eranos-Begegnungsstätte für Ost und West in Moscia-Ascona” (*Schweizer Annalen*, 1935), which was apparently the first attempt by someone from the outside to characterize the philosophical and spiritual orientation of Eranos, Walter Robert Corti noted: “As soon as the speakers gather around a common theme, it becomes apparent that—with the notable exception of Martin Buber—they are kindred spirits in many important ways” (quoted in Hakl, *Eranos*, 102). In a footnote, Hakl suggests that it is unclear what Corti meant by the “exception of Buber,” but I trust that my present study explicates just this. While Corti may very well be exhibiting a sort of “microaggression” against Buber as the token Jew at Eranos, it was nonetheless the case that Buber’s lectures cut against the ideological grain of the gathering.

not been lost on the Gestapo agents planted in the crowd.⁴³ When he informed Fröbe-Kapteyn that he would be unable to attend Eranos, she responded with a three-sentence letter:

Dear Professor Buber,

I am so sorry, of course, that you will not come. But I understand that there are factors that make it impossible. I hope to see you in September.

With cordial greetings, also for your wife

Yours,

Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn⁴⁴

Buber was the first and the last Jew to speak at Eranos for the next thirteen years—that is, until Leo Baeck finally agreed to grace the gathering with his presence in 1947. Gershom Scholem would go on to present there almost annually from 1949-1979, and, in fact, he chose Eranos as the site for his famous attack on “Martin Buber’s Conception of Judaism,” just one year after his colleague’s death.⁴⁵ After all, Scholem could count on that audience to shake their

⁴³ The event that prompted the *Redeverbot* was apparently Buber’s lecture that winter at the Berlin Philharmonic, published as “Die Mächtigkeit des Geistes,” in Martin Buber, *Die Stunde und die Erkenntnis*, 74-87; English: “The Power of the Spirit,” in Martin Buber, *Israel and the World*, 172-182. On February 21, 1935, Buber received orders from the Gestapo, forbidding him to lecture within the Jewish community. Soon thereafter, on March 5, the ban was extended to all teaching activity. See the discussion of this sequence of events in Paul Mendes-Flohr’s forthcoming biography on Buber (Yale University Press), chapter 8. I am grateful to Professor Mendes-Flohr for sharing his unpublished manuscript with me.

⁴⁴ July 27, 1935 letter from Fröbe-Kapteyn to Buber, in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 221, folder 2. The terseness of this response, just before the 1935 gathering, may reflect some logistical relief on her part. Buber’s participation the previous year had already started to pose threats to the reputation and very survival of Eranos. German media attacked the circle for, among other things, being under Jewish influence, and critics cited Buber’s name repeatedly. The fact that Buber’s name had been on the program and in the Eranos Yearbook made it extremely difficult thereafter for German scholars to be associated with Eranos in any way. For example, due to mounting pressure from the Nazi party, Hauer never participated in the conference again. Moreover, he had to issue a statement to the press that he had once delivered an academic lecture at Eranos but did not belong to it, and had not been aware of any “Judeo-Masonic machinations or occult exercises.” See Hakl, *Eranos*, 86-87.

⁴⁵ See Gershom Scholem, “Martin Bubers Auffassung des Judentums,” in *Eranos-Jahrbuch 1966: Schöpfung und Gestaltung*, edited by Adolf Portmann (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1967), 9-55. It is also significant that Scholem entitled his own collection of Eranos essays *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik* (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1960); English: *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).

heads at Buber's myopic fixations on "existential corporeality."⁴⁶ Beyond the Buber-Scholem controversy, however, our contextual analysis of Buber's "Symbolic and Sacramental Existence" sheds light on his later debate with Jung. Seven years after the Shoah, Buber declared that Jung's Gnosticism was morally insidious and painfully reflective of a whole generation of "thinkers"⁴⁷—yet the seeds of those arguments were palpable already in the opening minutes of Buber's 1934 Eranos lectures. At the dawn of a fascist regime, he suspected that a merely "spiritual" conversation could have bodily consequences.

The Chapters that Follow

The story of Buber's resistance at Eranos is a crucial backdrop for this whole dissertation, and not only because his concepts of "*sinnbildliche* and sacramental existence" will resurface throughout the chapters that follow. Indeed, the historical situation out of which that essay emerged can remind us what was at stake for Buber in the issues that we shall discuss. Our study will focus on themes of embodiment (*Leiblichkeit*) in Buber's dialogical thought, and most of all as they are manifested hermeneutically in his Hasidic tales. Time and time again, we will see Buber's discomfort with philosophical or mystical systems that bifurcate reality into dualisms of materiality and spirituality, phenomena and noumena, or body and mind, and we will witness ways in which Buber highlighted and affirmed corporeal-spiritual wholeness. As we delve into such ideas in all their textual forms, as we reflect on Buber's intellectual engagements with realms ranging from Descartes and Kant to Kabbalah and the Kotsker—we ought to remember

⁴⁶ Regarding the antipathy toward Existentialism at Eranos, see Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 59-60, 349-350.

⁴⁷ See "Religion and Modern Thinking," and "Supplement: Reply to C.G. Jung," in *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 63-92, 131-138. It is no coincidence that Buber also made Heidegger a main focus of the first essay.

Buber at Eranos. We should bear in mind what was at stake for him in 1934 when he resisted against gnostic enthusiasms for transparent symbols and disembodied transcendence. We ought to remember what was at stake for him socially, politically, and ethically when he implored his audience to bring awareness to concrete reality, when he declared “Corporeality, not spirituality,” and when he insisted that genuine religious speech is “always situation-based, always a speech that deals with this moment and thus deals with ephemerality, with ephemeral embodiment (*Leiblichkeit*).”⁴⁸ The ideas that we will investigate in this dissertation were, for Buber, just as ethically and politically potent as they were intellectually and theologically rich.

As we proceed, therefore, we must be mindful of an irony at work in the contemplation of embodiment. In moments when we are lost in thought about the body, we lose sight of bodies—even if our thinking proves in the end to enhance such awareness. As Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart warn, “What must be guarded against at all costs, is the disappearance of the real, lived, laughing, suffering, birthing and dying body underneath the philosophical and theological meaning it is called to bear. It would indeed be foolish to allow ‘the body’ to become a disembodied entity.”⁴⁹ It is all too easy to slip into abstractions. Buber himself was certainly familiar with such pitfalls in discourse about dialogue: “There are many methods of evading the vision and practice of the life of dialogue through theoretical discussions of the dialogical principle.”⁵⁰ To be sure, in the chapters that follow we will inevitably succumb to such hazards time and time again. However, I encourage readers to pause periodically while reading this

⁴⁸ Buber, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum” (stenographer’s typescript), I:11.

⁴⁹ Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 151.

⁵⁰ Martin Buber, “Interrogation of Martin Buber,” in *Philosophical Interrogations*, edited by Sydney and Beatrice Rome (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 18.

dissertation and to reflect on the real-life residues that trail behind ideas. I assure you that I have done no less in the process of writing the pages before you.

Now, I recognize that my references to embodiment in the context of Buberian dialogue may have already elicited skepticism in some of my readers. If so, then I encourage you especially to read chapter one below, which is the most theoretical and philosophical part of this dissertation. I outline therein what I mean by the term “embodiment” and, through careful philological analyses of Buber’s writings, I show how embodiment offers a very helpful lens for our understanding of Buber’s phenomenology of dialogue. In the process, I wage an intervention against those who would read Buber’s concept of dialogical encounter as disembodied, particularly those who have done so under the assumption that Buber’s I-It and I-You correspond (however roughly) to Kant’s dichotomy of sensible phenomena and non-sensible noumena. Ultimately, I portray Buber as a post-Kantian figure in both the chronological and ideological senses—that is, I showcase how he philosophized under the influence of Kant, yet also how he diverged significantly from Kant. Furthermore, in clarifying the wholly embodied nature of dialogical encounter, I elucidate what I term Buber’s *dialogical monism*, to be distinguished from both materialist and mystical forms of substance monism, as well as Nietzsche’s dialectical monism. Finally, inasmuch as Buber paints dialogical events as theologically expressive—albeit in a wholly non-noetic and non-discursive way—I explore the implications of our findings for Buber’s religious thought, illustrating what I take to be his *embodied theology*. In many ways, these discussions in chapter one lay the theoretical groundwork for the rest of the dissertation, which investigates how Buber’s embodied theology comes to life in uniquely vivid ways in his writings on Hasidism.

Taken as a whole, the final three chapters of this project offer the first major hermeneutical study of Buber's Hasidic tales. Scholarship on Buber's representation of Hasidism has focused overwhelmingly on his discursive reflections in essays, but the tales ought to be the primary focus.⁵¹ Indeed, these narratives constitute the vast majority of Buber's work on Hasidism, and they commanded a significantly larger audience than his essays on the movement.⁵² Moreover, inasmuch as Buber's versions of the tales deviate at times from the original sources, these writings offer especially lucid glimpses into the inner workings of his religious mind. While Buber makes general statements about Hasidism in his essays, the tales themselves—when studied alongside their original sources—offer far clearer windows into Buber's engagement with Hasidism and his own religious convictions. I am sympathetic to Michael Fishbane's claim that Jewish theology is fundamentally "exegetical theology," revealed through the re-vision, re-telling, and re-interpretation of earlier sources.⁵³ And as this mode of

⁵¹ Among those scholars who have engaged with Buber's tales, only a few have studied them in relation to the original sources. See Akibah Ernst Simon, *Ye'adim, Tsematim, Netivim: Haguto shel Mordekhai M. Buber* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Po'alim, 1985), 113–118; Steven T. Katz, "Buber's Misuse of Hasidic Sources," in idem, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 52–93; Nicham Ross, *Masoret Ahuvah u-Senu'ah: Zehut Yehudit Modernit u-Ketivah Ne'o-Hasidit be-Fetaḥ ha-Me'ah ha-Esrin* (Be'er Sheva: Hotsa'at ha-Sefarim shel Universitat Ben Gurion ba-Negev, 2010), 77–83; Martina Urban, "Mysticism and Sprachkritik: Martin Buber's Rendering of the Mystical Metaphor 'ahizat 'enayim," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 62 (2006): 535–552; HaCohen, "Bubers schöpferischer Dialog mit einer chassidischen Legende."

⁵² Grete Schaeder remarks that one of Buber's main collections of theoretical essays on Hasidism, *Die chassidische Botschaft* (1952)—which appeared also in Hebrew as *Be-Fardes ha-Hasidut* (1945) and in English as *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (1960)—was "one of his least read books; thirteen years after it appeared in German, it still had not reached a second edition." Schaeder, *The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber*, 324. In contrast, Buber's Hasidic tales earned widespread acclaim in Germany. See Mendes-Flohr, "Fin de Siècle Orientalism," in his *Divided Passions*, 96–109. Anecdotally, even today in bookstores throughout the world, one is far more likely to find Buber's anthologies of Hasidic tales than his collections of essays on the movement.

⁵³ See Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Cf. Sam Berrin Shonkoff, "Michael Fishbane: An Intellectual Portrait," in *Michael Fishbane: Jewish Hermeneutical Theology*, Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers, edited by Aaron W. Hughes and Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1–52.

religious expression is “not propositional but concrete through and through,”⁵⁴ the hermeneutical method lends itself especially well to our investigations of Buber’s embodied theology. The intertextual tensions between Hasidic sources and Buber’s re-presentations of them reveal far more about his religious mind than we could articulate through abstract reflections. At times, to be sure, our hermeneutical investigations will unveil insights about Buber’s thought that other scholars have noted—but even in such cases, our much-neglected methodology will nonetheless shed new light on those issues.

In chapter two, we will investigate Buber’s notions of embodied theological *expression*, as manifested hermeneutically in his Hasidic writings. Through intertextual studies of Buber’s tales vis-à-vis the original Hasidic sources, we behold Buber’s striking narrative representations of the Hasidic “deschematization of the mystery,” as well as his astonishing conceptions of what occurs theologically when tsaddiqim meet with their Hasidim and “speak Torah.” Then, in chapter three, we will apply our hermeneutical method in order to elucidate elements of embodied theological *cognition* in Buber’s Hasidic tales. We will see how Buber depicts the processes of “learning” and “teaching” in those communities, and how he portrays theological understanding as inseparable from actions and events. These insights will help to explain why Buber was so much more drawn to the narrative literature than the theoretical literature of Hasidism, as the former genre shows, rather than interprets, the concrete events of theological meaning. Moreover, our findings will shed immense light on the epistemological and theological underpinnings of the Buber-Scholem debate, raising crucial questions for the study of religion more generally.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 5-6.

Finally, in chapter four, we will turn our attention to Buber's visions of religious practice, as revealed hermeneutically in his Hasidic tales. Indeed, inasmuch as this dissertation focuses on Buber's embodied theology—that is, how religious meaning is coterminous with concrete events—this whole exploration must culminate in a fresh perspective on Buber's perspectives on religious life. And given the overflowing amount of ritual imagery in Hasidic literature, Buber's own representations of that material shed enormous light on our inquiry. Although his views may verily be characterized as “meta-nomian” expressions of a sort of “religious anarchism,” as previous scholars have suggested, we will see that these designations are only the beginning of a conversation. In this chapter, therefore, we elucidate the actual textures and sensibilities of “sacramental existence.”

In the concluding section, I reflect more broadly on Buber's representations of Hasidism in their historical context, as a cultural Zionist in a post-Emancipation era who stared down fascism and barely escaped genocide. In contrast to the Maskilic call to be a man in the streets and a Jew at home, Buber saw his Hasidic writings as a way of “standing in the door of my ancestral house.” This liminal stance in the doorway between inherited tradition and contemporary life is a thoroughly *hermeneutical* position. It is here that Buber inherits and interprets, where he seeks to integrate the disparate dimensions of his modern identity in his own distinctive cultural, linguistic, and spiritual tapestry.

This is then followed by three appendices. The first offers a biographical sketch of Buber's way to Hasidism. For readers who are less familiar with Buber's life and legacy, I strongly encourage you to begin here. The second appendix offers a comparison of Buber's early and late representations of Hasidism, which serves to justify why the dissertation focuses on Buber's later Hasidic writings (i.e., those in the last four decades of his life). In doing so, this

discussion sheds additional light on Buber's well-known shift from mysticism to dialogue (see chapter one), and how this transition is visible in Buber's Hasidic writings. The third appendix—which builds upon a discussion in chapter three—offers a hermeneutical history of the phrase “נעשה ונשמע” (Exodus 24:7) in Jewish thought. That two-word phrase, literally “We will do and we will hear/obey,” comes to be interpreted quite commonly as a declaration that it is only *by means of* bodily doing that one can “hear” or understand God. Although this perspective draws upon classical Rabbinic exegesis, I contend that the reinterpretation of Exodus 24:7 in terms of theological understanding emerges originally in Hasidism, and then spreads therefrom into other streams of modern Jewish thought, partially thanks to Buber's engagement with and dissemination of Hasidic sources.

Methodological Statement for Studying Buber's Hasidic Tales

Insofar as this dissertation offers the most in-depth hermeneutical study of Buber's Hasidic tales to date, a more detailed methodological statement is in order. First of all, as mentioned above, I will focus primarily on Buber's post-mystical Hasidic writings, inaugurated with his 1922 anthology *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge* and climaxing two decades later in the magnum opus of his Hasidic corpus, *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim*.⁵⁵ As demonstrated in chapter one, Buber's well known turn “from mysticism to dialogue” involved *ipso facto* a shift in his perspectives on embodiment, and this coincided as well with significant changes in his

⁵⁵ Due to the Second World War, *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim* was published originally in Hebrew translation as *Or ha-Ganuz* (volume 1: 1946, volume 2: 1947), and then in English translation as *Tales of the Hasidim* (1947). The German text was not published until 1949, although this was clearly the basis for the others. Indeed, many of the tales in this anthology had appeared already in Buber's earlier German anthologies.

portrayals of Hasidism.⁵⁶ Thus, his later works are far more relevant for our investigations of Buber's embodied theology. It is also worth highlighting the fact that the majority of Buber's Hasidic writings came from his post-mystical period.

Let us turn now to the main principles that will guide our investigations of Buber's hermeneutical engagement with Hasidic sources. First, we shall take into account his *principle of selection*, that is, why he chose to present the particular tales that he did. Buber himself referred to this as his "filtering activity," as he seized the minority of sources that he deemed most essential, while leaving the others out.⁵⁷ In his introduction to *Die Erzählungen*, Buber notes, "This book contains less than a tenth of the material I collected."⁵⁸ Buber provides some explicit information about his method of selection:

The first criterion for the inclusion of a tale was, of course, significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*) *per se*, as well as special significance for the understanding of Hasidic existence. But many passages which were suitable from this point of view had to be set aside because they did not serve to characterize one of the zaddikim about which this book centers. And this was the deciding factor.

Thus, from the numerous legends transmitted about almost every zaddik, I had to choose those which gave the best account of the character and the way of a certain zaddik.⁵⁹

Buber's statement is fairly straightforward, but what he does not mention is that his principle of selection was informed also by ideological considerations. While his desire to portray the personalities of tsaddiqim was certainly central to his project, he also wanted to present Hasidism itself in a particular light. Buber pored over the hundreds of volumes in his Hasidic library and curated collections of tales that resonated for him. One beholds clear visual representations of this through perusing the lists of sources that he created in a personal notebook during

⁵⁶ See Appendix B.

⁵⁷ Buber, "Interpreting Hasidism," *Commentary* 36.3 (1963), 221.

⁵⁸ Buber, *TH*, xxii.

⁵⁹ *TH*, xxii; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 126.

preparations for *Das verborgene Licht*,⁶⁰ or through observing the intermittent markings in the books of his Hasidic library housed at the archives. Therefore, we must challenge Buber's claim that his "principle of selection was not derived from a subjective preference."⁶¹ For instance, Buber rarely selected *mayses* whose messages centered upon transmissions of kabbalistic arcana, glorifications of halakhic observance, or mystical practices of annihilation (*biṭul*) or divestment of corporeality (*hitpašḥut ha-gashmiyut*). In short, given that Buber included in his anthologies only about ten percent of the thousands of tales that he studied, the very act of selection is already a significant form of hermeneutical activism. An underlying assumption throughout my analyses of Buber's Hasidic writings in this dissertation is that the tales he presents say something about Buber's own leanings, even when he renders them virtually verbatim.

A second hermeneutical principle for our investigations pertains to Buber's *anthological ordering* of tales, that is, why he positioned particular tales in particular places in his collections. Oftentimes, Hasidic *mayses* have multiple or ambiguous messages, so the organization of tales in relation to one another can serve to underscore or introduce certain meanings. In his anthology *Das verborgene Licht*, Buber organizes his tales explicitly according to themes, such as "On Heaven and Earth," "On Service," or "On the Leader and the Community," and this makes the hermeneutical aspect of anthological positioning especially clear. In most cases, however, Buber organizes his tales according to *tsaddiqim* without any explicit categorization, so it is left to careful readers to discern the contextual correlations. Again, Buber provides some helpful methodological remarks in his introduction to *Die Erzählungen*:

Within the individual chapters, I have arranged the tales in biographical, but not in chronological order, since this would have obscured rather than clarified the total effect I had in mind. From the material at hand, it was easier to compose the picture of a man and

⁶⁰ See Buber's unpublished notebook at the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1.

⁶¹ Buber, "Interpreting Hasidism," 221; cf. Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 731.

his way, by projecting the various elements of his character and of his work individually and—if possible—each in the light of its own particular development, until they all fused into a sort of inner biography. Thus, for instance, in the chapter on the Baal Shem, the following sequence was observed: 1) the soul of the Baal Shem; 2) preparation and revelation; 3) ecstasy and fervor; 4) his community; 5) with his disciples; 6) with a variety of people; 7) the strength of vision; 8) holiness and miracles; 9) the Holy Land and redemption; 10) before and after his death. Each passage comes at its appointed place, though occasionally this breaks the chronological order, and the teachings supplement the tales wherever this seems desirable.⁶²

In differentiating between chronology and biography, Buber emphasizes that he orders the tales in service of his plan to portray the personal textures and spiritual ways of individual tsaddiqim. This is certainly a helpful explication, and the example he provides sheds light on the otherwise invisible sections that structure his chapter on the Besht. However, just as we saw in Buber's statement about his principle of selection, Buber again skirts the more overtly "subjective" and hermeneutical concerns that inform his approach. Consider, for example, his tale about the Besht entitled "The Famous Miracle."⁶³ In Buber's version, a "researcher of nature" points out to the Besht that the Sea of Reeds was naturally scheduled to part anyway when the children of Israel happened to arrive there, so it does not make sense to call this a "miracle." The Besht responds to him, "Don't you know that God created nature? And he created it so, that at the hour the children of Israel passed through the Sea of Reeds, it had to divide. That is the great and famous miracle!" Buber positions this tale among others that he categorizes (according to his methodological remark above) as pertaining to the Besht's legendary capacity for engaging personally and profoundly "with a variety of people." However, this tale could be read just as well as a representation of, say, the Besht's cosmology. Indeed, this is closer to how the *mayse* functioned in the original homiletical source from which Buber drew it, where the exegete, Ya'akov Aharon Yanovski, invoked it primarily to elucidate the relationship between the laws of nature and the

⁶² *TH*, xxiii; German: MBW, vol. 18.1, 126-127.

⁶³ *TH*, I:71; German: MBW, vol. 18.1, §65.

miracle at the sea.⁶⁴ For Buber, in contrast, what is most consequential is the Besht's personal dialogue with the naturalist, which he implies primarily by means of anthological positioning.

Buber implies his framing of the above tale as well by means of *changes* he makes to the original source—for example, there is no direct dialogue at all between the Besht and the naturalist in the original source⁶⁵—and this leads us to our third methodological principle: the *textual alterations* that Buber implemented in his renditions of Hasidic sources. The fundamental question in this context is, How and why did Buber add to, omit from, or otherwise revise the original *mayses* in the precise ways that he did? To be sure, Buber's textual alterations in his post-mystical Hasidic writings are far less conspicuous than in his earlier Neo-Romantic works, wherein he quite unreservedly rewrote tales as loose adaptations of Hasidic sources.⁶⁶ He even confesses that his “earlier work had not been sufficiently grounded” in the original texts,⁶⁷ for in those years he “did not listen attentively enough to the crude and ungainly but living folk-tone which could be heard from this material.”⁶⁸ But it would be erroneous to conclude that Buber's later tales are merely translations of the *mayses* that he decided to anthologize, with no more than stylistic alterations. To be sure, many of the changes that he introduces seem to have been

⁶⁴ See Ya'aqov Aharon Yanovski, *Beit Ya'aqov* (Piotrków, 1899), 4. Yanovski tells the *mayse* again on page 45. HaCohen cites the latter version, but Buber's unpublished notes confirm that he consulted the former version. Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, section on der Baalschem, #204, “Der Philosoph und das Schilfmeer.” For Yanovski, the climactic claim of this *mayse* is that התנה הקב"ה עם מעשה בראשית, “God established a condition with the work of creation,” namely that the sea will split at this very moment. Cf. Yehudah David Eisenstein, *Otsar Midrashim*, vol. 1 (New York, 1915), 197. For the Rabbinic phrase itself, and the notion that God established a condition with the work of creation, see B. Shabbat 88a; B. Avodah Zarah 3a, 5a.

⁶⁵ In Yanovski's formulation, the Besht knows through prophetic powers that the naturalist will come to challenge him on this, so the Besht beats him to the punch, so to speak, and delivers a public sermon explaining that God created the laws of nature by which the sea split at just the right time.

⁶⁶ See Appendix B. The preeminent book on Buber's early Hasidic writings is Martina Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal: Martin Buber's Early Representation of Hasidism as Kulturkritik* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁶⁷ Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” 221.

⁶⁸ Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” in *HMM*, 2.

primarily for aesthetic reasons, as Hasidic Hebrew was notoriously unrefined and grammatically sloppy, but many of his alterations do indeed hold theological or philosophical significance. From my extensive studies of Buber's tales vis-à-vis the original Hasidic sources, I estimate that about twenty percent of them contain alterations that bear direct witness to Buber's own religious sensibilities. Regarding that subset of his tales, most of Buber's alterations remain within range of plausible readings of the original sources—although the changes are naturally still of great interest from a hermeneutical-theological standpoint—and occasionally his alterations are more radically transformative, subverting the meaning of the original texts.

To detect and discuss the theologically significant textual alterations, we shall focus on two general patterns. First, we will scrutinize key terms in Buber's German and Modern Hebrew tales, with attention to (a) what words are being rendered as such from the original Hasidic sources, with attention to their own philological backgrounds and valences, and (b) where else those terms appear in Buber's German and Modern Hebrew writings. For example, consider the term “להשיג,” which appears quite commonly in Hasidic sources and means primarily “to comprehend” or “understand” in an intellectual sense or, particularly in the philosophical Hebrew lexicon, “to cognize” or “perceive.”⁶⁹ Given our findings about Buber's differentiation between abstract philosophical “knowledge” and concrete religious “knowing” in the context of his embodied theology, one would suspect that this term gave Buber pause, especially in narrative contexts of religious insight or illumination. And, indeed, Buber tends to translate this Hasidic Hebrew term into German as “*fassen*” or into Modern Hebrew as “לתפוס”, both of which bear a double-meaning of physical grasping and mental understanding, much like the English

⁶⁹ On the latter meaning in pre-modern philosophical usage, see definitions of השגה in Israel Efros, *Philosophical Terms in the Moreh Nebukim* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1924), 42; Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Concise Dictionary of Hebrew Philosophical Terms* (Cincinnati, 1941), 18.

“apprehension.” The significance of this “embodied metaphor”—to employ a concept popularized by Lakoff and Johnson⁷⁰—gains further clarity through consideration of Buber’s use of the term *fassen* elsewhere in his writings—for example, in his tendency to pair it with another key term that we shall discuss,⁷¹ “*schauen*,” a dialogical mode of cognition that is anchored to the sensuous particularities of presence, thereby intimating a phenomenological link between theological insight and sensory beholding.⁷² This is just one example (which we shall discuss in greater depth below, especially in chapter 3) to give a sense of how Buber’s renderings of terms in his Hasidic tales often represent more than just stylistic maneuvers.

In addition to key terms, the study of Buber’s textual alterations demands attentiveness to the types of imagery and ideologies that he tends to omit or reformulate. Examples of Hasidic content that elicited this type of hermeneutical activism in Buber are generally the same as those mentioned above in the context of what Buber “filters” out through his principle of selection—mystical practices of annihilation or divestment of corporeality, transmissions of esoteric arcana, or glorifications of halakhic punctiliousness. However, Buber’s alterations of such material within the tales that he anthologizes is far more illuminating than those instances when he simply skipped or excluded *mayases* that contained those elements. Indeed, when we confront the particular changes themselves, we witness the very textual traces of those moments when Buber reinterpreted and re-envisioned the dynamics of Hasidic piety and practice. And we observe not only what he omitted and reworded but also what he added from the depths of his own “exegetical imagination,” to use Fishbane’s locution. While all three of the above-mentioned

⁷⁰ See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); idem, *Philosophy in the flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁷¹ See below in chapter one.

⁷² For examples of Buber’s pairings of *fassen* and *schauen*, see Buber, *Der große Maggid*, lxxxiii; idem, *Nachlese*, 133; idem, *Ereignisse und Begegnungen*, 29.

manifestations of hermeneutical engagement found in Buber's Hasidic tales—his principle of selection, his anthological ordering, and his textual alterations—will inform my own hermeneutical investigations in the present study, I will devote most explicit attention to the third form, as it is most vividly revealing.

Of course, it would be tedious and impossible to offer an exhaustive hermeneutical study of Buber's entire corpus of Hasidic writings, which includes approximately 1,400 tales dealing with extremely diverse themes, each of which Buber drew from anywhere between one and five different sources. Thus, it is necessary for me to be candid about my own principles of selection that guide the present study. After multiple readings of all of Buber's published tales—as well as some unpublished ones located in the Martin Buber Archives—it was clear that numerous tales pertained to the themes of embodiment and embodied theology that intrigued me in Buber's philosophical works. I then went through the published material again and identified those tales, which resulted in a list of 602 titles. From this subset—nearly half of all the material—I selected 150 that related most robustly to my research questions, and I conducted hermeneutical analyses of those tales vis-à-vis the original Hasidic sources. The tales cited in this dissertation are those that I have deemed to be most significant and revealing with regard to the issues at hand. Some are illuminating due to their inherent messages, and others are especially interesting due to their divergences from the original sources. Naturally, in order to perform careful hermeneutical work—and to complete this project in a timely manner—I could not cover everything. I trust, however, that my sample size is both qualitatively and quantitatively significant, and that the general conclusions I was able to draw therefrom would only be reinforced and deepened through additional studies. Inevitably, to some degree, my final selection does reflect my own interests, as any scholar must ultimately make personal decisions about what to investigate

intensively and share with readers. However, I am confident that my hermeneutical and philological methods have been sufficiently meticulous to safeguard against mere projections of my own interests onto the extant sources. I strongly encourage other scholars to continue hermeneutical investigations of Buber's tales, according to the questions and themes that they find worthy of exploration, as I can attest that the results of such studies are well worth the labor.

In order to identify the precise Hasidic sources that Buber consulted for his renditions of the tales, I relied to a large degree on Ran HaCohen's magisterial notes to his critical edition of Buber's *Erzählungen*.⁷³ HaCohen listed the original sources, including exact editions and page numbers, for almost all of Buber's post-mystical Hasidic tales, offering a simply precious tool for research on Buber's Hasidic writings. To do so, he consulted Buber's source index from *Or ha-Ganuz* and then undertook the unenviable task of identifying the precise page numbers in the Hasidic books, which Buber never listed. Frankly, before HaCohen published this critical edition of *Die Erzählungen* in 2015, I would often spend an entire day trying to locate just two or three of Buber's Hasidic sources, and it was painfully clear to me why there was so little in-depth scholarship on his tales. As far as I know, mine is the first dissertation or full-length study of any kind to make use of HaCohen's contribution, and the fruits of my research are greatly indebted to him. In addition to HaCohen's source index, I relied a great deal on Buber's unpublished notebook from the archive. This proved to be an essential resource for my hermeneutical investigations, as Buber sometimes listed sources there that he did not include in his *Or ha-Ganuz* source index, and every so often I also had occasion to make minor corrections to HaCohen's citations regarding precise book editions or page numbers. For all of Buber's tales that I analyzed hermeneutically, I consulted every Hasidic source that he had consulted.

⁷³ See *MBW*, vol. 18.2, 855-1241.

Following a tip from HaCohen, I was almost always able to find the exact editions of the books I needed through the websites of *HebrewBooks.org* and *Otzar ha-Hokhma*, which indicates yet another reason why rigorous investigations of Buber's Hasidic tales is possible now in ways that it was not for previous generations of scholars.⁷⁴

It is important now to address two issues concerning matters of language. First of all, we must acknowledge the complexities of translation surrounding the sources at hand. The so-called “original” Hasidic sources that Buber consulted were almost always Hebrew texts based upon oral traditions in the Yiddish vernacular. Thus, already in the Hasidic books themselves, acts of transcription and translation were already compounded to form dense thickets of mediation. Subsequently, Buber's renditions of those materials in German and Modern Hebrew represent additional layers of mediation. Buber was aware of this basic history of transmission, but it only emboldened him further in his hermeneutical-literary endeavors. The original orality of the stories affirmed for him that the published versions were corrupted and in need of revision, and he believed that he could recapture the essential spokenness that had been lost.⁷⁵ According to Buber, Hasidim had chosen for the *mayses* to remain oral, and this is evidenced in the fact that very few published collections appeared in the early generations of the movement.⁷⁶ Moreover, Buber insisted that the tales were transmitted more faithfully in that era—not necessarily in the sense that their precise wording was better preserved, but more that “the living spirit” of the original events was portrayed more vividly in the vocal media of “oral transmission, which is

⁷⁴ See *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 29 n. 62.

⁷⁵ As we will discuss below in chapter 4, Buber also regarded his biblical translation work in a similar fashion.

⁷⁶ Contemporary scholarship supports Buber's contention that Hasidic narratives were transmitted orally long before they appeared in published form. See Gedalyah Nigal, “New Light on the Hasidic Tale and its Sources,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1998), 345–353; idem, *The Hasidic Tale*, trans. Edward Levin (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 7–18.

always assisted by tone and gesture.”⁷⁷ After a half-century “hiatus” in the publication of Hasidic tales, following the appearance of *Shivhei ha-Besht* in 1815, a substantial wave of publications emerged in the final decades of the century during the so-called “Lemberg period,” named for the town (also known as Lvov) where several prominent collectors and printers resided,⁷⁸ which happens also to be the town around which Buber grew up in those same years. And while the tales published during the Lemberg period and thereafter comprised most of the materials from which he crafted his own Hasidic works, Buber asserted that “the second half of the nineteenth century marks the corruption of transmitted motifs. They appear as thin and wordy narratives patched with later inventions and worked into a cheap form of popular literature. But only our own era (since about 1900) heralded the beginnings of critical selection and compiling.”⁷⁹ Buber’s reference to the “critical selection and compiling” of the early twentieth century alludes to the so-called Neo-Hasidic writers, such as Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (1852-1915), Mikha Yosef Berdyczewski (1865-1921), Shmuel Abba Horodetsky (1871-1957), and, of course, Buber himself.⁸⁰ One detects an air of condescension—and perhaps one of an orientalist variety—in Buber’s view that these westernized, enlightened readers had a more sophisticated appreciation of Hasidic literature than the Hasidim themselves had.⁸¹ Regardless of our own evaluations,

⁷⁷ See Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” 220-221. Buber’s subordination of written texts to oral traditions was consonant with the contemporaneous *Formgeschichte* school of biblical criticism, whose main proponents were familiar to Buber.

⁷⁸ See Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, 18. Nigal offers different explanations than Buber for why this fifty-year hiatus occurred.

⁷⁹ *TH*, xix.

⁸⁰ See Nicham Ross, *Masoret Ahuvah u-Senu’ah: Zehut Yehudit Modernit u-Ketivah Ne’o-Hasidit be-Fetah ha-Me’ah ha-Esrin* (Be’er Sheva: Hotsa’at ha-Sefarim Universitat Ben Gurion ba-Negev, 2010). Cf. HaCohen, “Einleitung,” in *MBW*, 18:18.

⁸¹ On the Hasidim as “oriental,” see Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Fin de Siècle Orientalism, the *Ostjuden*, and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation,” in *Divided Passions*, 77-132. In addition, Buber’s sense that the twentieth-century hermeneuts grasped Hasidic literature more deeply than the Hasidic authors and editors had themselves may also reflect the influence of Buber’s teacher Dilthey. In Dilthey’s own words: “The ultimate goal of the hermeneutic process is to understand an author better than he understood himself.” Wilhelm Dilthey, “The Rise of Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, edited by

however, Buber did see his work in such a light, and he believed that he was penetrating the encrustations of vulgar “literature” to the living breaths of orality and the still warm pulses of the recounted events themselves. We may say that Buber imagined his “translation” work as tantamount to a re-Yiddishizing of the Hebrew *mayses*, inasmuch as Yiddish was, for him, “that spoken idiom of the popular masses of East European Jewry that has ever again delighted me as the popular itself become speech.”⁸² Of course, the irony of this image in light of Buber’s triply-translated tales—from spoken Yiddish to written Hebrew to Buber’s own German and Modern Hebrew renditions—printed in commercialized books, should not be lost upon us.⁸³

A second important consideration regarding matters of language in this study is that I focus primarily on Buber’s tales in German, as opposed to those in Modern Hebrew. Buber composed his tales originally in German and, furthermore, although neither German nor Hebrew was his mother tongue (he was raised speaking Polish and Yiddish), German was certainly the more familiar language to him, a quite significant factor when conducting close philological analyses of his tales. Indeed, Buber emigrated to Palestine only in 1938, when he was sixty years old. Before Buber published his first Hebrew anthology, *Or ha-Ganuz*, in 1946-1947, he had already published hundreds of tales and six anthologies (not including subsequent editions) in German. And while *Or ha-Ganuz* appeared years before *Die Erzählungen*, this chronology was simply a result of the fact that Buber was unable to publish the German version in the years immediately following World War Two, for obvious reasons. Indeed, *Or ha-Ganuz* was a translation of his German tales, many of which had appeared already in earlier anthologies, and

Rudolf A. Makkreel and Rithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 250. Regarding Dilthey’s influence on Buber’s Hasidic writings, see Appendix B.

⁸² Buber, “Authentic Bilingualism,” *A Believing Humanism*, 81.

⁸³ We shall have more to say below in chapter 4 about orality, spokenness, and performativity in Buber’s Hasidic anthologies.

Buber even wrote the introduction originally in German.⁸⁴ The hermeneutical lens that I apply to Buber's tales requires quite heavy reliance on terminological nuances, and one can assume that the exact wording of the German versions is closer to Buber's own voice. Although he did consult with others at times—most notably his wife Paula Winkler Buber and eventually his son-in-law, the poet Ludwig Strauss—regarding his German formulations, Buber received significantly more assistance for the language of his Hebrew tales. In fact, in his introduction to the first edition of *Or ha-Ganuz*, Buber noted explicitly, “In giving them [the tales] their fitting Hebrew form I was greatly assisted by Mr. M.A. Zack, to whom I wish here as well to express my heartfelt gratitude,”⁸⁵ and Buber allegedly visited the writer and translator Avraham Yaari in his home every day for help during the production of *Or ha-Ganuz*.⁸⁶ That said, however, it is clear that Buber was intimately involved in the Hebrew composition of his tales, at the very least approving all choices, and I will certainly refer to those works at times. Indeed, since the original materials Buber consulted were almost always in Hebrew, the textual alterations that appear in Buber's own Modern Hebrew versions can bear a certain “smoking gun” quality that can be less conspicuous in the German.

Finally, I shall conclude these methodological remarks with an explication of my approach to the charged question of whether or not Buber was “right” about Hasidism. This has

⁸⁴ See the handwritten drafts in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var 350, Dalet 3. Cf. HaCohen's notes in *MBW*, vol. 18.2, 808-809.

⁸⁵ *Or ha-Ganuz: Sippurei Ḥasidim* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1946), 13. Buber omitted this acknowledgment from subsequent editions of *Or ha-Ganuz*. See Laor, “Agnon and Buber: The Story of a Friendship,” in Mendes-Flohr, ed., *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*, 75. Buber's regrettable tendency to keep quiet about the labor of his translators is evident as well in his work on Chinese stories. See Eber, “Martin Buber and Taoism,” 447, 462-63.

⁸⁶ See Yaari's own testimony in Haim Gordon, ed., *The Other Martin Buber*, 120-122. Cf. Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions*, 366 n. 69. I am also grateful to have received further insights into this relationship via a private email correspondence in May 2016 with Avraham Yaari's son, the esteemed economist Menahem Yaari.

been a lively debate for generations now, particularly since the acerbic public critiques of Buber by Gershom Scholem and Rivkah Schatz-Uffenheimer in the early 1960s.⁸⁷ In the wake of the so-called Buber-Scholem controversy, there have been three general approaches to the question of Buber's position. First, of course, some scholars have evaluated the historical correctness or incorrectness of Buber's portrayals of Hasidism. This camp includes those who have claimed unequivocally that Buber distorted or "misused" Hasidic sources, as well as those who have attempted to disentangle what Buber got right and what he got wrong.⁸⁸ Second, there are scholars who concede that Buber's portrayals of Hasidism were faulty from a scholarly standpoint, but contend that he should not be evaluated so much as a critical historian of Hasidism, as his aims were ultimately constructive. In a sense, this second camp underscores and elaborates upon Buber's own insistence contra Scholem and Schatz-Uffenheimer that he was not a "historian" and therefore should not be judged as one.⁸⁹ The central question for this camp is why—with respect to biographical, philosophical, or sociopolitical considerations—Buber portrayed Hasidism in the way he did.⁹⁰ The third trend includes those who simply regard

⁸⁷ See Gershom Scholem, "Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism," in *The Messianic Idea*, 228–250; Rivkah Schatz-Uffenheimer, "Man's Relation to God and World in Buber's Rendering of the Hasidic Teaching," in Schilpp and Friedman, eds., *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 403–434. We will have more to say about the Buber-Scholem debate below in chapter 3. Cf. Shonkoff, "Sacramental Existence and Embodied Theology in Buber's Representation of Hasidism," 142–146.

⁸⁸ In addition to Scholem and Schatz-Uffenheimer's critiques noted above, see also Steven T. Katz, "Buber's Misuse of Hasidic Sources"; Louis Jacobs, "Aspects of Scholem's Study of Hasidism," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Gershom Scholem* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 179–188; Moshe Idel, "Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem on Hasidism: A Critical Appraisal," in Ada Rapoport-Albert (ed.), *Hasidism Reappraised* (Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996), 389–403; Barry J. Hammer, "Resolving the Buber-Scholem Controversy in Hasidism," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 47.1 (1996): 102–27; Seth Brody, "'Open to Me the Gates of Righteousness': The Pursuit of Holiness and Non-Duality in Early Hasidic Teaching," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 89.1/2 (1998): 3–44; Jerome Gellman, "Buber's Blunder: Buber's Replies to Scholem and Schatz-Uffenheimer," *Modern Judaism* 20.1 (2000): 20–40; Margolin, *Miqdash Adam*, op. cit., 6–40, 419–433; Israel Koren, *Mystery of the Earth*, 339–362.

⁸⁹ See Buber, "Interpreting Hasidism," 218–219, 221.

⁹⁰ See Grete Schaeder, *The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber*, 287–338; David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 89–93;

Buber's publications as reliable resources for the study of Hasidism. Understandably, there are very few academics in this camp, although I suspect that the majority of Buber's overall readership from the past century would fall more or less into this category.⁹¹ Needless to say, few if any readers of Buber fall perfectly into one or another of these camps, but it is helpful nonetheless to identify these general trends.⁹²

In my own work, I reject the third trend and integrate aspects of the first and second, albeit in novel ways. I take for granted that Buber's readings of Hasidism were idiosyncratic, but I approach those idiosyncrasies with more of a spirit of curiosity than criticism, seeking to understand *how* exactly Buber portrayed Hasidism and *why* he made the interpretive choices he made. However, such an approach threatens to descend into a narrow study of Buber that loses sight of Hasidism itself and the genuinely intimate engagement that Buber had with those

Michael Oppenheim, "The Meaning of Hasidut: Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49.3 (1981): 409-21; Steven D. Kepnes, "A Hermeneutic Approach to the Buber-Scholem Controversy," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 38 (1987): 81-98; Laurence J. Silberstein, "Modes of Discourse in Modern Judaism: The Buber-Scholem Debate Reconsidered," *Soundings*, Vol. 71 (1988): 657-681; Jon D. Levenson, "The Hermeneutical Defense of Buber's Hasidism: A Critique and Counterstatement," *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (1991): 297-320; Rachel White, "Recovering the Past, Renewing the Present: The Buber-Scholem Controversy over Hasidism Reinterpreted," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 14.4 (2007): 364-392; Claire E. Sufrin, "On Myth, History, and the Study of Hasidism: Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem," in James A. Diamond and Aaron W. Hughes (eds.), *Encountering the Medieval in Modern Jewish Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 129-152.

⁹¹ Grete Schaeder points out that Buber's representation of Hasidism "by and large remained undisputed for decades." Schaeder, *The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber*, 291. For a more detailed account of the early reception history of Buber's Hasidic writings, see Mendes-Flohr, "Fin de Siècle Orientalism," *Divided Passions*, 96-109. For a representative example of a later writer who accepted Buber's Hasidic writings as an accurate portrayal of the movement, see Maurice Friedman, *A Heart of Wisdom: Religion and Human Wholeness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), chapter 5.

⁹² A forthcoming article by David Biale on the Buber-Scholem controversy defies my categorization, as Biale attempts to understand the nature of Scholem's critique of Buber in terms of Scholem's own personal identity and development. See David Biale, "Experience vs. Tradition: Reflections on the Origins of the Buber-Scholem Controversy," *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 15 (2016): 1-15. The case is similar regarding an essay by Shaul Magid, in which he investigates Scholem's own "presentist" concerns that informed both his writings on Hasidism and his critique of Buber. Shaul Magid, "For the Sake of a Jewish Revival: Gershom Scholem on Hasidism and its Relationship to Martin Buber" (unpublished). I thank both David Biale and Shaul Magid for sharing these works with me.

sources. This is precisely what is most promising about the hermeneutical approach: The intertextual investigations foster a bifocal awareness that keeps both Buber and Hasidism in view, unveiling the full richness and complexity of Buber's Hasidic corpus. And, as we shall see, this methodology reveals the fact that Buber does indeed tap into elements that are present in Hasidic texts, which he then isolates and amplifies hermeneutically, in close yet constructive relation to the sources. There are numerous Hasidic sources—especially in the legendary literature, but not exclusively so—that support Buber's positions, scores of which he cites in his anthologies and essays. He discovers streams surging within Hasidism—sometimes beneath the surface, to be sure—while also channeling and “filtering” those currents through the byways of his own being. At times, we will not shy away from placing Buber's insights in conversation with modern scholarship on Hasidism. There are also, of course, countless Hasidic sources that contradict Buber's sensibilities, and he navigates these through his principle of selection, anthological constructions, and textual alterations. These hermeneutical tensions make Buber an especially fascinating figure to study, illuminating the vibrant confluence of a German-Jewish philosopher and Hasidic literature.

Inasmuch as Buber's representations of Hasidism do reflect his own spiritual orientations, some have protested that he failed to be sufficiently “dialogical” in his encounters with Hasidic texts.⁹³ This is a fair point. However, we should also bear in mind that dialogue, for Buber, does not involve a dissolution of the “I” in I-Thou relations. Scholars who strive to present the facts of Hasidism with maximal objectivity, irrespective of their own personal visions, perform a great service for the academic study of Judaism—and I do regard my own project as a contribution to that discourse—but is the scholar's requisite suppression of self and subjectivity necessarily

⁹³ For example, see Levenson, “The Hermeneutical Defense of Buber's Hasidism,” 313-317.

reflective of dialogue? Moreover, is it the *only* pathway of dialogue between person and text? In the present study, I hope to show that when we follow Buber's paper trail, as it were, and observe the textual traces of his longings, embraces, and struggles in relation to Hasidic sources, we do behold a powerful dialogical relation. The hermeneutical approach executed in this study opens up such vistas, precisely through the philological and critical rigor that it demands.

From this perspective, Buber's anthologies and essays are a part of Hasidic tradition. To be sure, he was not a Hasid, but I would like to suggest that this fact has less to do with the nature of his writings than it does with the details of his life "off the page." According to Arthur Green's "working definition" of the intensely variegated phenomenon of Hasidism, it is essentially "a traditionalist Jewish pietism bound by the authority of both halakhah and aggadah that traces its spiritual lineage to the Baal Shem Tov."⁹⁴ Buber is beyond the pale, so to speak, inasmuch as he was not "bound by the authority" of halakhah, but the rest of the definition applies to him. If one knew nothing about Buber's religious observance or communal affiliations, then one would likely classify his collections of tales as Hasidic. Indeed, HaCohen has demonstrated how Hasidic Jews throughout the world have unknowingly consumed Buber's works, as a number of Orthodox authors have plagiarized his tales in their books, despite public enmity against Buber in those very literary circles.⁹⁵ Of course, one could certainly object that Buber transformed the inherited Hasidic materials in various ways—but while this fact may set him apart from critical-historical scholars, it does not necessarily differentiate him from the Hasidic editors and authors who compiled and composed the very "traditional" literature that he

⁹⁴ Arthur Green, "Early Hasidism: Some Old/New Questions," in Rapoport-Albert, ed., *Hasidism Reappraised*, 445.

⁹⁵ See HaCohen, "Einleitung," in *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 27-28. HaCohen delivered a fascinating lecture on this topic, entitled "Buber's Covert Orthodox Reception," at the May 2015 conference *Multiple Dialogues: Martin Buber in Palestine and Israel* at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

studied.⁹⁶ Also, in light of a relatively recent, strong wave of scholarship on Modern Kabbalah and late Hasidism, it would be misguided to count Buber out of Hasidic tradition due to his status as a “modern” thinker.⁹⁷ Hypothetically, had Buber been a Hasid—in the social, cultural, and ritual aspects implied by that term—the textual idiosyncrasies of his *Or ha-Ganuz* would presumably still have been controversial and eccentric, but I suppose that few Hasidim would have deemed them outright heretical. To be clear, my claim here is not that Buber was a Hasid—he most certainly was not—but that there is much to be gained in breaking out of the binary of treating him as either (1) a flawed historian of Hasidism or (2) a romantic modern who harnessed a distorted image of Hasidism to broadcast his own forms of existentialist philosophy. While both of those caricatures are partially true, the hermeneutical approach can serve to nuance and complicate our understanding of Buber’s Hasidic writings.

⁹⁶ See Zeev Gries, “The Hasidic Managing Editor as an Agent of Culture,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, 141-155.

⁹⁷ I refer to the scholarship of Jonathan Garb, Boaz Huss, Jonatan Meir, Tomer Persico, Jody Myers, and others. For an extensive bibliography, see Ariel Mayse, “The Soul of Scholarship: Jonathan Garb’s *Yearnings of the Soul*,” *Journal of Religion* 97.3 (2017), footnotes 4 and 7.

CHAPTER 1

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“Embodied in the Whole Material of Life”: Buber’s Phenomenology of Dialogue Reconsidered

Introduction

This dissertation focuses on themes of embodiment—more specifically, embodied theological expression (chapter two), embodied theological cognition (chapter three), and embodied religious practice (chapter four)—in Buber’s Hasidic tales. A central claim of the project is that these aspects of Buber’s thought are more vividly manifest through hermeneutical-intertextual studies of the narrative sources than through general discussions of Buber’s discursive statements. However, before we turn to the tales, it is necessary for us to clear our path forward by way of philosophical analysis and intervention. After all, the very term “embodiment” in the context of Buber’s dialogical thought is likely to furrow the brows of some readers. Indeed, regarding our relations to another person, Buber indicated that as soon as I “abstract from him the color of his hair, of his speech, of his graciousness,” then “he is my You no longer and not yet again.”¹ Moreover, Buber declared that “the You-world does not have coherence in space and time.”² Understandably, such statements have led many interpreters to suppose that dialogical relations transcend the very dimensions of space and time, let alone the everyday sensations of bodily existence. In fact, there has been a strong tendency among scholars to understand Buber’s concepts of I-It and I-You as corresponding approximately to Kant’s phenomenon and noumenon, respectively. Thus, before we launch into our in-depth study of

¹ *IT*, 69; German: *ID*, 25.

² *IT*, 84; German: *ID*, 42.

embodied theological sensibilities in Buber's Hasidic tales, we must first clarify a number of matters in his philosophical writings.

In contrast to those scholars of Buber who suppose that I-You relations are disembodied and immaterial, I will argue in this chapter that a framework of embodiment (*Leiblichkeit*) is very beneficial for our efforts to understand Buber's philosophy of dialogue. I will agree for the most part with scholars who suggest that Buber's It-world corresponds roughly to Kant's phenomenality, but I will claim that it is far more misleading than elucidating to identify Buber's You-world with Kantian noumenality—a term that Buber himself never used to describe dialogical encounter. Ultimately, Buber's dialogical thought is post-Kantian in both senses of the term—that is, he philosophized under the influence of Kant, yet also very much in opposition to Kant—and I propose that attention to themes of embodiment enables us to disentangle his different modes of post-Kantianism from one another. In this process, we will gain crucial insights into Buber's understanding of the interrelations between dimensions of existence such as appearance and being, body and soul, materiality and spirituality, shedding light ultimately on what we will term his *dialogical monism*. These explorations will also lead us to a far deeper understanding of Buber's theological sensibilities, culminating in an investigation of what we shall identify as his *embodied theology*.

It is necessary from the outset to make some preliminary points about the term “embodiment.” In characterizing dialogical encounters as embodied, this does not imply that they are somehow on the hither side of intellect, soul, or spirit. In fact, as indicated previously in the introduction, the very notion of embodiment reflects a dissolution of dualisms between mind and body, body and spirit, and so on. In this respect, it is instructive for us to consider the German terms *Körper* and *Leib*, which provide a certain nuance that is lacking in the single

English word “body.” *Körper* refers to the body as such, the body as material object—*Körperlichkeit* is corporeality. *Leib* refers to the lived body, the personal body, the relational body—*Leiblichkeit* is embodiment. The *Leib* is more than the sum of its physical parts, and perhaps even inseparable from soul, spirit, psyche, and action. Although Buber does seem to use the terms *Körper* and *Leib* interchangeably at times in his writings,³ there are indeed cases where he draws unmistakable distinctions.⁴ And for the sake of clarity, we may say that the embodied nature of dialogue has less to do with *Körperlichkeit*, per se, than with *Leiblichkeit*. The term *leibhafte* (bodily), for example, is virtually synonymous with “relational” in Buber’s dialogical writings.⁵ In other words, dialogical encounter should not be understood as some aesthetic focus

³ This is particularly the case in Buber’s Hasidic tales, where he tends to translate the Hebrew terms גשמי and גשמיות as *körperliche* and *Körperlichkeit*, even when they are employed in the original sources to underscore the spiritual vitality within materiality. Of course, this is an understandable linguistic decision, inasmuch as the Hasidim were making a quite subversive point that one should serve God even in the lowly coarseness of corporeality.

⁴ For example, in one sentence, Buber differentiates between “the givenness of the human body” (*Gegebenheit des Menschenleibes*)” versus “two entities which have gone apart from one another, the withdrawn ‘body (*Körper*)’ and the withdrawing ‘soul’” (Buber, “Distance and Relation,” *KM*, 66; German: *MBW*, 10:48). See also Buber’s critique of the Buddha: “when he bids us become aware of the processes in our body (*Körper*), what he means is almost the opposite of our sense-assured insight into the body (*sinnbewusstes Leibeseinsicht*)” (*IT* 140; German: *ID*, 110). For another example, see Buber’s description of the development from childhood to so-called personhood: “We must remember the reach beyond that undifferentiated, not yet formed primal world from which the corporeal (*körperliche*) individual that was born into the world has emerged completely, but not yet the bodily (*leibliche*), the actualized being that has to evolve from it gradually through entering into relationships” (*IT*, 79; German: *ID*, 37). He then refers shortly thereafter to “the [child’s] *Körper* maturing into the [person’s] *Leib*” (*IT*, 80; German: *ID*, 38).

⁵ For examples of this term *leibhafte* in Buber’s dialogical writings as denoting dialogical relationality, see, *inter alia*: “the It-humanity that some imagine, postulate, and advertise has nothing in common with the bodily (*leibhaftigen*) humanity to which a human being can truly say Thou” (*IT*, 65; *ID*, 14); “Does the thinker of whom we are speaking stand firm with the bodily (*leibhaften*) fact of otherness?... [We should] live towards the other man, who is not framed by thought, but bodily (*leibhaft*) present before us” (“Dialogue,” *BMM*, 27-28; *DP*, 179-80); “For with him it is a matter of individual, objectivized processes and phenomena, of something that is separated from connection with the whole bodily (*leibhaften*) person” (“What Is Man?,” *BMM*, 124; *Werke*, 1:316). We will encounter many more examples throughout this dissertation. We should note that *leibhafte* was also already a key term in Husserl’s phenomenological writings from years just prior to Buber’s dialogical turn. Husserl’s *leibhafte* tends to be translated into English as “bodily” or “fleshly,” but also as “in person.” See Elisabeth Pacherie, “*Leibhaftigkeit* and Representational Theories of Perception,” in *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in*

on the physicality of the other (!), but rather as an attentiveness to the person's wholeness. To be sure, this includes facial expressions and body language, but also the stirrings of their so-called "inner" life, their words and pauses, ideas and emotions—all the intangibles of personal presence. However, in order to justify this seemingly unremarkable notion that dialogical relations are, for Buber, *also* bodily, and *also* sensory, we must turn now to his very complex relation to Kant.

Buber's Post-Kantian Phenomenology of Dialogue

The notion that Buber's philosophy of dialogue should be mapped somehow onto Kant's transcendental idealism has become quite pervasive among scholars of Buber. This approach was promulgated most prominently by the philosopher Steven T. Katz, who took an exceptionally bold stance on the issue. According to Katz, "Buber's entire mature world view is structurally and fundamentally built on the back of Kantianism. Buber assumes for his own work that Kant is, in some fundamental way, right. We see this initially and most clearly in his dichotomous account of reality described through the realms of I-Thou/I-It which parallels Kant's noumenal/phenomenal distinction in striking ways."⁶ In fact, Katz contends, "the ultimate success of Buber's epistemology, as of his philosophy as a whole, depends on the correctness of some form of Kantian Idealism."⁷ According to this maximalist reading, Buber's statements that the It-world is, and the You-world is not, perceived in terms of the categories of space, time, and causality imply quite literally that the It-world "is *subject to* the category of space-time (&

Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science, edited by Jean Petitot, Francisco J. Varela, Bernard Pachoud, and Jean-Michel Roy (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 148-160.

⁶ Katz, "A Critical Review of Martin Buber's Epistemology of I-Thou," 90.

⁷ Katz, "A Critical Review of Martin Buber's Epistemology of I-Thou," 92.

causality)” and the You-world “is *not subject to* the categories of space-time (or causality).”⁸ In other words, I-You relations are “a-spatial, a-temporal, wholly non-sensual, and non-experiential in all the ordinary senses,” and thus they are “divorced from all behavioral or material predicates.”⁹

Of course, such an alignment of Buber’s I-It and I-You with Kant’s phenomenon and noumenon has enormous consequences for how we understand the place of the body in Buber’s phenomenology of dialogue. If the You-world is indeed transcendental in the sense of being beyond all sense perception, then it follows that I do not actually perceive the body of the other—or my own body, for that matter—in the event of I-You encounter. Thus, in order to even begin to make sense of Buberian dialogue, Katz argues, we would have to entertain “the possibility of disembodied existence” and “non-physical behaviour and identity.”¹⁰

Understandably, Katz takes issue with the notion of such an approach. “What the non-spatio-temporal ‘meeting’ of a non-spatio-temporal ‘I’ and non-spatio-temporal ‘Thou’ could be is unimaginable, even unintelligible,” he writes.¹¹ Moreover, “in contradistinction to Buber’s claim, *embodied* existence seems essential to the knowing of an Other when this Other is a person,” Katz contends, for we can only truly know the “I” of an other if the other “is embodied, has a memory, and is locatable in space-time, etc.”¹² Katz goes so far as to protest that “any satisfactory account of what it is to be a person will involve bodily criteria,” and

⁸ Katz, “A Critical Review of Martin Buber’s Epistemology of I-Thou,” 98. Emphasis added.

⁹ Katz, *Historicism, the Holocaust, and Zionism*, 31-32; idem, “A Critical Review of Martin Buber’s Epistemology of I-Thou,” 106-07. See also Wood’s similar claim that “the Thou informs the soul as the soul informs the body, each from its own distinct dimension which is not subject to the dimensions of bodily perceptions.” Robert Wood, *Martin Buber’s Ontology: An Analysis of I and Thou* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 72. Like Katz, Wood also indicates that I-It perception is, for Buber, “clearly Kantian” and “not subject to the dimensions of bodily perceptions.” *Ibid.*, 35-36, 72.

¹⁰ Katz, “A Critical Review of Martin Buber’s Epistemology of I-Thou,” 104.

¹¹ Katz, “A Critical Review of Martin Buber’s Epistemology of I-Thou,” 98.

¹² Katz, “A Critical Review of Martin Buber’s Epistemology of I-Thou,” 119n12. Emphasis in original.

unless there are such criteria, how would we be able to differentiate in our ascription of the predicate *Thou* between one person and another person? How would I know I was having a *Thou* relation with my wife rather than with my neighbor's wife or, for that matter, with my neighbor's husband, if all physical criteria were absent from *I-Thou* relations and from all saying of *Thou*?¹³

Katz's critical analysis helps us to appreciate how problematic—and, yes, absurd—Buber's philosophy of dialogue would be if it did indeed map so clearly onto Kantian transcendentalism. After all, what would it mean for Buber to suggest that in I-You encounters we transcend the phenomenal "appearance" of the other in order to behold their non-spatial, non-temporal, and utterly disembodied noumenality? If Katz's reading of Buber as a "neo-Kantian" is correct, then these conundrums should stump us all.¹⁴

However, we should not overlook the boldly bodily language that Buber employs to guide his readers to understandings of dialogical meetings. The You "bodies (*leibt*) over against me," and "the It-humanity that some imagine, postulate, and advertise has nothing in common with the bodily (*leibhaftigen*) humanity to which a human being can truly say Thou."¹⁵ According to Katz, the concrete terminology of Buber's dialogical thought "is at best metaphorical and analogical, dependent on the non-metaphorical use of these concepts in ordinary discourse."¹⁶ And while Buber insisted that the "*Thou* is no metaphor," Katz suggests

¹³ Katz, *Historicism, the Holocaust, and Zionism*, 32; cf. idem, "A Critical Review of Martin Buber's Epistemology of I-Thou," 104-06.

¹⁴ For Katz's characterizations of Buber as a "neo-Kantian" philosopher, see Steven T. Katz, "Martin Buber's Epistemology: A Critical Appraisal," in idem, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 4, 11. Interestingly, Katz does not explicitly identify Buber as "neo-Kantian" in the alternate version of that same essay published as "A Critical Review of Martin Buber's Epistemology of I-Thou," in Bloch's *Martin Buber: A Centenary Volume*.

¹⁵ Buber, *IT*, 58, 65; German: *ID*, 14, 21.

¹⁶ Katz, *Historicism, the Holocaust, and Zionism*, 32; cf. idem, "A Critical Review of Martin Buber's Epistemology of I-Thou," 107. We might note that Adorno made a related claim about the contemporary existentialist use of bodily language: "All of these words draw from language, from which they are stolen, the aroma of the bodily, unmetaphorical; but in the jargon they become quietly spiritualized. In that way they avoid the dangers of which they are constantly palavering. The more earnestly the jargon sanctifies its everyday world, as though in a mockery of Kierkegaard's insistence on the unity of the sublime and

that such a claim does little more than signal Buber’s philosophical inconsistency, if not his disingenuous refusal to acknowledge a merely figurative significance of his language.¹⁷ In contrast, I propose to take Buber at his word, and demonstrate—through careful, philological analyses of Buber’s dialogical writings—that there are indeed ways to reconcile his language of embodiment (which Katz almost entirely ignores) with his statements about space, time, and causality. Through reading Buber as a decidedly post-Kantian thinker, we will develop a more cautious explanation for how these different facets of his thought relate to one another.

A number of scholars have already made the important point that one should not differentiate too strongly between realms of phenomenality and noumenality in Buber’s thought. For example, Zank and Braiterman note that “the phenomenon is always the gateway to the noumenon,” for Buber, “just as the noumenal cannot be encountered other than in and by way of concrete phenomena.”¹⁸ Mendes-Flohr also affirms the interdependence of these dimensions, although in even stronger terms: “the phenomenal and noumenal realms are ultimately

the pedestrian, the more sadly does the jargon mix up the literal with the figurative.” Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (London: Routledge, 2003), 33. For Adorno’s explicit discussion of Buber, see *ibid.*, 16-17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Katz does not provide a citation in either version of his essay for his quotation from Buber that the “*Thou* is no metaphor.” I am not certain what source he has in mind, but we might consider the following statement from Buber’s *Religion als Gegenwart* lectures: “The latent tendency to objectification (*Objektivierungstendenz*) becomes creative through the touch (*Berührung*). Perhaps we may say this with an image: We must again and again resort to *images that are yet not metaphorical*. The voice, the eternal voice, becomes word through contact with the human being, with the surface of the skin, the ear, the living person that it touches.” See Rivka Horwitz, *Buber’s Way to ‘I and Thou’: The Development of Martin Buber’s Thought and His ‘Religion as Presence’ Lectures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 126; German: *idem*, *Buber’s Way to I and Thou: An Historical Analysis and the First Publication of Martin Buber’s Lectures “Religion als Gegenwart”* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1978), 150.

¹⁸ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Martin Buber,” by Michael Zank and Zachary Braiterman, accessed July 2, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/buber/>. An earlier version of this entry referred somewhat differently to “Buber’s feeling that the phenomenon is always the gateway to the noumenon, just as the noumenal cannot be encountered other than in the concrete phenomena.” See in the archives of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Martin Buber,” by Zank and Braiterman, accessed July 2, 2018, <https://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/archives/fall2008/entries/buber/>.

homologous.”¹⁹ Such blurring, if not dissolutions, of boundaries between phenomenality and noumenality are far more faithful to Buber’s philosophy than Katz’s stark opposition is. However, for the sake of clarity and precision, I would like to suggest that the term “noumenon” is ultimately more harmful than helpful for our efforts to understand Buber’s conception of dialogical encounter. In the history of philosophy, Kant affirms, phenomena are “beings of sense (*Sinnenwesen*)” and noumena are “beings of understanding (*Verstandeswesen*).”²⁰ Noumena are by definition intellectual objects whose intelligibility is limited exclusively to a sphere of pure consciousness, or *nous*, “mind,” which remains fundamentally inaccessible to human cognition, according to Kant, inasmuch as we lack any “intellectual” or “non-sensible intuition.”²¹ As we shall see, such transcendental idealism takes us very far afield from Buber’s concept of dialogical encounter. We may speak of the “ontological” character of I-You moments in order to highlight the meeting with being, but it is all too misleading to categorize those events in terms of the “noumenal.”

In what follows, I shall discuss three definitively post-Kantian facets of Buber’s philosophy of dialogue, which are verily interconnected with one another: First, Buber challenges the Kantian distinction between *Erscheinung* (appearance) and *Sein* (being),

¹⁹ Paul Mendes-Flohr, “The Aporiae of Dialogue: Reflections on Martin Buber’s Non-Noetic Conception of Faith,” *Intersubjectivité et Théologie Philosophique: Textes Réunis par Marco M. Olivetti*, Archivio di Filosofia 69 (2001), 689.

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 360. See also Kant’s assertion that the noumenon signifies “only the thinking of something (*Denken von Etwas*) in general, in which I abstract from all form of sensible intuition” (ibid., 349).

²¹ See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 360-61. See also ibid., 354-365. We should note as well that Buber’s concept of dialogue is explicitly against any mystical or philosophical system that presupposes some pure intellectual realm, or *nous*, that somehow underlies or engenders material phenomena. For example, with regard to efforts to apprehend “the Thinking One, ‘that by which this world is thought,’ the pure subject,” Buber notes sardonically that such systems are praiseworthy only for their “sublime power to ignore (*Absehen*).” See *IT*, 138-39; German: *ID*, 108-09.

intimating that the *Sein* of the other is perceptible—albeit not comprehensible—precisely in events of thoroughly sensible-cum-ontological beholding. Second, Buber appropriates Kant’s language of sensible intuition to denote a mode of dialogical beholding that is at once ontic and ontological. Finally, while Buber suggests that the You-world is not apprehended in terms of space and time, he intimates that dialogical beholding is nonetheless—or better: for that very reason—exceptionally attuned to the spatiality and temporality of bodily presence. In the process of explaining and elaborating upon these three interrelated aspects of Buber’s dialogical philosophy, we will elucidate at once the contours of his post-Kantianism and the crucial role that embodiment plays in his thought.

Let us begin with Buber’s challenge to the Kantian dichotomy of *Erscheinung* (appearance) and *Sein* (being), according to which we may perceive the phenomenal appearance of a thing, yet the noumenal being of the “thing in itself” remains beyond the capacities of human cognition. One of Buber’s boldest breaches of this dualism comes in the third part of *I and Thou*, where he differentiates between the religious and the philosophical approaches to antinomies. In religious existence, Buber explains, one must stand firm with the utter indissolubility of the antinomy and live the fullness of this tension with ready receptivity. “Whoever strives to relativize the antinomies annuls the sense of the situation (*hebt den Sinn der Situation auf*),” he declares.²² However, in the very next paragraph, Buber suggests that Kant does exactly that:

Kant can relativize the philosophical conflict of freedom and necessity by relegating the latter to the world of appearance (*Erscheinung*) and the former to that of being (*Seins*), so that the two positions no longer really oppose one another but rather get along with one another as well as do the two worlds in which each is valid. But when I mean freedom and necessity not in worlds that are thought of but in the reality of my standing before

²² *IT*, 143; German: *ID*, 114. The verb *aufheben* that Buber uses here carries the connotation of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, which Buber and many of his intellectual peers regarded as the epitome of philosophical flights from bodily reality.

God... then I may not try to escape from the paradox I have to live by relegating the irreconcilable propositions to two separate realms; neither may I seek the aid of some theological artifice to attain some conceptual reconciliation: I must take it upon myself to live both in one, and lived both are one.²³

According to Buber, therefore, Kant leans on the dualism of *Erscheinung* and *Sein* in order to relativize and thereby neutralize the sting of existential reality. However, Buber casts these “two separate realms” of *Erscheinung* and *Sein* as no more than “worlds that are thought of (*gedachten Welten*),” which cloud one’s vision of the real world of lived reality, where “both are one.” Thus, when Kant employs this fanciful “artifice (*Kunstgriff*) to attain some conceptual (*begrifflichen*) reconciliation,” he misses what Buber describes just before the above passage as the “Being-sense (*Sein-Sinn*)” and, consequently, “thwarts the sense that is only graspable but not conceptual (*begreifbaren, nicht begrifflichen Sinn*).”²⁴

Moreover, Buber takes aim at Kant’s preoccupation with differentiating between an *Erscheinung* and the so-called *Ding an sich selbst* (thing in itself).²⁵ First of all, Buber declares unequivocally, “I speak only of the real human being, of you and me, of our life and our world, not of any I-in-itself (*Ich an sich*) and not of any Being-in-itself (*Sein an sich*).”²⁶ For Buber, to suggest that the appearance of something is distinct from that thing “in itself” is not necessarily incorrect from an objective, philosophical-scientific standpoint. Indeed, it is precisely on this point that Buber concedes, “I have not fully liberated myself from Kant.”²⁷ However, from the perspective of intersubjective, dialogical awareness, such preoccupations with noumenality are

²³ *IT*, 144; German: *ID*, 114-15.

²⁴ *IT*, 142; German: *ID*, 112. In these latter quotations, Buber is alluding most directly to Schopenhauer, but he is nonetheless establishing the context for his critique of Kant.

²⁵ Although scholars tend to refer succinctly to Kant’s concept of the thing “*an sich*,” it should be pointed out that the longer phrase “*an sich selbst*” is, in fact, more common in Kant’s writings. As we shall see, this seemingly arcane point proves crucial for our detection of Buber’s post-Kantianism, as Buber uses the locutions “*an sich*” and “*selber*” quite interchangeably.

²⁶ *IT*, 65; German: *ID*, 20.

²⁷ Buber, “Interrogation of Martin Buber,” in Rome and Rome, eds., *Philosophical Interrogations*, 21.

ultimately philosophical abstractions that thwart dialogical awareness in earthly situations. For Buber, the intellectual idea of the other “in itself” is—in itself—mute, while the appearance of the other over-against us is precisely the site of communication. “It is not in the law that is afterward derived from the appearance (*Erscheinung*) but in the appearance itself (*in ihr selber*) that the being communicates itself.”²⁸ With regard to dialogical encounter with a tree, for example, Buber insists: “What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself (*er selber*).”²⁹ For Buber, the shift from I-It to I-You is far from any shift from phenomenal appearance to noumenal being. On the contrary, dialogical awareness dissolves boundaries between those realms and is directed toward the sensory presence of the other.³⁰

Of course, this convergence of appearance and being in Buber’s thought raises fundamental questions about the nature of dialogical perception, and this leads us to our second main observation about Buber’s post-Kantianism, namely his subversive appropriation of Kant’s language of *Anschauung* (intuition). Given Kant’s transcendental idealism and his concomitant dismissal of any “intellectual” or “non-sensible (*nichtsinnlichen*) *Anschauung*,”³¹ the term

²⁸ *IT*, 90; German: *ID*, 51.

²⁹ *IT*, 59; German: *ID*, 14. Cf. Buber’s characterization of an encounter with a linden tree: “the rustling and fragrance is not merely in and on it; it itself (*sie selber*) rustles and smells, and it is it itself (*sie selber*) that I feel when my hand touches its bark” (Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 159; German: *Werke I*: 434). We will have much more to say about this linden tree below.

³⁰ Interestingly, while Buber’s I-It and I-You most certainly do not map onto a dualism of *Erscheinung* and *Sein*, Buber does present them in terms of a duality of *Scheinen* (seeming) and *Sein* (being), or genuine relationality and disingenuous relationality. However, it is highly significant for our purposes that Buber uses language of embodiment to illustrate the dynamics of *Sein*. In his 1954 essay “Elements of the Interhuman,” after enumerating six configurations of relations between two hypothetical individuals, Peter and Paul, that are dominated by *Scheinen*, Buber adds: “Lastly, there are the bodily (*leibliche*) Peter and the bodily Paul. Two living beings and six ghostly appearances (*Scheingestalten*), which mingle in many ways in the conversation between the two.” Martin Buber, “Elements of the Interhuman,” in *Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy: Essays, Letters, and Dialogue*, ed. Judith Buber Agassi (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 77; German: *DP*, 265. See also Buber’s differentiation between “genuine dialogues” and “fictitious conversations (*Scheingespräche*) where none beheld (*schaute*) and addressed his partner in reality.” Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 7; German: *DP*, 149.

³¹ See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 360-61.

Anschauung is, for him, a mode of sensible perception that is limited to phenomenal appearance, as opposed to noumenal being. Indeed, Kant defines the noumenon precisely as “a thing insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition,”³² and even if the very appearance of that thing signals in some way the being of the thing in itself, this remains absolutely inaccessible to us. That noumenal being is, Kant insists, no more than “a something = *X*, of which we know nothing at all nor can know anything in general.”³³ In contrast, as we shall now see, while Buber does not necessarily reject Kant’s insistence that the “being in itself” of a thing lies beyond our cognitive capacities, he does nonetheless heighten the connection between *Anschauung* and our beholding of the other’s “being.” In other words, Buber imbues the term *Anschauung* (and its various cognates) with an ontological potency that breaks decisively from Kant.

With this in mind, we are now prepared to turn to Buber’s most detailed and explicit critique of Kantian transcendentalism in his 1955 essay “Der Mensch und sein Gebild,” translated subsequently into English as “Man and His Image-Work.”³⁴ Again, without necessarily repudiating Kant’s critique of metaphysics or his philosophical claims about the abyss between cognitive “representations (*Vorstellungen*)” and things in themselves, Buber suggests that this may not be an exhaustive account of reality—from the perspective of actual, lived life. Indeed, it may be precisely in such an acute awareness of unknowability that, “for the first time, the uncanny strangeness of the world is perceived (*verspürt*). That which I designate and use, that before whose incomprehensibility I shudder is fearfully dual; in place of the powerfully trustworthy to which I entrust myself stands the embodied contradiction (*leibhaftige*

³² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 360.

³³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 348.

³⁴ It is telling that Steven T. Katz has virtually nothing to say about this essay in his writings on Buber’s alleged neo-Kantianism.

Widerspruch).”³⁵ For Buber, dialogical encounter with the wholly unknown other over-against me may not disclose new swaths of philosophical knowledge, but that meeting may still nourish the surfacing of alternate, embodied modes of cognition. Thus, Buber reflects, “Of *x* we know what Kant points out to us of the thing in-itself, namely, that it is. Kant would say: ‘And nothing more,’ but we who live today must add: ‘And that the existent meets us.’ This is, if we take it seriously enough, a powerful knowing (*Wissen*).”³⁶

Buber clarifies what he means through a lengthy meditation on his encounter with a certain linden tree. In turning now to this discussion, we shall pay special attention to his radical revaluations, if not reconceptualizations, of some of the most foundational terms in Kant’s transcendentalism: *Sein*, *Erscheinung*, *Vorstellung*, *Anschauung*. Let us proceed carefully through the passage with philological care.

Buber’s anecdote begins beside an old linden tree that he sees regularly on a trail that he takes from time to time.³⁷ On this particular day, however, Buber pauses at the tree and wonders what this tree truly is, independent of his perception of it, before he arrives and after he leaves. Philosophers dismissed such a question as “meaningless,” Buber acknowledges—presumably, because they deemed the tree “in itself” to be beyond the limits of human cognition. In addition, botanists spoke volumes about the structure, dynamics, and properties of linden trees, but Buber reckons that such analyses would only guide his consciousness away from the sensuous existence of this very linden tree. “For the green of the leaf that fluttered down on my hand,” for example, “chlorophyll had to be substituted.” Thus, all such objectifying discourse about linden trees in general “drew me into the world of *x* where there was only the unrepresentable (*das*

³⁵ Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 155; German: *Werke*, 1:430.

³⁶ Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 157; German: *Werke*, 1:432.

³⁷ See Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 157; German: *Werke*, 1:432.

Unvorstellbare). Even the space in which the linden was fixed was unrepresentable (*unvorstellbares*) mathema.”³⁸ We should be attentive, of course, to Buber’s idiosyncratic use of the Kantian term here. For Kant, the transcendental being of things is intuited as a sensible representation (*Vorstellung*) through the categories of perception, but Buber expresses here a dissatisfaction with such an intangible, imageless notion of being, cut off completely from any possibility of sensible representation. Again, he does not necessarily reject the idea of the unrepresentable, noumenal *X*—it is just not sufficiently interesting to him, and not an adequate answer to his question about the meaning of intersubjective encounter.

Thus, with renewed focus, Buber returns his awareness from abstract ruminations about the tree toward the sensuous presence of the tree itself, to “the thing that had waited for me in order to become once again the blooming and fragrant linden of my sense world. I said to the sense-deprived linden-*x* what Goethe said to the fully sensible rose: ‘So it is you.’”³⁹ It is very significant, for our purposes, that the tree’s first appearance as a “You” is coterminous with Buber’s turn from intellectual reflection to “sense world (*Sinnenwelt*),” from an imageless *X* to the sensuous relation. For Buber, it is precisely through the encounter between “unperceived, *x*-nature” and a human being’s “meeting perception (*begegnende Wahrnehmung*),” that is, the person’s capacity to “allow the existent to appear (*erscheinen*) at a distance, as something existing beyond his needs and wishes”—it is only through this encounter that “perception is, without prejudice to all spiritually arising from being a subject, a natural act in which I and *x*

³⁸ In this case, among others in this section, Friedman translates *vorstellbare* as “realizable,” *unvorstellbare* as “unrealizable,” and so on. Of course, this is a problematic translation, given both Kant’s key concept of “representation” (*Vorstellung*) and Buber’s key concept of “realization” (*Verwirklichung*). In order to be more faithful to Buber’s critique of Kant in this section, I will translate *vorstellbare* and *unvorstellbare* here as “representable” and “not representable.” As awkward as those locutions may be, they should make us more attentive to Buber’s subversive treatments of Kantian “representation.”

³⁹ Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 157-58; German: *Werke*, 1:432-33. Regarding Buber’s reference to Goethe’s rose, cf. Buber, *IT*, 116.

take part.”⁴⁰ Without the embodied and sensory wholeness of dialogical meeting, the transcendental *x* of the other is meaningless. However, in the moment of dialogue—when one has let go of any striving to cognize or conceptualize the *x*—one encounters the place of the *x*, as it were, the sensory space that proclaims the presence of being—in this case, the being of the tree.

Let us proceed confidently from *x*, from its unfathomable darkness: its being (*sein Sein*) has intercourse with my being (*Sein*) when it dispatches to my senses the representatives to which scientific language has lent the ambiguous name of stimuli, and out of our intercourse arise the clearly outlined shapes that people my sense-world in color and sound. It itself (*Sie selber*), the sense-world, arises out of the intercourse of being with being (*Sein mit Sein*).⁴¹

Thus, the mute invisibility of *x*—the very being of the other—becomes manifest precisely in the so-called “stimuli” that are seen and heard as shapes, colors, and sounds. These elements of the “sense-world (*Sinnenwelt*)” are certainly not exhaustive, one-to-one representations of the *x*, the thing in itself. But, diverging from Kant, Buber affirms that proper perception of them unveils the very being of the other.

But what is the nature of this dialogical perception? And how do we even begin to understand the relationship between sensible stimuli and the transcendental *x*? Buber continues his contemplation of the linden tree with these very questions—and he does so in ways that swerve even further away from Kant:

Which connections correspond in the ontic of *x* to the shapes of this our world? We know nothing about it. But when we gaze (*schauen*) into the life-depths of our perception, we learn (*erfahren*) that here as everywhere shaping (*Gestalten*) is not a making. From each unrepresentable connection in the *x*-world there shoots up to us a multiplicity, just those so-called stimuli; it is as if it disintegrated into these stimuli in order to reach us. But here each multiplicity enters into a shaped unity, my senses work together with it in deep association—and the particular linden stands before me. Indeed, even the rustling and

⁴⁰ Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 158; German: *Werke*, 1:433.

⁴¹ Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 161; German: *Werke*, 1:436. Cf. “The artistic standing over-against, however, itself happens between the being of the artist—not his perception alone, but his being—and the being of the *x*.” *Ibid*.

fragrance is not merely in and on it; it itself (*sie selber*) rustles and smells, and it is it itself (*sie selber*) that I feel when my hand touches its bark. From the wholly unsensible (*unanschaulichen*) connection in *x* that meets me the wholly sensible (*anschauliche*) correspondence has arisen that now stands in its place as a being (*Wesen*) in nature, with its existence (*Dasein*) dependent on me and those like me.

Thus, avoiding any slippage into a naïve realism that would posit a simplistic identity between appearance and being, Buber begins with a theoretical reinforcement of Kant's boundary between sensory perception and metaphysical knowledge—but then penetrates that wall. While we may not be able to explain in rational terms the interplay of visible shapes and the thing in itself, Buber intimates, we behold their correspondence in our shift toward *Schauen*—a cognate of *Anschauung* and yet, for Buber, a mode of sensory receptivity that taps into “the life-depths of our perception.” And, according to Buber, we begin thereby to behold the “wholly *anschauliche* correspondence,” if not the connection, between the tree's appearance and the tree in itself: “the rustling and fragrance is not merely in and on it; it itself (*sie selber*) rustles and smells, and it is it itself (*sie selber*) that I feel when my hand touches its bark.” In this way, Buber suggests that the “unrepresentable (*unvorstellbaren*) connection in the *x*-world” comes nevertheless to meet us, “reach us,” precisely through its sensuous presence, which is truly more than a representation—that is, more than just an image of the other within myself.⁴²

Now, we should not overlook the extent to which Kant himself recognized such a correspondence between appearances and things in themselves. Indeed, Kant concedes,

the word ‘appearance’ must already indicate a relation to something the immediate representation (*Vorstellung*) of which is, to be sure, sensible (*sinnlich*), but which in itself (*an sich selbst*), without this constitution of our sensibility (on which the form of our intuition [*Anschauung*] is grounded), must be something, i.e., an object (*Gegenstand*) independent of sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*).

Now from this arises the concept of a *noumenon*, which, however, is not at all positive and does not signify a determinate cognition (*Erkenntnis*) of any sort of thing,

⁴² See Buber's comment about the “small *x*”: “It exists but not as representable (*vorstellbar*).” Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 157; German: *Werke*, 1:431.

but rather only the thinking of something in general, in which I abstract from all form of sensible intuition (*sinnlichen Anschauung*).⁴³

Like Buber, therefore, Kant recognizes that the very sensible appearance of a thing signals the being of the thing in itself. Also, like Buber, Kant holds that this “something” is beyond any “determinate cognition (Erkenntnis)” that could be conceptualized or reported in any way. However, unlike Buber, Kant insists that the thing in itself is fundamentally noumenal and therefore absolutely independent of any *Sinnlichkeit* or *Anschauung* whatsoever. Again, without necessarily denying Kant’s metaphysical scheme, Buber is evidently more astonished by the act of perception itself, or more precisely, what he sees as the relational act of beholding. Moreover, in this act, Buber refuses to refer to the thing in itself as “an object (*Gegenstand*),” as Kant does, as if the being of the other is yet another specimen for scientific contemplation. And, in that spirit, Buber concludes his meditation on the linden tree as follows:

The truer, the more existentially reliably it [dialogical beholding] takes place, so much the more, in all fields of the senses, is observation (*Betrachtung*) transformed into vision (*Schau*). Vision (*Schau*) is figurating faithfulness to the unknown and does its work in cooperation with it. It is faithfulness not to the appearance (*Erscheinung*), but to being (*Sein*)—to the inaccessible with which we associate.⁴⁴

In *Schauen*, for Buber, when one shifts from objectifying contemplation to dialogical beholding, one perceives no less than the being of the other. Thus, Buber explains immediately thereafter in the next section of the essay, “In human perception, so we may say, something (*etwas*) which was hidden in nature is drawn and lifted out of it,” and “one may call it ‘visibility (*Schaubarkeit*).’”⁴⁵

To be sure, that “something” remains fundamentally other and thus ultimately unknown, but this is true for even the most intimate of relations. Buber characterizes this fact as the

⁴³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 348 (German: A 252).

⁴⁴ Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 157-59; German: *Werke*, 1:432-34.

⁴⁵ Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 159; German: *Werke*, 1:434.

“primordial distance (*Urdistanz*)” between self and other, yet suggests that an awareness of this reality is actually constitutive of genuine dialogue.⁴⁶ The being of the other remains unknown, but Buber affirms that it is beholdable, for perception that has been “deepened to vision (*Schau*)...gives the unsensible (*unanschaulichen*) connections of the *x*-world the entirely present correspondence.”⁴⁷ For Buber, it is precisely the *anschauliche* presence of the other that proclaims intimacy and alterity, all at once. He calls this elsewhere “the bodily (*leibhaften*) fact of otherness.”⁴⁸ The closest contact sensitizes us to primal distance, yet just here we find ourselves in relation to the person’s unknown being. “Intuition,⁴⁹ through vision (*Schau*), binds us as persons with the world which is over against us, binds us to it without being able to make us one with it, through a vision (*Schau*) that cannot be absolute. This vision is a limited one, like all our perceptions... Yet it affords us a glimpse in unspeakable intimacy into hidden depths.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ See Buber’s essay “Urdistanz und Beziehung,” in *MBW*, 10:42-53; English: “Distance and Relation,” *KM*, 59-71.

⁴⁷ Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 159; German: *Werke*, 1:434.

⁴⁸ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 28; German: *DP*, 179. Martin Kavka expresses this matter with extraordinary clarity and sensitivity in his *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, 17: Touching you does not bring me into communion with the elemental nature of the earth, as [Mary] Daly believes. Instead, touching you places me face-to-face with the limits of my understanding, with the fact that I am not yet actual or actualized, a fact that puts all my attempts to commune with you under the necessary risk of failure. To make this relation happen, I must pull away from the relation, be silent and let you speak. At that point, I must wend my way back into the conversation somehow, and I have lost my own way as I began to listen to you.

⁴⁹ Since Buber is discussing the French writings of Bergson in this case, he simply uses the term “intuition” (*Intuition*, אינטואיציה) in both the Hebrew and German versions of this essay. However, it is clear that he is reading Bergson’s “Intuition” in light of his own post-Kantian concept of *Anschauung*.

⁵⁰ Buber, “Bergson’s Concept of Intuition,” *Pointing the Way*, 86; German: *Werke*, 1:1078. Cf. “We live in contact with them, and in this contact we perceive many things about them. But the being that is perceived, that is ‘known (*erkannte*),’ is not identical with the existing being (*dem seienden*), with whom I have contact. It is not identical and cannot become identical with him. That intuition by virtue of which we ‘transpose ourselves into the interior of the other’ may diminish the difference, but it cannot abolish it. The tension between the image of the person whom we have in mind in our contact and the actual existing person is in no way, however, to be understood merely negatively. This tension makes an essential contribution to the proper dynamic of life between man and man...” *Ibid.*, 83; German: 1074-75.

Buber's post-Kantian concept of *Schauen* is one of the most distinctive and illuminating features of his thought. Indeed, whereas Rosenzweig referred to his own dialogical system as the "new thinking (*neue Denken*)," Buber refers to dialogue as "the new vision (*neue Schau*)."⁵¹ And we must emphasize—time and time again, due to the frequency of misunderstandings on this issue—that Buber's *Schauen* is not some vague, disembodied perception. As Buber himself notes, "The person in I-Thou 'beholds (*schaut*)' nothing else than what he sees with his senses."⁵² This is indeed a far cry from Kant's position that "all our intuition (*Anschauung*) is nothing but the representation of appearance."⁵³ In fact, for Buber, *Schauen* is not only an employment of the senses but a heightening of the senses—for it is precisely a shift from the contemplation of intellectual ideas to the perception of palpable presence. Instead of examining something as an object, one enters into an intersubjective relationship with it. As we indicated above, Kant refers to the being of things in themselves, no less than their appearances, as "objects," and Buber seizes upon this as a crucial indication of both the brilliance and limitations of Kant's project. For Buber, Kant's perspective on reality remains within the bounds of objectifying "perception" (*Wahrnehmung*), which may be eminently lucid for analytical endeavors but is utterly insensitive—in all senses of that word. In fact, with a penetrating wordplay, Buber casts *Wahrnehmung* as the epitome of I-It perception: "You perceive (*nimmt...wahr*) it, take it for your 'truth' (*nimmt sie dir zur 'Wahrheit'*); it permits itself to be taken (*nehmen*) by you, but it does not give itself to you."⁵⁴ This almost violent image

⁵¹ See Buber's reference to "the new *Schau* for intellectual fields such as those of sociology, pedagogy, psychology, psychotherapy, and theory of art." Buber, "The History of the Dialogical Principle," *BMM*, 222; German: *DP*, 316. I am grateful to Hans Joas for bringing this fact to my attention.

⁵² "Philosophical and Religious Worldview (*Weltanschauung*)," in *A Believing Humanism*, 134; German: *Nachlese*, 134.

⁵³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 168.

⁵⁴ *IT*, 83; *ID*, 41.

of *Wahrnehmung* as non-consensual “taking” intimates that this form of perception is not actually so perceptive. One does not see the other in her wholeness, independent of oneself, but only in terms of one’s own needs and desires, lusts and repulsions. Thus, whereas “perception (*Wahrnehmung*) draws out of the being the world that we need; only vision (*Schau*)...transcends need and makes the superfluous into the necessary.”⁵⁵

This complex relationship between *Wahrnehmung* and *Schauen* is quite analogous to that between *Körper* and *Leib*. One can readily perceive, evaluate, and use the other’s *Körper* as an object of play or experimentation, or one can enter into relationship with the other as dialogical partner and thereby behold the person *leibhaft*. It is perhaps easier to understand from this perspective that *Schauen*, for Buber, is not essentially or necessarily equivalent to ocular vision. At bottom, rather, it is a full-bodied attentiveness, a posture or *Haltung* vis-à-vis the other. Of course, given that Buber’s primary topic is *dialogue*, wherein the organs of hearing figure so prominently, it is somewhat surprising that he used such a visual term to denote dialogical perception. But this only underscores the subversive post-Kantianism of Buber’s dialogical writings. Kant himself mused in his *Anthropology*:

Even if sight is no more indispensable than hearing, it is still the noblest of the senses. For it is furthest removed from the sense of touch, the most limited condition of perception: it not only has the widest sphere of perception in terms of space, but it is also the sense in which we are least aware of the organ’s being affected (since otherwise it would not be merely sight). So sight comes closest to a *pure intuition* (an immediate representation of the given object, with no admixture of sensation noticeable in it).⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 160; German: *Werke*, 1:435.

⁵⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 35. Emphasis in original. Kant’s assessment of the disparate levels of mediation between vision and touch date back to ancient Greek philosophy. See Richard Kearney, “The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics,” in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, edited by idem and Brian Treanor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 26-27.

Quite provocatively, Buber appropriates the language of “intuition (*Anschauung*)” from Kant to denote a maximally sensuous mode of encounter that encompasses all the sense organs, including touch. Indeed, dialogical perception takes place “with every pore of my body,”⁵⁷ when “a form offers itself to my eye, even when a crude noise strikes my ear,” and it is precisely at such moments of dialogical receptivity that “in all fields of the senses is observation (*Betrachtung*) transformed into vision (*Schau*).”⁵⁸ Moreover, Buber is actually skeptical of eyesight itself for the exact reason that Kant praises it: it is relatively alienated from sensory realia and thus lends itself well to objective reflection. For example, Buber critiques the Greeks for their “hegemony of the visual sense over the other senses” which resulted in an “optical image of the world (*Weltbild*)” in which the world itself was “objectified as only the visual sense is able to objectify, and the experiences of the other senses are as it were retrospectively recorded in this image.”⁵⁹ Vision threatens to freeze the dynamic turbulence of presence into categories and projections. Dialogue demands more. Thus, Buber distinguishes *Schauen* from *Hinstarren*, a word that can mean “staring,” but with the added valence *erstarren*, to ossify, paralyze, set still,

⁵⁷ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 2; German: *DP*, 141.

⁵⁸ Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” *KM*, 159; German: *Werke*, 1:434.

⁵⁹ Buber, “What Is Man?,” *BMM*, 127; German: *Werke*, 1:318. On Buber’s approach to the philosophical problem of *Weltbilder*, see Martina Urban, “The Paradox of Realization: Buber on the Transcendental Boundary of Spatial Images,” in *Martin Buber: His Intellectual and Scholarly Legacy*, ed. Sam Berrin Shonkoff (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 171-193. For Buber’s comparison of Occidental (Greek) “visual” culture versus Oriental (Jewish) “motoric” culture, especially in Buber, “The Spirit of Orient and Judaism,” *OJ*, 57-78. See also below in chapter three.

as well as the adjective *starre*, rigid or stiff.⁶⁰ Dialogical perception is an awakened openness to the irreducible fullness of what is happening—no more and no less, here and now.⁶¹

Here and now, the *Jetzt und Hier*. This is one of Buber's favorite formulations of the where and when of dialogue. And yet how do we reconcile this language with his apparent extrication of the You-world from space and time? Where is "here" and when is "now" if not in space and time? This perplexity brings us to our third general observation about Buber's post-Kantianism, namely his reconceptualization of space, time, and causality in the context of dialogue. Kant promoted "the distinction of all objects in general into phenomena and noumena,"⁶² where the former are perceived through what he regarded as the *a priori* categories of space, time, and causality, and the latter are never cognized at all because they are, in themselves, independent of space, time, and causality. Buber complicates this schema. As we have seen, he accepts the philosophical position that there are noumenal things in themselves beyond human cognition, yet also affirms that that being may be encounterable, if not knowable. Buber accomplishes this maneuver through laying new emphasis on the *relation* between self and other—and, most importantly, the other that is a You is no longer an object. Whereas Kant viewed all things as "objects (*Gegenstände*)" and thus considered them from an objective

⁶⁰ See "Looking away from the world is no help toward God; staring (*hinstarren*) at the world is no help either; but whoever beholds (*schaut*) the world in him stands in his presence." Buber, *I and Thou*, 127; *Ich und Du*, 75. In fact, in an earlier draft of his translation, Ronald Gregor Smith rendered *hinstarren* erroneously here as "harden." Buber corrected him, yet this mistake captures the close connectedness of those terms. See Buber's notes in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 741.I, s.v., Seite 79, Zeile 4. For other examples of Buber's identification of *starre*-cognates with the It-world, see Buber's description of that which has been "changed into It and frozen (*Erstarren*) into a thing among things" (*IT*, 90; *ID*, 50); his comment about one who faces only the "rigid (*starre*) past" without presence (*IT*, 94; *ID*, 55); and his statement, "When a culture is no longer centered in a living and continually renewed relational process, it freezes (*starrt*) into the It-world" (*IT*, 103; *ID*, 66-67).

⁶¹ For a quite different but fascinating analysis of the role that vision and seeing play in Buber's religious aesthetics, see Zachary Braiterman, *The Shape of Revelation: Aesthetics and Modern Jewish Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁶² See the chapter by that title in Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 354-365.

standpoint, Buber draws a new distinction: not between phenomena and noumena (which are all essentially objects, as Kant indicates) but between object and You. And while this new “twofoldness”⁶³ enables Buber to circumvent Kant’s ontological barrier between being and appearance, it also enables him to recast space, time, and causality in a new key. In the context of his dialogical writings, these terms refer less to *a priori* categories of perception than to particular mechanisms of objectification. As a general rule, when Buber refers to time (*Zeit*), space (*Raum*), and causality (*Ursächlichkeit, Kausalität*), he has in mind the cognitive instruments of order and evaluation, the scales of science and philosophy, the metrics that equip us to organize and plan, possess and profess, construct and demolish. These are the analytical prisms through which we regularly refract the world, whether consciously or unconsciously. Buber agrees with Kant that these mediate our perception, but unlike Kant, Buber insists that we have the capacity for an even greater immediacy that is no less sensory.

According to Buber, therefore, the shift from objective cognition to intersubjective relation takes us beyond the scope of Kant’s project without negating it. Indeed, “It was Kant’s pathfinding discovery that in subject-object cognition, hence in philosophical-scientific cognition, we only cognize that which has been formed beforehand in our thought-categories (*Denkkategorien*),” Buber writes.⁶⁴ Moreover, such a contextualization of Kant’s philosophy within the bounds of mere objects does not imply, therefore, that “great systems” such as his are “therefore fictitious: they are announcements of *real* thought-relationships (*Denkbeziehungen*) to beings. But they can only become possible through the re-establishment of object-subject relations.”⁶⁵ And insofar as subject-object cognition requires the thinker to undertake a “looking

⁶³ See the opening lines of *IT*.

⁶⁴ Buber, “Philosophical and Religious World View,” *A Believing Humanism*, 130-31; German: *Nachlese*, 129.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 131; German: 129.

away from his *concrete situation*,” it follows that “*all* scientific and philosophical thinking tears asunder...the wholeness of the concrete person.”⁶⁶ Thus, by means of a backhanded compliment toward Kant, paired with a corralling of Kant’s philosophy within the delineated boundaries of subject-objective relations, Buber casts his own intersubjective thought as a way to shed light on the concrete person and the concrete situation—and we might add: in concrete temporality and concrete spatiality, as opposed to Kant’s mere “thought-categories (*Denkkategorien*)” of objective space and time.⁶⁷

Thus, when Buber notes that “the It-world has coherence in space and time” while “the You-world does not have coherence in space and time,”⁶⁸ this is not a neo-Kantian claim that I-You relations are somehow non-spatial and non-temporal (whatever that would mean, exactly). It is rather a post-Kantian intimation of a different kind of temporality and spatiality—not that of time and space, *per se*, but that of now and here, the hour (*Stunde*) and the over-against (*Gegenüber*), the event and concreteness. Buber has many words that denote this dialogical spatiality and dialogical temporality, but the term that encompasses both dimensions at once, most of all, is *Gegenwart*. *Gegenwart* is one of the most difficult words in Buber’s corpus to translate. Consider, for example the number of valances in this brief passage from *I and Thou*:

The present (*Gegenwart*)—not that which is like a point and merely designates whatever our thoughts may posit as the end of ‘elapsed’ time, the fiction of the fixed lapse, but the real and fulfilled present—exists only insofar as presentness (*Gegenwärtigkeit*), encounter, and relation exist. Only as the You becomes present (*gegenwärtig*) does presence (*Gegenwart*) come into being.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 130, 131; German: 129. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁷ We should note that Buber’s reference to Kant’s “thought-categories (*Denkkategorien*)” and “thought-relationships (*Denkbeziehungen*)” in the passages cited above are additional examples of Buber’s subversive, post-Kantian use of terminology. According to Kant, the *Kategorien* of human perception dictate the nature of our cognitive *Beziehungen* to all things. For Buber, however, Kant was only considering the limited scope of objective cognition and subject-object relations, and thus failed to appreciate that his *Kategorien* and *Beziehungen* were merely *Denkkategorien* and *Denkbeziehungen*.

⁶⁸ *IT*, 84; *ID*, 42. See also a similar repetition in *IT*, 148; *ID*, 119.

⁶⁹ *IT*, 63; German: *ID*, 19.

Within these two sentences, *Gegenwart* and its cognates stand for a temporality that transcends linear time; an event that is evidently homologous with “encounter” and “relation”; and a condition of the You that brings about the emergence of—*Gegenwart*. In this light, we can appreciate why Buber devoted nearly half a page of notes to his translator Ronald Gregor Smith about the challenges of rendering *Gegenwart* into English. Buber suggested to him possibilities such as “present,” “presence,” and “presentness,” highlighted Goethe’s invocation of “God’s presence (*Gegenwart*) in all elements” from the epigraph of *Ich und Du*, and even referred Smith to a dictionary entry that drew an etymological connection between *Gegenwart* and *entgegengewandt*, literally to be “turned towards.”⁷⁰ *Gegenwart* is at once a spatial, temporal, and relational reality that cannot be objectified or quantified in any way. And *Gegenwart* is a convergence of materiality and spirituality, body and soul.⁷¹

⁷⁰ See Arc. Ms. Var. 350 008 741a, s.v., comment #26 regarding Seite 110, Zeile 127 and Seite 113, Zeile 130. In his reference to the dictionary entry, Buber changes Weigand’s “entgegen gewendet” to “entgegengewandt.” See Friedrich Ludwig Karl Weigand, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 1 (Gießen: Verlag von Alfred Töpelmann, 1909), 651. See also Buber’s comments less than two weeks later to Smith about translating the adverb “gegenwärtig”: “gegenwärtiglich ist nicht in the present moment; gemeint ist so etwas wie with sense of presence, with force of presence.” Martin Buber Archives, ARC. Ms. Var. 350 008 741.I, s.v. Seite 40, Zeile 9. For the line about which Buber is commenting, see Smith’s translation of *I and Thou*, 49; German: *ID*, 50. Cf. Kaufmann’s comments about translating this word in Buber, *IT*, 45.

⁷¹ For an example of this latter point, see: “But the severed It of institutions is a golem, and the severed I of feelings is a fluttering soul-bird. Neither knows the human being... Neither knows person or community. Neither knows the present (*Gegenwart*)” (*IT*, 93-94; German: *ID*, 55). On the term *Golem*, Buber commented to Ronald Gregor Smith that this refers to “an animated clod without soul,” and regarding the image of the “soul-bird (*Seelenvogel*),” Buber explained that this refers to the “mythical notion of the soul as a bird.” RGS rendered the term precisely in those words (*I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, 53). Thus, Buber conveys here that *Gegenwart*, much like the genuine wholeness of a human being, is neither body nor soul, but both at once. See in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 741.I, s.v., Seite 44, Zeilen 16 and 17. Cf. Buber’s related characterization of modern society—with all its technological, industrial, and political forms of alienation—as a “golem” (Buber, “What Is Man?”, *BMM*, 158).

According to Buber, the opposite of *Gegenwart* is not past, future, or absence, but *Gegenstand*, object.⁷² As soon as I objectify the present as a configuration of clock hands, then it is no longer the present. As soon as I objectify the presence of someone standing over-against me, then I am no longer in her presence. The slippery passage between I-It and I-You runs directly between presence and object. The objective categories of space and time are, for Buber, corrosive of the spatiality and temporality of presence. Indeed, Buber observes, “as soon as we experience something as *time*, as soon as we become conscious of the dimension of time as such, the memory is already in play; in other words, the pure present knows no specific consciousness of time.”⁷³ However, to suggest therefore that presence is non-temporal would be a gross oversimplification and, moreover, neglectful of explicit points that Buber makes. For example, regarding the emergence of I-It relations in the course of human development, while Buber claims that “only now does he place things in a spatio-temporal-causal context,” he explains in the very next sentence:

The You also appears in space, but only in an exclusive confrontation (*Gegenüber*) in which everything else can only be background from which it emerges, not its boundary and measure. The You appears in time, but in that of an event (*Vorgangs*)⁷⁴ that is fulfilled in itself—an event lived through not as a piece that is a part of a constant and organized sequence but in a ‘duration (*Weile*)’⁷⁵ whose purely intensive dimension can be determined only by starting from the You. It appears simultaneously as acting on and as acted upon, but not as if it had been fitted into a chain of causes; rather as, in its reciprocity with the I, the beginning and end of the occurrence. This is part of the basic

⁷² “For the real boundary, albeit one that floats and fluctuates, runs...between You and It: between presence (*Gegenwart*) and object (*Gegenstand*).” *IT*, 63; German: *ID*, 19. See also Buber’s indication of an indirect correlation between objects and presence: “those who have remained poor in objects (*gegenstandsarm*) and whose life develops in a small sphere of acts that have a strong presence (*gegenwartsstarker*)” (*IT*, 69; German: *ID*, 25).

⁷³ Buber, “What Is Man?”, *BMM*, 141; German: *Werke*, 1:334.

⁷⁴ It is unclear why Kaufmann translates this key term *Vorgang* here as “process.” Ronald Gregor Smith translates it more aptly as “event” in his translation of *I and Thou*, 41.

⁷⁵ Buber comments to Ronald Gregor Smith that this term *Weile* refers to Henri Bergson’s concept of “durée.” See in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 741.I, s.v. Seite 30, Zeile 9. For a contrasting of Buber’s “anthropological conception of time” with Bergson’s “durée,” see Urban, “Paradox of Realization,” in Shonkoff, ed., *Martin Buber*, 179.

truth of the human world: only It can be put in order. Only as things cease to be our You and become our It do they become subject to coordination. The You knows no system of coordinates.⁷⁶

Clearly, Buber's view that the It-world is apprehended in contexts of space, time, and causality does not imply that the You-world happens outside of these dimensions in a literal, objective sense. The You "also appears in space," "appears in time," and "appears simultaneously as acting on and as acted upon," although the dialogical beholder does not interpret them according to such objective categories, does not "place things in a spatio-temporal-causal context (*Zusammenhang*)."

The last word here, *Zusammenhang*, is crucial, as it helps to clarify Buber's much discussed point that "the It-world has coherence (*hat Zusammenhang*) in space and time" and "the You-world does not have coherence (*Zusammenhang*) in space and time."⁷⁷ Kaufmann translates *hat Zusammenhang* as "hangs together," and Smith renders it as "set in the context."⁷⁸ The latter is perhaps a clearer representation of what Buber means. But it is also possible that Buber has in mind Kant's conception of empirical truth, which is based precisely on a determined "coherence (*Zusammenhang*)" between sensory appearances and the necessary rules of logic.⁷⁹ Buber would of course agree that such a rational method of verification is indispensable for human flourishing—and yet that very process requires an intellectual distance that depend on I-It relations. Indeed, Buber points out, while the It-world is "the world in which one has to live and also can live comfortably—and that even offers us all sorts of stimulations

⁷⁶ Buber, *IT*, 81; German: *ID*, 39.

⁷⁷ *IT*, 84; German: *ID*, 42.

⁷⁸ Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Smith, 43.

⁷⁹ See Robert Hanna, "The Trouble with Truth in Kant's Theory of Meaning," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 10.1 (1993): 1-20, especially pp. 10-16. For an additional example of Kant's application of this principle of "coherence," see his definition of "nature (in the empirical sense)" as "the combination (*Zusammenhang*) of appearances as regard their existence, in accordance with necessary rules, i.e., in accordance with laws." Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 320.

and excitements, activities and knowledge,” the You-world has an effect of “loosening the well-tried structure (*Zusammenhang*), leaving behind more doubt than satisfaction, shaking up our security (*Sicherheit*).”⁸⁰ The You-world, where we find ourselves facing the holy yet horrifying insecurity of raw existence, lacks *Zusammenhang* in “space” and “time” insofar as it is not apprehended in those terms—nor can it be, without plunging back into the familiar folds of I-It.⁸¹ “With all deference to the spatio-temporal world continuum (*raumzeitliche Weltkontinuum*),” Buber reflects, “I know as a living truth only the world concreteness (*Weltkonkretum*) that is constantly, in every moment, reached out to me.”⁸² This is not a retreat from the world; it is rather a perspective shift from cosmos to creation.⁸³

It is most defensible for us to conclude at this point that the You-world is *meta*-spatial and *meta*-temporal, as opposed to non-spatial and non-temporal. What this means is that while I-You relations do naturally take place in space and in time, they are not reducible to such categories.⁸⁴ In events of dialogical immediacy, moments transcend measurements: for the

⁸⁰ *IT*, 84; German: *ID*, 43.

⁸¹ In one extremely rare case, Buber does describe presence as “space- and time-less (*raum- und zeitlos*),” but it is noteworthy for our purposes that he does so here while simultaneously emphasizing the very bodily concreteness of the other (in this case, a work of art) during dialogical encounter: “It becomes ‘incarnate (*verkörpert*)’: out of the flood of spaceless and timeless presence it rises to the shore of continued existence.” Buber, *IT*, 66; German: *ID*, 21.

⁸² Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 12; German: *DP*, 156. See also Buber’s comment that dialogue “is completed not in some ‘mystical’ event, but in one that is in the precise sense factual, thoroughly dovetailed into the common human world and the concrete time-sequence (*der konkreten Zeitfolge*)” (*ibid.*, 4; German: 144).

⁸³ “The true name of world concreteness is creation, which is entrusted to me and to every person.” *Ibid.*, 13; German: 157.

⁸⁴ As a comparison, we might consider Buber’s notion of “the metaphysical and metapsychical fact of love” (*IT*, 95; *ID*, 57). In this case, of course, Buber does not imply that love is non-physical or non-psychical! Rather, Buber characterizes love as metaphysical and metapsychical in order to emphasize the relation itself, which both includes and transcends corporeality and emotions. Hence, Buber refers to “the metaphysical and metapsychical fact of love which is merely accompanied by feelings of love” (*IT*, 95; German: *ID*, 57). Interestingly, it seems that Buber came to see the phrase “metaphysical and metapsychical” as too easily misleading for his readers. Indeed, in 1957, he struck those words from a later sentence in *I and Thou*: “What has been said earlier of love is even more clearly true at this point: feelings merely accompany the metaphysical and metapsychical fact of the relationship” (*IT*, 129; see

moment we begin to measure, we translate the unprecedented mysteriousness of presence into universally applicable metrics. To cast a dialogical event as meta-temporal and meta-spatial is, therefore, to honor the irreducibility of what is present, to behold the uniqueness of the one who is over-against me, who is more than any particular exemplar of general rules. If we freeze the flow of Now in pales of space and time—if we note that our contact has lasted three seconds or that we stand twenty inches apart—then the concrete contours of You evaporate instantaneously into ideas and memories. In light of Buber’s remark that “prayer is not in time but time in prayer, the sacrifice not in space but space in the sacrifice,” we might say similarly that encounter is not in time or space but time and space in encounter.⁸⁵

ibid., 129n1). In any case, the message remains the same: Love is metaphysical and metapsychical precisely because it involves physicality and feelings yet is not reducible to those elements. This is precisely how we ought to understand the meta-temporal and meta-spatial nature of dialogical relations in general. Cf. Buber’s comment regarding the “metaphysical” aspect of Kierkegaard’s philosophy: “Metaphysics seizes here the concreteness of the living person with a strength and consistency hitherto unknown in the history of thought” (“What Is Man?,” *BMM*, 162-63; German: *Werke*, 1:359). Cf. Buber’s association of “the metacosmic (*die metakosmische*)” with “the world as a whole in its relation to that which is not world (*der Welt als Ganzem in ihrem Verhältnis zu dem, was nicht Welt ist*)” (*IT*, 149; *ID*, 120). It is also fruitful to compare Buber’s use of the “meta” prefix to that of Rosenzweig in his reflections on metaphysics, metalogic, and metaethics. As Rotenstreich explains, “the notion of *meta* is introduced in order to save the irreducible ontological position and thus the uniqueness of the respective sphere to which it refers (viz., God, world, and man).” Nathan Rotenstreich, “Rosenzweig’s Notion of Metaethics,” in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr (Hanover, MA: University Press of New England, 1988), 71.

⁸⁵ *IT*, 59; German: *ID*, 15. Just as dialogue is meta-spatial and meta-temporal, we may also characterize it as meta-causal. That is to say, although I-You meetings do indeed take place in the world of causality, their course is not simply reducible to those laws. To my knowledge, Buber never says that the You-world is literally untouched by the laws of causality. Rather, he suggests that in moments of dialogical encounter, one is no longer concerned with thinking about causality: “The unlimited reign of causality in the It-world, which is of fundamental importance for the scientific ordering of nature, is not felt to be oppressive by the man (*bedrückt den Menschen nicht*) who is not confined to the It-world but free to step out of it again and again in the world of relation” (*IT*, 100; *ID*, 63); “The man to whom freedom is guaranteed does not feel oppressed by causality (*bedrückt die Ursächlichkeit nicht*)” (*IT*, 101; *ID*, 65); “No, the man who returns into the It-world, carrying the spark [of the You-world], does not feel oppressed by causal necessity (*bedrückt die ursächliche Notwendigkeit nicht*)” (*IT*, 102; *ID*, 65). In other words, the You-world offers a flood of meaning that drowns out the anxiety of causality: “Wise, masterful fate which, as long as it was attuned to the abundance of meaning in the cosmos, reigned over all causality” (*IT*, 103; *ID*, 67). This is a far cry from Katz’s view that causality is simply “operative” in the You-world (Katz, “A Critical Review of Martin Buber’s Epistemology of I-Thou,” 93).

For this very reason, however, the You-world is more immediately sensuous than the It-world. Indeed, while the scientist may seem supremely focused on bodily existence in all of its microscopic detail, even his naked eye misses a certain voluptuousness:

He perceives...things in terms of space (*Raumnetz*) and events in terms of time (*Zeitnetz*), things and events that are circumscribed by other things and events, to be measured and compared—an ordered world, a detached world. This world is somewhat reliable; it has density and duration; its structure lets itself be surveyed (*überschauen*); one can take it out again and again; one reviews it with closed eyes and then checks it with open eyes. There it is—right next to your skin, if you like, or nestled in your soul, if you prefer that: it is your object and remains that, according to your pleasure—and remains primally alien both outside and inside you.⁸⁶

Thus, the It-world may be examined to the heart's content, but it remains somewhat of a thought-construct, a virtual reality. And Buber's word choices here are striking. First, *Raumnetz* and *Zeitnetz* might be interpreted hyper-literally as "space-nets" and "time-nets," suggesting a sort of entrapment or capturing of wild beings. Indeed, in an early draft of his translation of *I and Thou*, Smith went so far as to suggest that these events are "caught in" spatial and temporal coordinates, until Buber requested a subtler translation.⁸⁷ In any case, the phrasing conveys a sense of estrangement from things and events, and this is only amplified by Buber's portrayal of those objects as "primally alien both outside and inside you." In addition, Buber's remark that this objectified world "lets itself be surveyed (*überschauen*)" can also mean quite literally to overlook or ignore—a valence that certainly resonates with the image of studying the world with both closed and open eyes. In short, while I-It escapades may be driven by our most carnal cravings, the very egocentrism of our thirsts may actually numb us to those very delights, as they are located precisely outside of ourselves. In the self-centered It-world, "all his games, arts,

⁸⁶ *IT*, 82-83; German: *ID*, 40-41.

⁸⁷ Smith's final translation was: "things entered in the graph of place, events in that of time" (42). See Buber's comments, addressed to Smith on March 9, 1937, in the Martin Buber Archives, ARC. Ms. Var. 350 008 741a.I, s.v. Seite 31, Zeile 8. Cf. "He is no longer He or She, limited by other Hes and Shes, a dot in the world grid (*Weltnetz*) of space and time" (*IT*, 59; German: *ID*, 15).

intoxications, enthusiasms, and mysteries that happen within him do not touch the world's skin."⁸⁸

On the surface, it would seem that this notion of the sensuousness of the You-world conflicts with Buber's claim that the You is "devoid of qualities," and as soon as "I can again abstract from him the color of his hair, of his speech, of his graciousness," then "he is my You no longer and not yet again."⁸⁹ But let us take a closer look at that passage:

The human being who but now was unique and devoid of qualities (*unbeschaffen*), not at hand (*vorhanden*) but only present, not experienceable, only touchable (*berührbar*), has again become a He or She, an aggregate of qualities (*Summe von Eigenschaften*), a quantum with a shape (*ein figurhaftes Quantum*). Now I can again abstract from him the color of his hair, of his speech, of his graciousness; but as long as I can do that he is my You no longer and not yet again.⁹⁰

I have simply copied Kaufmann's translation above in order to highlight ways in which Buber is commonly misunderstood. We may begin to clarify misconceptions through making a few corrections. First, Kaufmann's translation of *unbeschaffen* as "devoid of qualities" seems to conjure up vague images of a faceless or ghostly You. This is certainly not what Buber means here. *Unbeschaffen* is a coinage that could actually be rendered hyper-literally as "unobtained" (*beschaffen* means to obtain or get), although Buber employs it here to imply that the other has not been reduced to a series of qualities. Smith translates it as "unconditioned,"⁹¹ and this is perhaps the best English can offer. We should also note that Kaufmann renders both *Beschaffen* and *Eigenschaften* in that single sentence according to the same English word, "qualities," which conceals Buber's original nuance. Buber tends to use the term *Eigenschaft* to refer specifically to objectified characteristics that are, as it were, abstracted from the other, as opposed to the actual

⁸⁸ *IT*, 142; German: *ID*, 113.

⁸⁹ *IT*, 69; German: *ID*, 25.

⁹⁰ *IT*, 69; German: *ID*, 25. I have altered Kaufmann's translation according to Buber's original German for reasons discussed below.

⁹¹ *I and Thou*, 31.

“substance” of their wholeness that “confronts us bodily (*leibhaft gegenübertreten*).”⁹² Thus, to see someone as “unconditioned (*unbeschaffen*)” instead of as an “aggregate of characteristics (*Summe von Eigenschaften*)” is actually to behold them with even greater clear-sightedness. Furthermore, Kaufmann’s choice to render *ein figurhaftes Quantum* as “a quantum with a shape” is similarly misleading. Buber does not imply here that the You somehow lacks shape—indeed, he emphasizes its very concrete, “touchable” tangibility. Instead of “with a shape,” we would be better off rendering *figurhafte* simply as “figural,” as Buber intends here to distinguish between the image of the other in thought versus the actual presence of the other.⁹³ Thus, the fact that “I can again abstract from him the color of his hair” only in I-It relations does not imply that I am somehow colorblind during I-You encounters, but rather that I behold the concrete wholeness of the person. Hence, in facing a tree with dialogical attentiveness,

There is nothing that I must not see (*absehen*) in order to see (*sehen*), and there is no knowledge that I must forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and instance, law and number included and inseparably united (*vereinigt*).

Whatever belongs to the tree is included: its form and its mechanics, its colors and its chemistry, its conversation with the elements and its conversation with the stars—all this in its wholeness (*Ganzheit*)... [The tree] bodies forth over against me.⁹⁴

For Buber, what is seen in its wholeness is present; what is perceived as a conglomerate of characteristics is an object. To be sure, we slip time and time again from dialogical beholding to evaluative scanning—“Genuine beholding (*Anschauung*) never lasts long”⁹⁵—but it should be

⁹² See *IT*, 81, 61; German: *ID*, 38-39, 17.

⁹³ I have in mind here also Sarah Hammerschlag’s book *The Figural Jew* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), which explores the concept of the “jew” that is employed in philosophical and political thought, as opposed to the actual Jews who exist historical actuality.

⁹⁴ *IT*, 58; German: *ID*, 14. Cf. “He is no longer... a quality (*Beschaffenheit*) that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named characteristics (*Eigenschaften*)... Even as a melody is not composed (*sich zusammensetzt*) of tones, nor a verse of words, nor a statue of lines—one must pull and tear to turn a unity into a multiplicity—so it is with the human being to whom I say you” (*IT*, 59; German: *ID*, 15).

⁹⁵ *IT*, 68; German: *ID*, 24. Kaufmann renders *Anschauung* here as “contemplation,” but the intellectual connotation of that translation is painfully misleading. In fact, Buber’s point here is precisely that we slip all too easily into reducing the other to an object that is “describable, analyzable, classifiable—the

plainly clear at this point that it is erroneous to consider this as some reversion from incorporeal intuition to bodily sensation. On the contrary, while an It is merely figural, the You “bodies forth over against me (*leibt mir gegenüber*).”⁹⁶

The Case of Eros

In order to further illustrate the bodiliness of the You and abstractness of the It, let us turn to an illuminating case study drawn from Buber’s dialogical writings: the case of erotic encounter.⁹⁷ Here we can see with exceptional vividness how Buber casts I-You relations as more sensuous than I-It encounters, but with a such a high level of nuance that we must read carefully. Indeed, Buber notes that “the erotic is in no way, as might be supposed, purely an intensification and display of dialogue,” for “many celebrated ecstasies of love are nothing but the lover’s delight in the possibilities of his own person.”⁹⁸ However, this is of course not to suggest that erotic contact is inherently incapable of reaching dialogical “intensification,” but rather that it fails to do so when it remains in the narrowness of objectification. In fact, Buber suggests that sexuality can be one of the more difficult realms to actualize dialogue, insofar as there are such strong drives toward personal pleasure and self-satisfaction. Thus, “The kingdom of the lame-winged Eros is a world of mirrors and mirrorings,”⁹⁹ and in that realm of egocentric escapades:

intersection-point (*Schnittpunkt*) for manifold systems of laws” (ibid.). Generally, Kaufmann translates the term *Betrachtung* as contemplation (see, e.g., *IT*, 80), which is indeed correct.

⁹⁶ For additional instances where Buber uses this astonishing verb “leibt,” see *ID*, 19 (English: *IT*, 63); *Die Stunde und die Erkenntnis*, 63 (English: *Israel and the World*, 138).

⁹⁷ Much of the content below is drawn from the section entitled “Eros” in Buber’s essay *Zwiesprache*. See *BMM*, 28-30; German: *DP*, 180-183. This is Buber’s most extensive illustration of the dialogical principle in terms of erotic relations, although he deals with it briefly as well in other places, as we shall see.

⁹⁸ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 4-5; German: *DP*, 144.

⁹⁹ “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 29; German: *DP*, 181.

There a lover stamps around and is in love only with his passion. There one is wearing his differentiated feelings like medal-ribbons. There one is enjoying the adventures of his own fascinating effect. There one is gazing enraptured at the spectacle of his own supposed surrender. There one is collecting arousals. There one is displaying his ‘power.’ There one is preening himself with borrowed vitality. There one is delighting to exist simultaneously as himself and as an idol very unlike himself. There one is warming himself at the blaze of what has fallen to his lot. There one is experimenting. And so on and on—all the manifold mirror-monologists (*Spiegel-Monologen*), in the chamber of the most intimate dialogue!¹⁰⁰

It is crucial for us to note that Buber characterizes such self-centered sexuality as lacking a degree of physical attunement. “For those human beings...who in the passion of erotic fulfillment are so carried away by the miracle of the embrace,” Buber writes, “all knowledge (*Wissen*) of I and You drowns in the feeling of a unity that neither exists nor can exist.”¹⁰¹ And in such cases, the “dynamics of the relation itself,” with all their bursts of personal pleasure, “can get in the way of the relationship-bearers who confront each other immovably,¹⁰² and can block the enraptured from feeling each other.”¹⁰³ In such I-It lunges toward Eros, it is as if there is a veil between lovers, desensitizing them to one another. Indeed, in the whirl of this ecstatic relation, “its members (*Glieder*) seem to fade before it”—a suggestive wordplay that works identically in German and English—and “the I and the You between whom it is established are

¹⁰⁰ “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 29-30; German: *DP*, 182.

¹⁰¹ *IT*, 135; German: *ID*, 104.

¹⁰² German: “...die sich vor deren einander unverrückbar gegenüberstehende Träger stellen.” In comments to Ronald Gregor Smith, Buber elucidated the meaning of the phrase “sich vor...stellen” in this context as “something like: which can put itself in front of its bearers.” Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 741.I, s.v., Seite 87, Zeile 11/10. Kaufmann distorts the meaning of this with his unilateral insertion of the word “although” into the sentence: “the dynamics of the relationship itself...can stand before the two carriers of this relationship, *although* they confront each other immovably (*IT*, 135, emphasis added). For Buber, it is precisely the “immovability” of these lovers that makes them veiled from one another. Although they are physically “gegenüberstehende,” their self-intoxication renders them unresponsive, unreceptive, and thus “immovable/unalterable/unshakable (*unverrückbar*)” vis-à-vis the other.

¹⁰³ German: “und sie dem Gefühl des Verzückten verdecken kann.” Buber commented to Smith: “The meaning is: and cover each of them to the feeling of the enraptured other one.” Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 741.I, s.v., Seite 87, Zeile 9.

forgotten. This is one of the phenomena of the margin, where reality becomes blurred.”¹⁰⁴ Such meetings that supposedly brim with bodily thrill may actually be less vivid than “the central reality of an everyday earth-hour, with a streak of sunshine on a maple twig.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed, Buber notes, “As long as love is ‘blind’—that is, as long as it does not see a *whole* (*ganzes*) being—it does not yet truly stand under the basic word of relation.”¹⁰⁶

The situation is strikingly otherwise in the case of dialogical Eros, where lovers meet one another with utmost intimacy. Here, according to Buber, one beholds the very unity of spirituality and corporeality. Indeed, he rejects outright the Greek distinction between earthly and heavenly Eros: “Neither seems to me to indicate an absolute distinction,” for “the Pandemos (assuming it is a genuine Eros and not a Priapos impudently pretending to be the higher one) needs only to stir his wings to let the primal fire be revealed (*offenbare*) in the games of embodiment (*Spielen der Leiblichkeit*).”¹⁰⁷ Whereas self-absorbed lovers lacked an essential awareness of each other, each one tucked into his or her own ventures, now in dialogue they “know (*erkennen*)” one another—in the biblical sense.¹⁰⁸ Now they are “soaring out, each to the beloved partner, and there, in the over-there that is becoming the over-here, to ‘knowing (*erkennen*).”¹⁰⁹ This dialogical act of “knowing” is a sort of self-transcendence, but precisely

¹⁰⁴ *IT*, 135; German: *IT*, 105.

¹⁰⁵ *IT*, 135-36; German: *ID*, 104-105.

¹⁰⁶ *IT*, 67-68; German: *ID*, 23. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁷ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 28; German: *DP*, 180.

¹⁰⁸ On Buber’s concept of “knowing” in the so-called biblical sense, cf. Buber, *Nachlese*, 128: “Einen anderen Sinn hat das Wort ‘erkennen’ in dem biblischen Satze: ‘Adam *erkannte* sein Weib Eva.’ Hier ist die Beziehung von Wesen zu Wesen gemeint, in her wirkliches *Erkennen von Ich und Du* geschieht, nicht aber von Subjekt zu Objekt. Dieses Erkennen begründet die religiöse Weltanschauung.” Emphasis in original. See also: “it is like Adam’s knowledge when he ‘knew (*erkannte*)’ his wife Eve. What the most learned and ingenious combination of concepts denies, the humble and faithful beholding, grasping, knowing (*Erkennen*) of any situation bestows.” Idem, “With a Monist,” *Pointing the Way*, 27; German: *Ereignisse und Begegnungen* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1917), 39.

¹⁰⁹ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 29; German: *DP*, 181. The original German of this highly idiosyncratic line reads: “. . . auszufliegen, jede zur geliebten Partnerin, und dort, im zum Hüben gewordenen Drüben, zu ‘erkennen.’”

through deepened attunement to otherness, through a shift from flashy inner excitements to fleshly giving and receiving.

Those who are entrusted (*die Getreuen*) to dialogical, strong-winged Eros know (*erkennen*) the beloved being. They experience (*erfahren*) his particular life in plain presence (*Gegenwart*)—not as a thing that is seen and tasted, but from the innervations to his movements, from the “inner” to his “outer.” But by this I mean nothing but the bipolar experience (*bipolare Erfahrung*), and—more than a swinging over and away in a flash (*im Nu*)—a reposing simultaneity. That tilt of the head over there—you sense how the soul summons it on the neck, you sense it not on your neck but on that one over there, the beloved, and yet you yourself are not as it were whisked away, you are here, in the feeling self-being (*im verspürenden Selbersein*), and you receive the tilt of the head, its summoning, as the response to the word of your own silence. You make and experience dialogue in reposing simultaneity. The two who are entrusted to dialogical Eros, who love one another, receive the shared event from the other’s side as well, that is, they receive it from both sides—they feel and thus grasp corporeally for the first time what an event is.¹¹⁰

In such moments of erotic “knowing,” Buber observes, you have heightened awareness of every tilt and titillation of the other. You are not “whisked away, you are here,” feeling, sensing, and being with his pulsing presence.¹¹¹ And while I-It ecstasies with forgotten lovers may leave one soaking in memorable afterglows, it is only I-You Eros that reveals “corporeally (*körperhaft*)...what an event (*Ereignis*) is.” Thus, while fixations on one’s own thrills in sexual encounters “can get in the way” and actually “block the enraptured from feeling each other,” as we saw earlier, there is no such sheath anymore in moments of genuine contact. One who lusts after the “ever repeated triumph with women” faces only a “*Phantom*,” but “when a man loves a woman, so that her life is present (*vergegenwärtigend*) in his own, the You of her eyes allows him to gaze (*schauen*) into a ray of the eternal You.”¹¹² The sheet is lifted. There is no longer just

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ An intriguing dimension of this passage, which is far more conspicuous in German than in English translation, is the fact that Buber addresses an anonymous “you” here about erotic contact with a male partner. In the previous paragraph, however, where Buber describes “soaring out...to the beloved partner (*Partnerin*),” the genders are reversed. Thus, Buber seems to emphasize grammatically that the dialogical dynamics of erotic reciprocity apply equally to both partners, regardless of their genders.

¹¹² *IT*, 154; German: *ID*, 125.

a mirage of the other on the horizon of one's inner deserts; there is the tender immediacy of You, which, according to Buber, is itself also the immediacy of divine presence, illuminating the face of the moment itself. There is only "the indwelling of the Present Being (*Einwohnung des Seienden*) between them."¹¹³

Dialogical Monism

Those spiritual and even theological embers that glow in moments of dialogical Eros beckon us to clarify an additional aspect of Buber's ontology. conception of relations between body and soul, God and world, spirituality and materiality. We have seen how Buber's post-Kantian philosophy of dialogue sought to (1) circumvent the transcendental boundary between appearance and being, (2) outline a mode of beholding through which one enters into a sensory relation with the thing in itself, and (3) affirm that while being is not apprehended in terms of space and time, it is nonetheless spatial and temporal. These aspects of Buber's thought helped us to understand in philosophical terms—if not always conventional philosophical argumentation—how dialogical encounters are indeed as bodily as Buber suggests that they are. Turning now to questions of monism versus dualism will help us to build upon this understanding.

It is well known that Buber's thought underwent a significant transformation "from mysticism to dialogue" in his late thirties,¹¹⁴ and it is helpful for our purposes to contrast the different perspectives on material reality that he held in these phases. As a young man, Buber

¹¹³ Buber, "Dialogue," *BMM*, 30; German: *DP*, 183. It is likely that Buber has in mind the Talmudic source: "Rabbi Akiba expounded: When a man and woman are worthy, the Indwelling (שכינה) is between them; when they are not worthy, fire consumes them." Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 17a. Cf. Buber, "Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement," *OMH*, 125-126.

¹¹⁴ The preeminent scholarship on this shift remains Paul Mendes-Flohr's *From Mysticism to Dialogue*.

was a significant contributor to the mystical discourse of German New Romanticism, and like many of his contemporaries, Buber celebrated the spiritual potency and truth-value of “inner experience” (*Erlebnis*). In such moments of mystical illumination, the person perceives that materiality—that is, the dualistic or “individuated” world—is in fact only the husk of a deeper reality where boundaries between “I” and world, self and other dissolve in absolute oneness. Although these mystical experiences might be quickened through walks in the woods, contemplation of nature, or other intoxicating immersions in bodily activity, the physical world of the senses was ultimately no more than a gateway to transcendent truth. As Buber himself phrased it, the “human being who trudges along day by day in the functions of bodiliness and unfreedom receives in ecstasy a revelation of freedom.”¹¹⁵ At the end of the day, for Buber, mystical ec-stasy was, as it were, an out-of-body experience. And yet, Buber did not go so far as to suggest that corporeality was ontologically separate from spiritual reality. Rather, he maintained that everything is one. In this respect, Buber embraced a sort of *substance monism*, according to which every aspect of individuated existence is essentially the same vital unity.¹¹⁶ Mendes-Flohr has suggested that this substance monism of Buber and the Neue Gemeinschaft reflected the influence of Nietzsche’s so-called *dialectical monism*, where the “will to power” operates as a force at the very heart of existence, in all its biological and psychological diversities.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 3.

¹¹⁶ See Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue*, 56. Years after Buber’s so-called dialogical turn, Rosenzweig characterized his earlier mystical thought—particularly as reflected in his dissertation on Nicholas of Cusa and Jacob Böhme—as “pantheistic monism.” See Franz Rosenzweig, “Aus Bubers Dissertation,” in Wilhelm Michel, Franz Rosenzweig, and Ludwig Strauß, eds., *Aus Unbekannten Schriften. Festgabe für Martin Buber zum 50. Geburtstag* (Berlin: Lambert Schneider, 1928), 244; cf. Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue*, 154n94.

¹¹⁷ Walter Kaufmann was the one to characterize Nietzsche’s thought as one of dialectical monism. See Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 235–46. Kaufmann describes Nietzsche’s concept of will to power as dialectically monistic in order to capture Nietzsche’s stance that all the basic tensions in existence, such as reason and passion, are essentially different “manifestations of one basic force” (235). The will to power is thus “a single

Buber's shift from mysticism to dialogue in the wake of World War One can be seen, in part, as a new perspective on the body. Now, for Buber, moments of illumination are no longer associated with ecstatic transcendence but with embodied presence. However, the epistemological and metaphysical underpinnings of this new view undergo a transformation as well, and we may characterize his new view as one of *dialogical monism*. In contrast to substance monism, which identified the foundational substance of all reality in quite definitive terms, dialogical monism is not so much an ontological claim as a phenomenological description. According to Buber, any objective statement about the core composition of existence, regardless of whether it is rooted in materialism or mysticism, is an I-It expression, as long as it is made from a general standpoint of detached reflection. The antithesis of such a position—that is, the I-You approach to the question of monism versus dualism—is thus not simply an alternate argument, but rather a dissolution of that very discourse in the dynamic solvent of dialogical life. For example, regarding the relationship between God and world:

“World here, God there”—that is It-talk; and “God in the world”—that, too, is It-talk; but leaving out nothing, leaving nothing behind, to grasp (*begreifen*) all—all the world—in the You, giving the world its due and truth, to apprehend (*fassen*) nothing besides God but also everything in him, that is the perfect relation.¹¹⁸

Thus, for Buber, the opposed doctrines of divine transcendence and pantheistic immanence both remain in the realm of I-It objectification, and the only true way out of those narrow straits is dialogical relation, which involves a letting go of abstract speculation. Similarly, with regard to the relationship between body and soul, Buber cites the Buddha's praiseworthy approach:

“When, O monk, the opinion prevails that soul and body (*Körper*) are identical, there is no salvation; when O monk, the opinion prevails that the soul is one and the body another, then also there is no salvation.” In the beheld (*geschauten*) mystery, as in lived reality, neither “thus it is” nor “thus it is not” prevails, neither being nor not-being, but

basic force whose very essence it is to manifest itself in diverse ways and to create multiplicity—not *ex nihilo*, but out of itself” (239).

¹¹⁸ Buber, *IT*, 127; German: *ID*, 95.

rather thus-and-otherwise, being-and-not-being, the indissoluble.¹¹⁹ To stand over-against (*gegenüberstehen*) the undivided mystery undivided, that is the primal condition of salvation. That the Buddha belongs to those who recognized (*erkannt*) this, is certain. Like all true teachers, he wishes to teach not an opinion but the way.¹²⁰

The Buddha, according to Buber, grasped that any propositional content whatsoever is inevitably fragmentary compared to wakeful moments of beholding and knowing over-against the unspeakable presence of lived reality. And this is so, Buber explains, precisely because one needs to confront “the undivided mystery undivided,” to face wholeness wholly. Thus, Buber affirms an alternate epistemology, one that goes beyond objectifications of the world toward a meeting with the world.¹²¹

Of course, from an objective standpoint, some claims and conclusions are more defensible than others, and Buber never denies this crucial fact. As we saw earlier, for example, Buber never wages any strictly philosophical refutation of Kant’s bifurcation of things into being and appearance. However, when it comes to the lived reality of dialogical existence, which Buber locates as the site and source of theological meaning, all such abstract ruminations dissipate before the supreme gravity of the event, which is thoroughly concrete that dichotomies

¹¹⁹ Cf. the well-known Talmudic teaching in Eruvin 13b: “These and those are the words of the living God.”

¹²⁰ *IT*, 138-39; German: *ID*, 108-09.

¹²¹ Interestingly, this is precisely Buber’s argument in his 1914 essay “With a Monist.” In this fictional exchange between Buber (presumably) and a monist, Buber pitches himself as a “rationalist” who is simply unable—precisely because of his commitment to rational inquiry—to deny the validity of an epistemological domain beyond detached objectivity. Buber insists in that essay: “What the most learned and ingenious combination of concepts (*Begriffen*) denies, the humble and faithful beholding (*Erschauen*), grasping (*Erfassen*), knowing (*Erkennen*) of any situation bestows. The world is not comprehensible (*begreifbar*), but it is embraceable (*umschlingbar*): through the embracing of one of its beings. Each thing and being has a twofold nature: the passive, absorbable, usable, dissectible, comparable, combinable, rationalizable, and the other, the active, non-absorbable, unusable, undissectible, incomparable, noncombinable, nonrationalizable. This is the stepping-over-against (*Gegenübertretende*), the shaping, the bestowing in things.” Buber, “With a Monist,” *Pointing the Way*, 27; German: *Ereignisse und Begegnungen*, 29. We can see how Buber was already starting to shift at this point to shift toward his dialogical monism, which differs both methodologically and epistemologically from the traditional substance monism (exemplified here by the so-called “monist”).

such as body and soul, materiality and spirituality, appearance and being simply cease to be meaningful. Again, this is not necessarily an ontological claim, but a phenomenological description. Hence, we may designate this as Buber's dialogical monism—a monism that is rooted more in relation than speculation, more in intersubjectivity than objectivity.¹²²

It is in this light that we may further our understanding of *Leiblichkeit* in Buber's dialogical thought. According to Buber's sensibilities, we can debate the relation between *Körper* and soul until the end of time, but this would not even begin to approach the lived *Leib*, where one beholds the wholly untheoretical wholeness of body and soul. Indeed, this is one of Buber's most severe critiques of philosophy: Although he identifies as a philosopher himself, he sees most other philosophers as neglecting the bodily wholeness of the human being, no matter how "concrete" they purport to be. Regarding Descartes, for example, Buber protests that "the I in the Cartesian *ego cogito* is not the living, body-soul (*leibseelische*) person whose embodiment (*Leibhaftigkeit*) had just been disregarded by Descartes as being a matter of doubt."¹²³ While Descartes may have regarded his method of philosophical reflection as rooted in his concrete

¹²² It should be noted, however, that there are certainly occasions where Buber does suggest in more declarative terms that the human being is, ontologically speaking, a body-soul unity. For example: "Is man really composed of soul and body? Does man really feel himself consisting of two kinds of things. Not *I!* Naturally two aspects exist, I perceive myself by my senses as well as from within me without my senses. But these are only two ways of seeing oneself. Are they really two kinds of things? From where does this division arise?... [N]owhere...do we find a legitimization of the division" (Buber, "On the Psychologizing of the World," *A Believing Humanism*, 146; German: *Nachlese*, 149-150). "The assumption that the unconscious is either body or soul is unfounded. The unconscious is a state out of which these two phenomena have not yet evolved and in which the two cannot be at all distinguished from each other" (Buber, "On the Psychologizing of the World," 155-156). "Man is not a centaur, he is man through and through" (Buber, "What Is Man?," *BMM*, 160; German: *Werke*, 1:355-356). One could certainly argue that Buber posits a substance monism, but since he hardly ever pursues such an endeavor systematically, I have restrained myself from proceeding in this direction for this project. In some of my earlier publications, I have indeed made such claims.

¹²³ Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999), 39. Cf. Buber's allusion to Descartes more than a decade earlier, in the context of so-called "primitive" peoples, whom Buber regards as exceptionally attuned to bodily immediacy: "And even in the primitive function of cognition one cannot find any *cognosco ergo sum* of even the most naïve kind" (*IT*, 73).

situation, Buber rejects this: “In the end, it identifies the person, this living body-soul (*leibseelische*) person, with that ‘I,’ that is, with the abstract and abstractly-produced subject of consciousness.”¹²⁴ Such intellectual detachment before bodily existence has been especially concerning, according to Buber, in the field of philosophical anthropology, where thinkers have failed repeatedly because they were “separated from connection with the whole bodily (*leibhaften*) person.” In order to shed genuine light on such investigations, Buber insists, “the philosophical anthropologist must stake nothing less than his bodily (*leibhafte*) wholeness, his concrete self.”¹²⁵ And yet even Heidegger, who prided himself in his efforts to focus attention on the most basic structures of human existence, failed in precisely this way. Ultimately, for Buber, Heidegger’s investigations of *Dasein* proved to be excessively concerned with disembodied, *existential* Being, at the expense of attention toward ontic, *existentielle* beings themselves. In this respect, Heidegger’s project was fundamentally flawed, at least from a philosophical-anthropological standpoint:

Contemplation (*Betrachtung*) of existence (*Daseins*) or self-being as such yields only the concept and outline of an almost ghostly spiritual being, that possesses, indeed, bodily (*leibliche*) contents of its basic sensations, its dread of the universe, its anxiety about existence, its feeling of primal guilt, yet possesses even these in a wholly unbodily (*unleibliche*) way, estranged from all that is bodily (*Leiblichen*).¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 39-40.

¹²⁵ Buber, “What Is Man?”, *BMM*, 124; German: *Werke*, 1:316. In both of these cases, Friedman translates *leibhafte* as “real,” which is not only imprecise but also contributes to the general neglect of Buber’s language of embodiment.

¹²⁶ Buber, “What Is Man?”, *BMM*, 180; German: *Werke*, 1:379. In light of Buber’s protest that Heidegger produced no more than a “ghostly” portrait of *Dasein*, we might note also Buber’s remarks comparison of “the I that has been robbed of its actuality” to “a ghost (*Gespentst*),” as well as his characterization of I-It relations as “ghostly (*gespentische*)” (*IT*, 108, 75; *ID*, 71, 32). Given this motif in Buber’s dialogical writings, it is especially striking to see Katz’s complains about Buber’s “ghostlike *I*’s and *Thou*’s” and Buber’s reduction of human existence “to a ghostlike image of its true, more complex self” (Katz, “A Critical Review of Martin Buber’s Epistemology of *I-Thou*,” 103; idem, *Historicism, the Holocaust, and Zionism*, 31)!

The fact that Heidegger reflected upon everyday phenomena does not mean that he beheld them in their bodily actuality.¹²⁷ In Buber's view, Heidegger failed no less than Descartes—or Kant for that matter—to study life itself, for each of these philosophers maintained dichotomies that subordinated concrete happenings to abstract concepts.

We see now more clearly what is at stake in Buber's dialogical monism. When the philosopher bifurcates people into body and soul or otherwise mines them for some treasured transcendence, he inflicts a certain high-brow violence, for the human being who is dissected in such ways is thereby objectified and overlooked.¹²⁸ However, from within these very critiques of philosophy emerges Buber's vision for an alternate mode of philosophical inquiry—one that takes into account the undivided wholeness of the human, one that is “earnest in the desire to ask its questions on the basis of human existence, situation and presence (*Gegenwart*).”¹²⁹ And it begins with how philosophers themselves engage with one another:

If we are serious about thinking between I and Thou then it is not enough to cast our thoughts towards the other subject of thought framed by thought. We should also, with the thinking, precisely with the thinking, live towards the other man, who is not framed by thought, but bodily present (*leibhaft vorhanden*) before us; we should live towards his concreteness. We should live not towards another thinker of whom we wish to know nothing beyond his thinking but, even if the other is a thinker, towards his bodiliness beyond thinking (*sein leibhaftes Nichtdenken*).¹³⁰

Thus, the type of philosophy that Buber envisions is one that recognizes the intellectual-bodily wholeness of people. And while he does seem to sense that such an approach will lead

¹²⁷ For a far more extensive and incisive study of Buber's critique of Heidegger, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger in Dialogue,” *The Journal of Religion* 94.1 (2014): 2-25.

¹²⁸ For Buber, this applies equally to objectifications of non-human entities. See, for example, his claim that if we bifurcate reality into various elements—if, for example, “Out of life with nature we... take the ‘physical’ world, that of consistency; out of life with men, the ‘psychical’ world, that of affectability’ out of life with spiritual beings, the ‘noetic’ world, that of validity”—then as a result of our abstractions, those very real entities “have been deprived of their transparency and thus of sense (*Sinn*).” *IT*, 150; German: *ID*, 121.

¹²⁹ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 27; German: *DP*, 179.

¹³⁰ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 27-28; German: *DP*, 179-80

philosophers away from certain perspectives, it is crucial to emphasize that his ultimate concern is not for intellectual communities to adopt particular solutions to problems in, say, metaphysics or philosophy, but rather for them to adopt particular approaches that are dialogically sound. That is, he is concerned that “the action of thinking bear, include, and refer to the presence of the living person facing us (*die Gegenwart des Gegenüberlebenden*).”¹³¹

And yet, there is only so far that Buber feels he can go to defend the dialogical potency of philosophy. Although he does affirm a sort of “knowing thought (*erkennende Denken*)” that exhibits “elements of dialogue,”¹³² there are simply limits to how bodily attuned one can be in the midst of such cerebral processes. “In a great act of philosophizing,” Buber writes, “even the finger-tips think—but they no longer feel.”¹³³ One’s moments of embodied sensitivity to oneself and others can fruitfully inform one’s thinking, but the act of conceptualization and articulation itself requires a certain inward turn and a dimming of distractions. Thus, “Philosophizing and philosophy...begin ever anew with one’s definitely looking away (*absieht*) from his concrete situation, hence with the primary act of abstraction.”¹³⁴ In order to speak intelligibly about

¹³¹ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 27-28; German: *DP*, 179-80.

¹³² “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 26; German: *DP*, 177. Smith’s translation of *erkennende Denken* as “cognitive thought” overlooks the significance of dialogical *Erkennen* in Buber’s thought, as we saw above in Buber’s reflections on erotic “knowing.”

¹³³ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 44. Cf. Rosenzweig’s characterization of philosophy’s alienation from the body, on the very first page of his magnum opus: “But philosophy refutes these earthly fears. It breaks free above the grave that opens up under our feet before each step. It abandons the body to the power of the abyss, but above it the free soul floats off in the wind. That the fear of death knows nothing of such a separation in body and soul, that it yells I, I, I and wants to hear nothing about a deflection of the fear onto a mere ‘body’—matters little to philosophy.” Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 9; German: *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988), 3.

¹³⁴ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 38; German: *Werke*, 1:531. See also Buber’s reference in the same essay to “that concrete reality from which the philosophizing man does and must look away (*absieht und absehen muß*)” (*ibid.*, 38-39; German: *Werke*, 1:532). Cf. “The man who knows in the subject-object relation, hence before all the philosophical man, begins therefore by looking away (*abzusehen*) from his *concrete situation*” (Buber, “Philosophical and Religious World View,” *A Believing Humanism*, 130; German: *Nachlese*, 129, emphasis in original). With regard to Buber’s portrayal of philosophy as “looking away,” see also his similar characterization of gnostic Kabbalah as “metaphysical looking away (*Absehn*)”

reality, one must shift from the particular to the general, and regard individuals and events as data for rational reflection. And while this can be an eminently worthy process, it is, in itself, an I-It endeavor. In fact, Buber suggests, “I-It finds its highest concentration and illumination in philosophical knowledge.”¹³⁵ Obviously, for Buber, one can philosophize about I-You relations, as he did voluminously, but when those times when ideas and writings flow will differ from those moments when one embodies that which is described. This process demands a sort of bifocal vision, a fluctuation between event and reflection, illumination and illuminating. Ultimately, however, philosophy itself cannot be the primary engine, for it keeps one’s consciousness anchored to subject-object relations. Indeed, Buber cautions, “The passage from Him to Thou is not ‘dangerous’ for philosophy, it is impossible.”¹³⁶

Embodied Theology

(*OMH*, 97; German: *MBW*, 17:133). In fact, Buber’s oppositions of mysticism versus religion and philosophy versus religion are strikingly similar. See *OMH*, 67-68; German: *MBW*, 17: 279-80.

¹³⁵ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 44.

¹³⁶ Buber, “Interrogation of Martin Buber,” in Rome and Rome, eds., *Philosophical Interrogations*, 49. Buber’s critique of philosophy’s inattention to embodiment may draw from Nietzsche’s own critiques of philosophers. Indeed, according to Nietzsche, “every predominantly aesthetic or religious craving for some Apart, Beyond, Outside, Above permits the question whether it was not sickness that inspired the philosopher...and often I have asked myself whether, taking a large view, philosophy has not been merely an interpretation of the body and a *misunderstanding of the body*.” And yet, Nietzsche envisions a different kind of philosophy: “We philosophers are not free to divide body from soul as people do; we are even less free to divide soul from spirit.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 34-35, emphasis in original. See also Nietzsche’s Zarathustra’s declaration: “Body am I through and through, and nothing besides, and soul is merely a word for something about the body. The body is a great reason.... There is more reason in your body than in your finest wisdom.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Graham Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 30. Buber translated this very part of *Zarathustra* into Polish when he was just seventeen years-old, and while he would later diverge from Nietzsche’s philosophy in various respects, he clearly remained sympathetic to Nietzsche’s concerns. See Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Zarathustra as a Prophet of Jewish Renewal: Nietzsche and the Young Martin Buber,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 57.1 (2001): 103-111.

Buber's portrayal of the limits of philosophy—in a word, its inability to turn “from Him to Thou”—carves out an expansive space for alternate modes of consciousness, and this is precisely where Buber locates religious cognition, which is itself coterminous with dialogical encounter. Indeed, Buber intimates that this capacity to clear the mind is philosophy's supreme function vis-à-vis religion. When “the hour of the philosopher” comes and brings “the negation of all metaphysical ideas about God,” this is like a forest fire that blazes through and allows for new growth. “This critical ‘atheism’ (*Atheoi* is the name which the Greeks gave to those who denied the traditional gods)...is the prayer of the philosopher to the again unknown God. It is well suited to arouse religious men and to impel them to a new meeting. On their way they destroy the images which manifestly no longer do justice to God.”¹³⁷ And what emerges following the dust clouds of fallen idols is—a renewed beholding of existence. Buber refuses to identify religious consciousness with any noetic content whatsoever, for that would only revert it to subject-object cognition.¹³⁸

The religiosity for which philosophy may (or may not) help to empty the mind is an entirely different way of knowing. Whereas “Philosophizing and philosophy...begin ever anew with one's definitely looking away (*absieht*) from his concrete situation,”¹³⁹ Buber asserts that “religious expression is bound to the concrete situation.”¹⁴⁰ If philosophy is a “third-person”

¹³⁷ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 46. On the significance of this statement in relation to Buber's concept of theological images, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophysis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 28.

¹³⁸ “Philosophy errs in thinking of religion as founded in a noetic act, even if an inadequate one, and in therefore regarding the essence of religion as the knowledge of an object which is indifferent to being known... Religion, on the other hand, insofar as it speaks of knowledge at all, does not understand it as a noetic relation of a thinking subject to a neutral object of thought, but rather as mutual contact, as the genuinely reciprocal meeting in the fullness of life between active one active existence and another.” Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 32-33.

¹³⁹ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 38.

¹⁴⁰ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 37.

discourse about what is generally, religion is a “second-person” relation with what is presently. And not only do religion and philosophy represent different epistemologies, they have divergent aims. Whereas philosophy pursues objective knowledge (*Erkenntnis*), religion seeks intersubjective knowing (*Erkennen*). Thus, regarding moments of theological illumination, Buber writes, “we have ‘known (*erkannt*)’ it, but we have no knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) of it that might diminish or extenuate its mysteriousness. We have come close to God, but no closer to an unriddling, unveiling of being.”¹⁴¹ Buber uses a variety of terms, in addition to *Erkenntnis* and *Erkennen*, to denote the epistemological abyss between objectifying knowledge and dialogical knowing. We might consider, for example, his contrasting of the Greek and Hebrew words for wisdom, *sophia* and *hokhmah*, where the former “specifies a closed realm of thought, knowledge for its own sake,” whereas the latter involves “immediate deed-knowledge (*Tatwissen*)” and thus rejects the Greek “delimitation of an independent spiritual sphere, governed by its own laws, as the misconstruction of meaning (*Sinns*), the violation of coherence, the severance of thought from reality.”¹⁴² Another example of such an epistemological opposition in Buber’s writings is that between the Greek-Christian and Hebrew-Jewish terms for faith, *pistis* and *emunah*, where the former denotes doctrinal “belief that” something is, was or will be, whereas the latter refers to dialogical “trust in” someone or something over-against the person.¹⁴³ Regardless of which

¹⁴¹ *IT*, 159-60; German: *ID*, 131. For additional examples of Buber’s distinction between *Erkenntnis* and *Erkennen*, see Buber, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz,” 363; idem, *Ereignisse und Begegnungen* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1917), 28; idem, *Ich und Du*, 107; idem, *Nachlese*, 128; idem, *Die Chassidischen Bücher* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1927), 665. See also our discussion of Buber’s concept of knowing (*Erkennen*) “in the biblical sense” above in this chapter’s section on dialogical Eros.

¹⁴² Buber, “Teaching and Deed,” *Israel and the World*, 140; German: “Die Lehre und die Tat,” *Die Stunde und die Erkenntnis*, 65-66.

¹⁴³ It is worth noting that there was already a strong precedent, well over a century prior to Buber, for rendering the Hebrew אמונה into German as “trust (*Vertrauen*).” See Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum* (Berlin: Welt-Verlag, 1919), 81: “Ja, das Wort in der Grundsprache, das man durch Glauben zu übersetzen pflegt, heißt an den mehrsten Stellen eigentlich Vertrauen, Zuversicht, getroste Versicherung auf Zusage und Verheißung.” For Buber’s most extensive

terms he used, Buber remained consistently resistant against any identification of religious cognition with any content whatsoever, be it knowledge, doctrine, or some other informational material. Indeed, Buber sees the very notion of “faith-content (*Glaubensinhalts*)” as antithetical to the religious “situation.”¹⁴⁴ And he holds this position because when we enter the realm of information, we transgress the boundary between relational encounter and descriptive accounting—“we transgress against it, against that which has being, if we say: ‘I believe that he is.’”¹⁴⁵ With respect to attempts to speak about that which God is or does, Buber could hardly express the matter more clearly or concisely than this: “There never has been nor can be any such talk that is not erroneous.”¹⁴⁶

Given such sensibilities, it is understandable why Buber denied until his dying day that he was a theologian.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, according to Buber, *Theologie* is by definition a “conceptual (*begriffliche*) explication” of religion.¹⁴⁸ Thus, “theology” is understood here precisely as philosophical theology, doctrinal theology, or some combination thereof—in any case, something quite different than the mode of theological awareness that Buber has in mind.¹⁴⁹ And

discussion of this dichotomy, see his book *Two Types of Faith* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003). For an intriguing study of Buber’s juxtaposition of *pistis* and *emunah* in terms of Buber’s theopolitical perspectives, see Christoph Schmidt, “Beyond the Law and Without the Cross: Martin Buber and Saint Paul as an Apostolic Competition between ‘Two Types of Faith,’ in Shonkoff, ed., *Martin Buber*, 66-77.

¹⁴⁴ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 8; German: *DP*, 149.

¹⁴⁵ *IT*, 161; German: *ID*, 132-33.

¹⁴⁶ *IT* 124; German: *ID* 91.

¹⁴⁷ See Martin Buber, “Replies to My Critics,” in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, edited by P.A. Schilpp and M. Friedman (LaSalle: Open Court, 1967), 690.

¹⁴⁸ Buber, “What Is Man?,” *BMM*, 122; German: *Werke*, 1:313.

¹⁴⁹ We should note, however, that there are rare instances where Buber portrays the role of “theologian” in a somewhat more positive light—at least when considered in juxtaposition with philosophers. For example, when contrasting the approach to the problem of the human being in Thomas Aquinas versus other philosophers who operated with excessive intellectual abstraction, Buber notes that Aquinas “was a theologian (*Theolog*), and therefore in duty bound to know about the real man who says ‘I’ and is addressed as ‘Thou.’” Buber, “What Is Man?,” *BMM*, 129; German: *Werke*, 1:320. Nevertheless, such comments are very sparse in Buber’s writings, and “theologian” remains a generally pejorative term for him.

yet, he does note that his distinction between philosophical and religious worldviews may also be understood in terms of his friend Franz Rosenzweig's dichotomy of philosophy and "theology."¹⁵⁰ Moreover, we simply cannot ignore Buber's frequent intimations that *something* is expressed, communicated, and bestowed in moments of dialogical encounter. To be sure, it is no content, information, or belief that could be verbalized or crystallized in any way, but it is indeed—"something (*etwas*), which I cannot grasp in any objective (*gegenständlich*) way at all, that 'says something (*etwas sagt*)' to me."¹⁵¹ We might assert that Buber's theological "something" is drawing upon Kant's language of "**something** (*Etwas*), as the object of sensible intuition," the "something (*Etwas*) = *X*,"¹⁵² and that might very well be correct—but, for Buber, such analysis would divert our attention entirely away from the non-object something. Indeed, shedding light on "real faith (*wirkliche Glaube*)," Buber writes,

What happens to me says something (*etwas*) to me, but what it says to me cannot be disclosed by any esoteric information; for it has never been said before nor is it composed of sounds that have ever been said. It is neither interpretable nor translatable, I can have it neither clarified nor explained; it is not a *what* (*ein Was*) at all, it is said into my very life; it is no experience that can be remembered independently of the situation, it remains the address (*Anrede*) of that moment and cannot be isolated (*unisolierbar*).¹⁵³

Upon receiving the something that is said, there is no actual "what" to wonder about. In fact, it is not even possible to ask "who speaks?" without being expelled immediately from the encounter.¹⁵⁴ "I cannot depict or denote or describe the person in whom, through whom,

¹⁵⁰ See Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999), 45. Cf. Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, 114–18.

¹⁵¹ Buber, "Dialogue," *BMM*, 9; German: *DP*, 151.

¹⁵² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 348. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵³ Buber, "Dialogue," *BMM*, 12; German: *DP*, 155.

¹⁵⁴ See Buber, "Dialogue," *BMM*, 14-15; German: *DP*, 159-60. Cf. his related comment in *Ich und Du*: "In the language of the Bible: 'Those who wait for God will receive strength in exchange.' In the language of Nietzsche who is still faithful (*treu*) to actuality in his report: 'One accepts (*nimmt*), one does not ask who gives.'" *IT*, 158; German: *ID*, 129-30. Buber's biblical citation is to Isaiah 40:31. He translates the verse similarly in the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible.

something has been said to me; were I to attempt it, the being-said (*Gesagtsein*) would be over.”¹⁵⁵ And yet, we must note once again: theological expression is happening in these earthly events. “They leave no content that could be preserved, but their force enters into the creation and into man’s knowledge (*Erkenntnis*).”¹⁵⁶

Evidently, Buber thought it was possible to gain some insight into God, even if that insight remained irreducible to systems or principles.¹⁵⁷ If we simply take him at his word that he does not do theology, then we may miss this crucial nuance in his religious thought. However, if we expand our own definition of “theology” to include any mode of human expression that conveys somehow something about divine reality—whether in the medium of language, image, sound, gesture, or just presence—then we may rightly inquire: What kind of theology does Buber undertake and envision? How, for Buber, is religious truth expressed and cognized? The term “theology,” for lack of a better word, helps us ask this question about his thought. As Adorno classed Buber among the “anti-intellectual intellectuals,”¹⁵⁸ we might consider him as a sort of anti-theology theologian.¹⁵⁹ However, it would be more precise to classify Buber as one who

¹⁵⁵ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 10; German: *DP*, 152.

¹⁵⁶ *IT*, 82; German: *ID*, 40.

¹⁵⁷ I use the term “insight” here with the German *Einsicht* in mind, which Buber uses to denote situational and even sensuous awareness, as opposed to abstract or intellectual knowledge. For example, see “Gegen all mantische Historiosophie, gegen alles Bescheidwissen um die Zukunft, ob dialektischer, ob gnostischer Herkunft, steht hier die *Einsicht* in das echte Dasein des geschehenden.” Martin Buber, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum,” in *Eranos-Jahrbuch 1934, Band II: Ostwestliche Symbolik und Seelenführung*, ed. Olga Fröbe Kapteyn (Zürich: Rhein Verlag, 1935), 346. Cf. Buber’s reference to a dialogical “sinnbewusstes Leibeseinsicht” in *Ich und Du* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1923), 88.

¹⁵⁸ See Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, 1. Adorno uses this term pejoratively to describe those existential thinkers, including Buber (see *ibid.*, 16-17), who sought to overcome Idealism. “Today, as then, they sense the danger of losing again what they call the concrete—of losing it to that abstraction of which they are suspicious, an abstraction which cannot be eradicated from concepts. They consider concretion to be promised in sacrifice, and first of all in intellectual sacrifice. Heretics baptized this circle ‘The Authentic Ones.’” *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁵⁹ For illuminating reflections on Buber’s “anti-theology,” see Yaniv Feller, “*Hitgalut ve-Anti-Te’ologiyah be-Hagut shel Martin Buber*,” *Zehuyot* 3 (2013): 61-74. According to the conventional

offers a post-doctrinal theology, where “doctrine” refers no less to philosophical claims about God than to traditional religious dogmas and mystical beliefs.¹⁶⁰ Even more specifically, Buber articulates an *embodied theology*. That is, inasmuch as religious awareness is homologous with dialogical encounter, for Buber, the medium of theology is no more and no less than the embodied immediacy of those events.

It follows, then, that embodied theology is fundamentally non-discursive. Of course, while Buberian dialogue can certainly involve language, the ultimate “something” that is conveyed is never reducible to verbalizable ideas or idioms. In this respect, we may say that embodied theology is *metasprachliche*, meta-verbal. While all dialogue is verily *Sprache*, “speech,” it is not this in any strictly verbal sense. Indeed, “Just as the most eager talking over each other does not make a conversation...so for a conversation no sound is necessary, not even a gesture. Speech (*Sprache*) can forego all intelligibility (*Sinnenfälligkeit*)¹⁶¹ and remain speech.”¹⁶² Even in silent stillness, “here too, gesture—the corporeal attitude (*körperliche Haltung*) of the one to the other—is still expressing (*äußernd*).”¹⁶³ And make no mistake: the fact that this “gesture” or “corporeal attitude” is expressive does not imply that there is some signed content conveyed. Indeed, *Haltung* here is essentially a way of “holding” oneself, a

definition of theology with which Feller operates, Buber is indeed “anti-theological.” However, I am attempting here to reconsider Buber’s religious thought in light of an expanded conception of theology.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, Buber emphasizes to Ronald Gregor Smith that in the context of philosophical *Lehren* about religious matters, the word *Lehre* should be translated not literally as “teaching” but contextually as “doctrine.” Buber then goes on to list more than a dozen places in Smith’s translation of *Ich und Du* where “Lehre” should be rendered as “doctrine.” See in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 741.I, s.v. Seite 84, Zeile 15.

¹⁶¹ Smith’s translation of *Sinnenfälligkeit* as “all the media of sense” is misleading. Given the significance of *Sinn* and *Sinnlichkeit* in Buber’s dialogical thought (see our discussion below in this section), this is clearly not what Buber has in mind here. The German adjective *sinnfällig* denotes a form of communication that is obvious or visible, intelligible or easily understood. Buber’s point here is that dialogical “speech” need not involve any verbalization.

¹⁶² Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 3; German: *DP*, 141-42.

¹⁶³ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 3; German: *DP*, 142.

posture as opposed to any pronouncement.¹⁶⁴ Buber also suggests that “stammering (*Stammeln*),” that audible act of speechlessness, may be one of the most expressive dialogical forms of all: “no speech will ever repeat what the stammer (*Stammeln*) is able to communicate,”¹⁶⁵ he writes, and notes too that “the soul is but rarely able to attain to surer articulation” than in “honest stammering.”¹⁶⁶ And even in those encounters where words are spoken, for Buber, their dialogical-cum-theological potency is not in their content but in their very “spokenness (*Gesprochenheit*),” which Buber identifies with no less than “the whole speaking human body (*der ganze sprechende Menschenleib*)” and “a bodily attitude and action (*leibhaften Haltung und Handlung*).”¹⁶⁷ In short, “‘Spoken (*Gesprochen*)’ means: spoken in a particular situation,” and if one tries to extricate some definite content from “the situations of its spokenness,” then that very speech “loses its concreteness, its bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*).”¹⁶⁸ As Buber declared at Eranos: “All genuine religious speech (*Rede*) is situation-based (*situationsbezogen*)—always situation-based,

¹⁶⁴ On *Haltung* as a way that one “holds” herself, see Buber’s additional comments here about a closed-off person whose “*Haltung* does not give him away, [for] he is a held-together, withheld man (*gehaltener, verhaltener Mann*)” (ibid., 3; German: 142-43), but then when this man breaks open in a moment sitting beside another man, the other “receives it with no holds barred (*rückhaltlos aufnimmt*)” (ibid., 4; German: 143).

¹⁶⁵ *IT*, 144-145; German: *ID*, 115.

¹⁶⁶ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 17; German: *DP*, 163. For a narrative representation of this principle in Buber’s Hasidic writings, see his “Stammering,” in *TH*, I:214-215; German: “Das Stammeln,” *MBW*, 18: §386. To hear a fantastic and quite playful recording of Buber reciting this tale, listen to Martin Buber, “Das Stammeln,” in *Wo ich gehe – Du!* (Gütersloh: Ariola-Athena, 1959), track 7. Interestingly, the word “stammer” does not appear even once in the text of Buber’s tale, and the closest the original sources come to using such a term is in a comment that the young men praying did so “without any annunciation (כלי חיתוך אותיות כלל).” However, Buber decides ultimately to append his loaded term “Stammeln” as the title of the tale, even after initial considerations of a less suggestive title, “Mit zwei jünger Leute (With Two Young People).” For the original Hasidic sources, see Yehudah Aryeh Frenkel-Teomim, *Oholei Shem* (Bilgoraj, 1911), 14:14; Israel Berger, *Eser Orot* (Piotrków, 1907), 48. For Buber’s unpublished notes on this tale, including his initial idea for the title and his references to original sources, see his notes on Levi Jizchak von Berditschew, in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #3, “Mit zwei jünger Leute.”

¹⁶⁷ Buber, “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” *OMH*, 157–158, 162; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 163, 165.

¹⁶⁸ Buber, “A Suggestion for Bible Courses,” in Buber and Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, 173; German: *MBW*, 14:140.

always a speech that deals with this moment, and thus deals with transitoriness, with transitory embodiment (*Leiblichkeit*)... here and now; that alone is the religious way.”¹⁶⁹

Embodied theology—whether spoken in silence, stammering, or intelligible speech—is fundamentally inseparable from events of relation. God, the Eternal You, is knowable only as “what confronts us immediately and first and always, and legitimately it can only be addressed (*angesprochen*), not asserted (*ausgesagt*).”¹⁷⁰ For Buber, there is no true theological *Aussage* (assertion, statement, evidence) or *Aussprache* (discussion, talk) to take away; there is only the *Ansprache* (address) that is directed to another—situationally, relationally, bodily. For Buber, it is precisely this address that simultaneously excuses and expands the meaningfulness of words in metaverbal encounter. As he explained to Ronald Gregor Smith,

Because I cannot speak ‘about it,’ it is only the immediate address (*Ansprache*) to ‘YOU’—regardless of this or that language or this or that formulation—that establishes the relation, the primal act of the spirit, which is THE WORD, LOGOS, and thus nullifies the inadequacy of the words of individual languages.¹⁷¹

The dialogical address, this “primal act (*Urakt*)” of spiritual existence, is the primordial speech of embodied theology. Everything else is commentary.

For Buber, the “something” that is gleaned from events of encounter is the very presence (*Gegenwart*) of the moment itself. “Man receives, and what he receives is not a ‘content’ but a presence, a presence as strength.”¹⁷² However, another term that Buber employs to name this

¹⁶⁹ Buber, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum” (stenographer’s typescript), I:11. Cf. Buber, “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz im Judentum,” in Fröbe-Kapteyn, ed., *Eranos-Jahrbuch 1934*, 346.

¹⁷⁰ See *IT*, 129; German: *ID*, 97.

¹⁷¹ Buber wrote this in February 1937 in relation to Smith’s translation of *Ich und Du*. This comment can be found in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 741a, s.v. Seite 95, Zeile 111. The original German is as follows: “Weil ich nicht ‘darüber’ sprechen kann, bleibt nur die unmittelbare Ansprache mit ‘DU’, unabhängig von dieser oder jener Sprache, dieser oder jener Ausdrucksweise, die die Beziehung herstellt, der Urakt des Geistes, der DAS WORT, LOGOS, ist, und darum die Unzulänglichkeit der Worte, der einzelnen Sprachen, nichtig macht.”

¹⁷² *IT*, 158; German: *ID*, 130.

same fruit—one that has even more theological resonance, perhaps—is *Sinn*, which holds the same fullness of semantic range as the English “sense.” In his own stammering to say what one takes away from dialogical encounter, Buber displays this very multivocality of the term:

it makes life heavier, but heavy with meaning (*sinnschwer*). And...[it is] the inexpressible confirmation of meaning (*Sinns*). It is guaranteed. Nothing, nothing can henceforth be meaningless (*sinnlos*). The question about the meaning (*Sinn*) of life has vanished. But if it were still there, it would not require an answer. You do not know how to point to or define the meaning (*Sinn*), you lack any formula or image for it, and yet it is more certain for you than the perceptions of your senses (*Sinne*).¹⁷³

The *Sinn* of dialogical encounter is a divine “meaning (*Sinn*)” that presses upon our “senses (*Sinne*)” even more than perception itself. It is thus “the meaning that is only graspable but not conceptual (*begreifbaren, nicht begrifflichen Sinn*).”¹⁷⁴ And it is wholly flush with dialogical life: “We do not find meaning (*Sinn*) lying in things nor do we put it into things, but between us and things it can happen (*er sich begeben*).”¹⁷⁵ Therefore, *Sinn* is no static thing or stable principle—it is a way, a path, a process.¹⁷⁶ Anything less than that, any abstracted content that eludes our senses, is—quite literally—*unsinnig*, nonsense. From the perspective of Buber’s embodied theology, it is *sinnlos* (senseless) and even *widersinnig* (absurd) to transmute the moment into intangible beliefs.

So, what does one do with this unspeakable *Sinn* of dialogue? How could we even characterize it as “theological” if it does not have some personal and interpersonal effect over time? “In truth,” Buber writes, “the pure relation can be built up into spatio-temporal continuity

¹⁷³ *IT*, 158-59; German: *ID*, 130.

¹⁷⁴ *IT* 142; German: *ID* 112.

¹⁷⁵ Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 36; German: *DP*, 192.

¹⁷⁶ Indeed, Buber remarked to Ronald Gregor Smith that the term “Tao” in Lao-Tzu’s writings can “be rendered as ‘Bahn’, Weg’, ‘Sinn.’” Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 741a.I, s.v. Seite 55, Zeile 66. Cf. “Religious truth, in contradistinction to philosophical truth, is not a maxim but a way (*Weg*), not a thesis but a process.” Buber, *On Judaism*, 162; German: *Cheruth: Eine Rede über Jugend und Religion* (Berlin: R. Löwit Verlag, 1919), 19.

only by becoming embodied (*verleiblicht*) in the whole material of life. It cannot be preserved (*bewahrt*) but only put to the proof in action (*bewährt*); it can only be done, poured into life.”¹⁷⁷ This takes us to the very bloodstream and beating heart of Buber’s embodied theology. We may note here the significance of this intermingling of the terms “embodying (*Verleiblichung*)” and “putting to proof in action (*Bewährung*).”¹⁷⁸ For Buber, the sensible *Sinn* of embodied theology does not lend itself well to textualization or interpretation, but rather embodied action.¹⁷⁹ One who sits back and ponders that sensible meaning of divinity has already lost it. “The encounter with God does not come to man in order that he may henceforth occupy himself with God but in order that he may prove its meaning in action (*den Sinn...bewähre*) in the world.”¹⁸⁰

Thus, one gains theological insight not through heady analysis or argumentation but through the enactment of meaning.¹⁸¹ As Buber notes, the so-called “attributes” or *middot* of God in Jewish tradition are neither ideational nor conceptual, as in other traditions, but rather actions, such as clothing the naked, visiting the sick, comforting mourners—that is, “Middot made

¹⁷⁷ *IT*, 163; German: *ID*, 135.

¹⁷⁸ *Bewährung* is a notoriously difficult term to translate in Buber’s writings. In his correspondence with Ronald Gregor Smith, he rejected the idea of rendering it as “confirmation,” and proposed instead the phrase “proving true.” Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 008 741.I, s.v. Buber’s correction to Seite 104, Zeile 17. Cf. Kaufmann’s note in *IT*, 152n2.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. “It does not wish to be interpreted by us—for that we lack the ability—only to be done by us.” *IT*, 158-59; German: *ID*, 130.

¹⁸⁰ Buber, *IT*, 164; German: *ID*, 136. For additional examples of this terminological pairing of *Sinn* and *Bewährung*, see “But even as the *Sinn* itself cannot be transferred or expressed as a universally valid and generally acceptable piece of knowledge, putting it to proof in action (*seine Bewährung*) cannot be handed on as a valid ought” (*IT*, 159; German: *ID*, 131); cf. “The *Sinn* we receive can be put to the proof in action (*bewähren*) only by each person in the uniqueness of his being and in the uniqueness of his life” (*ibid.*).

¹⁸¹ For two excellent explorations of Buber’s concept of *Bewährung*, including references to this concept in other contemporaneous thinkers, see Michael Fishbane, “Justification through Living: Martin Buber’s Third Alternative,” in *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*, ed. P. Mendes-Flohr (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press and The Israel Academy of Sciences and the Humanities, 2002), 12-32; Martin Kavka, “Verification (*Bewährung*) in Martin Buber,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 20.1 (2012): 71-98.

sensible (*versinnlichte*),” made meaningful through performative manifestation.¹⁸² We can readily see, then, why Buber emphasizes what he calls the “sacramental” quality of dialogical encounter.¹⁸³ Dialogical life is a sort of religious action that blurs boundaries between heaven and earth, body and spirit.¹⁸⁴ Indeed, in his Hasidic writings, Buber defines *Sakrament* precisely as the “binding of meaning (*Sinns*) to the body (*Leib*),” and suggests that the moments of so-called “sacramental existence” are the very bodily “symbols (*Sinnbilder*)” of divine meaning.¹⁸⁵ According to Buber, the early generations of Hasidim—and most especially their leaders, the *tsaddiqim*, whom Buber regards as the *Bewährten*, “the ones in whom truth is put to proof in action”—put embodied theology into practice. Let us turn now to Buber’s narrative representations of those events. As we shall see, these tales reveal far more about Buber’s religious sensibilities than any theoretical discourse can.

¹⁸² “Imitatio Dei,” *Israel and the World*, 76; German: *Kampf um Israel*, 81.

¹⁸³ See, *inter alia*, Buber’s comment that “the dialogical word has happened sacramentally,” his reference to “the strict sacrament of dialogue,” and his assertion that “they would not reach the ‘sacramental’ there” in an urban office setting. Buber, “Dialogue,” *BMM*, 4, 17, 34; German: *DP*, 143, 164, 189.

¹⁸⁴ This position should not be confused with that of incarnational theology, according to which divinity is literally located in a particular body. Indeed, Buber’s point is precisely that every entity in the world can be the sensible site of divine meaning. Moreover, for Buber, this is only knowable or beholdable in events of dialogical encounter, and any attempt to convert such moments into a dogma of “incarnation” would be to objectify the other (and the event itself) as an It. For a more detailed comparison of Buber’s embodied theology with Christian incarnational theology, see below in chapter two, section seven.

¹⁸⁵ Buber, “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” *OMH*, 165; German: “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz,” *Eranos Jahrbuch 1934*, 351, and *passim*. On Buber’s subversive use of the term *Sinnbild* in this essay, see above in the “prologue” section of the introduction. Interestingly, Grete Schaeder suggests that Buber’s essay “Imitatio Dei,” quoted above in this paragraph, “provides the basis for” the idea of hallowing in Buber’s essay “Sinnbildlich und sakramentale Existenz.” Grete Schaeder, *The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 313.

CHAPTER 2

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“Being Torah”: Embodied Theological Expression in Buber’s Hasidic Tales

Introduction

In 1923, the Polish Hasidic author and editor Yo‘ets Kim Kaddish Rakats published the following tale in his popular volume *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh*:

Another [teaching] in the name of the holy [Rabbi Simḥah Bunem of Pshiskhe: Regarding the biblical verse] *You shall be in awe of [את] the Lord your God*,¹ [Rabbi Akiva taught that this “את” comes] to include Torah scholars, meaning that Torah scholars increase awe of God.² Understand this. When the aforementioned holy Rabbi was in the city of Danzig, the Germans (הדאטשין, surely referring to assimilated Jews) asked him why such a man—a great Torah scholar who knows many books—still has to go visit tsaddiqim. [After all,] one sees (רואה) all the wisdom and principles in the books themselves. He responded to them with excuses, but they did not accept them. One time, however, they invited him to go to the theater with them, and he declined, and when the Germans returned to his house and told him how in the theater there were so many wondrous things that their eyes had never seen, the holy rabbi, may his merit shield us, responded to them that he also knew all the wondrous things that were there. They asked him how he knew, since he had not been in the theater. He responded that he saw (שראה) the playbill, which described everything that happened there, including all the wondrous things, and he described each thing to them as if he himself was there. And the Germans responded that there is no comparison between one who merely saw (שראה) a described thing and one who actually sees with his eyes. But then the holy Rabbi responded to them: “If so, you yourselves must admit that there is no comparison between one who sees the tsaddiq himself and one who sees (לרואה) in books. Understand this.”³

¹ Deut. 6:13.

² Cf. Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 22b.

³ Yo‘ets Kim Kaddish Rakats, *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh*, vol. 1 (Piotrków, 1927), 48-49. Unless specified otherwise, all translations of Hasidic sources are my own. In general, these translations prioritize literal precision over literary smoothness in order to highlight ways in which Buber alters the texts in his renditions. The original Hebrew of this source is as follows:

עוד בשמו הקדוש. את ה"א תירא לרבות ת"ח. פי' התלמידי חכמים מרבים את יראת ה' והבן. בעת שהי' הה"ק הנ"ל בעיר דאנציג ושאלו אותו הדאטשין שאיש כזה ת"ח גדול ויודע ספרים הרבה יהי' עוד צריך לעשות הוצאות לצדיקים. מן הספרים בעצמו רואה כל חכמה ומוסר. והשיב להם תירוצים ולא נתקבלו אצלם. אך פ"א בקשוהו ממנו שילך עמהם לטיאטער והשמיט עצמו מהם. ויהי

Just about a year after Rakats published this *mayse*, and five hundred miles west of that publishing house in Piotrków, Poland,⁴ Buber released his own version of the same tale for a broad and variegated German readership.⁵ Given Buber’s own theological sensibilities that we discussed in the previous chapter—specifically his sense that embodied encounters in the world are theologically expressive, albeit in a non-noetic sense—one can see why Buber was drawn to this story.⁶ Indeed, Rabbi Bunem rejects the idea that religious wisdom could be reduced to conceptual content in static ink, as the enlightened “German” Jews imagined. Rather, Bunem insisted, the kerygmatic core of Hasidic “thought” was anchored to actual encounters with *tsaddiqim*, just as live theatrical performances reveal unimaginably more than any printed playbill.⁷

כשבאו הדייטשין לביתו וסיפרו לפניו איך שהי' בהטעאטער הרבה דברים נפלאים אשר עוד עיניהם לא ראתה. השיב להם הה"ק ז"ע כי גם הוא יודע כל הדברים הנפלאים שהי' שמה, ושאלו אותו מהיכן יודע. כי לא הי' בהטעאטער. השיבם שראה את הטאבעלי מצויר כל דבר הנעשה שמה וכל דבר נפלא וצייר להם כל דבר ודבר כמו שהי' בעצמו שמה. והשיבו הדייטשין שאין דמיון למי שראה רק דבר מצויר למי שרואה בעין ממש. ואז השיב להם הה"ק א"כ אתם מודים בעצמם שאין דומה לרואה הצדיק בעצמו לרואה מתוך הספרים. והבן :

⁴ Subsequent editions of *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh* were printed in Lodz, and these are cited far more commonly. On Rakats and his work, see Gedalyah Nigal, *Melaqtei ha-Sippur ha-Ḥasidi* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 1995), 263-264.

⁵ Martin Buber, “Das Schauspiel und der Zettel,” in *Das verborgene Licht* (Frankfurt: Rütten & Loening, 1924), 87. It is not surprising that Buber acquired and studied *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh* so soon after its publication. Indeed, not only was he generally privy to the appearance of new Hasidic literature, but he was also engaged in that literature with enhanced intensity at that time, as he taught a seminar on Hasidic legends at the Frankfurt Lehrhaus during the 1923-1924 academic year, while also collaborating with Agnon on what would have been their momentous *Corpus Hasidicum*. Moreover, Buber had assistants working with him in both of those contexts, who were surely helping to gather sources. See Dan Laor, “Agnon and Buber: The Story of a Friendship, or: The Rise and Fall of the ‘Corpus Hasidicum,’” in Mendes-Flohr, ed., *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*, 48-86; Friedman, *Martin Buber’s Life and Work: The Middle Years, 1923-1945*, 32, 34-35; *MBB*, 2:172.

⁶ On Buber’s concept of religious truth as “non-noetic,” see his *Eclipse of God*, 32-33; Mendes-Flohr, “The Aporiae of Dialogue”; cf. above in chapter 1.

⁷ Cf. Marc Saperstein’s observation that “oral literature and the performance arts—music, dance, drama—depend upon the physical presence of one or more artists whose role is decisive,” and that “we must conceive of the sermon not as the text (that frequently is the only record we have of it) but as an oral communication between preacher and listeners that is scripted or recorded in writing. The text therefore

Beyond these Buberian resonances in general, however, an intertextual study of the original Hasidic *mayse* vis-à-vis Buber's rendition reveals ways in which Buber bends the story even more toward his own embodied theology.⁸ Here is Buber's telling of the tale in the key of his own religiosity:

In the days when Rabbi Bunam was still a lumber-trader, some merchants in Danzig asked him why he, who was so well versed in the sacred writings, went to visit tsaddikim; what could they tell him that he could not learn from his books just as well? He answered them, but they did not understand him. In the evening, they invited him to go to the play (*Schauspiel*) with them, but he refused. When they returned home, they told him they had seen many wonderful things. "I know all about those wonderful things," said he. "I have read the program."

"But from that," they said, "you cannot really know what we have seen with our own eyes."

"That's just how it is," he said, "with the books and the zaddikim."⁹

Buber preserves the central gist of Rakats's version, yet some of his changes reflect concerns that go beyond mere aesthetics or literary style. First of all, he downplays Rakats' celebration of scholarly prowess. He omits completely the introductory interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:13, which had imbued the original *mayse* with the message that Rabbi Bunem ought to be revered as a *talmid ḥakham*, a Torah scholar. Instead, Buber mentions the fact that Bunem was a worldly "wood-trader (*Holzhändler*)," thereby emphasizing his down-to-earth engagement with everyday existence. And instead of using the derogatory depiction of the others as assimilated "German"

bears a relationship to the actual sermon analogous to the relationship of a script to a drama, or a musical score to a piano sonata, chorale, or symphony." Marc Saperstein, "The Sermon as Oral Performance," in Yaakov Elman and Israel Gershoni, eds., *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality, and Cultural Diffusion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 249.

⁸ I recognize that reference to the older published Hasidic tales as the "original" sources is somewhat problematic from a historical perspective, since they were themselves almost invariably based on earlier oral traditions, which were in turn translated from the vernacular Yiddish into Hebrew prose. However, I refer to those sources as the "originals" in order to convey that they were the Hasidic materials from which Buber created his own tales.

⁹ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken, 1991), II:241; German: *Das verborgene Licht*, 87. I have emended Marx's English translation slightly according to Buber's original German.

Jews, estranged from traditional knowledge, Buber describes them as “businessmen” or “merchants” (*Kaufleute*). This not only universalizes the tale,¹⁰ but also suggests perhaps that Bunem’s interlocutors misapplied mercantile values of efficiency and material gain to the realm of religiosity, where divine meaning is not acquired or possessed so much as enacted and perceived. In other words, for Buber, the disagreement between Bunem and the others has little, if anything, to do with their different degrees of textual proficiency, but rather with their disparate relations to existence. Accordingly, Buber goes on in his rendition to sharpen the epistemological divide between cerebral knowledge and embodied knowing: Whereas the original source uses the same verb, “to see (לראות),” throughout the narrative to denote both bookish learning and bodily meeting—one “sees” material in playbills and holy books, and one “sees” theatrical performances and *tsaddiqim*—Buber reserves that verb of physical sensation for the latter way of knowing. Moreover, to further highlight the bodily aspect of religious epistemology, Buber renders the Yiddish “טעאטער” into German not simply as “*Theater*” but as “*Schauspiel*,” which relates of course to his key term for dialogical “beholding (*Schauen*),” as discussed in the previous chapter.¹¹ Indeed, Buber had initially labeled this tale as “*Der Theaterzettel*” in his unpublished notebook, but then opted ultimately for the more charged term to convey a greater phenomenological nuance between intellectual knowledge and religious knowing. For Buber, the playbill is as remote from the live performance as the study of theological treatises is from embodied theological beholding.

¹⁰ On Buber’s efforts to universalize the particularistic elements in Hasidic sources, see Ran HaCohen, “Bubers schöpferischer Dialog mit einer chassidischen Legende,” in *Dialogue as a Trans-Disciplinary Concept: Martin Buber’s Philosophy of Dialogue and Its Contemporary Reception*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 89–100; cf. idem, “Einleitung,” in *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 30–31.

¹¹ Similarly, in Buber’s Modern Hebrew rendition of this source, he renders the Yiddish “טעאטער” not simply as “טאטרוך” but as “מהזה,” which relates etymologically to terms of vision. See Martin Buber, “*Ha-Mahazeh veba-Tokhnit*,” in *OhG*, 405.

In these hermeneutical dynamics between Rakats's tale—itself surely an interpretive refraction of an earlier oral tradition about Bunem—and Buber's version of it, core elements of Buber's religious thought are cast into relief. His choice to include this tale in his Hasidic anthologies in the first place is significant, of course,¹² and his hermeneutical alterations, complete with key terms and themes from his dialogical writings, express a great deal. And yet, this isolated source leaves some fundamental questions unanswered: What, exactly, is conveyed through the live tsaddiq-ḥasid encounter that cannot be articulated in books? How, or by what spiritual mechanisms, does the tsaddiq reveal that wisdom? And what is the nature of the ḥasid's cognition or awareness in that moment of receptivity? In essence, these questions pertain to the medium and the message of Buber's embodied theology, and they lie at the heart of this chapter. First and foremost, the answers will come into focus through close readings of Buber's Hasidic writings. At times, we will be able to point directly to Buber's explicit statements in essays on Hasidism or his other philosophical writings. Ultimately, however, it will be most illuminating to penetrate hermeneutically into the tales.

The Elusive Theological Core of Hasidism

In the previous chapter, we examined Buber's distinction between philosophical discourse and religious expression. Whereas the former is abstract, ruminative, and conceptual, the latter is concrete, embodied, and situational. For Buber, this theological sensibility surges in Hasidic sources. The movement adopted much of the gnostic language and imagery from

¹² Following the initial inclusion of this tale in his *Das verborgene Licht*, Buber added it to the section on Bunem in later editions of his *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge*. See Martin Buber, *Die chassidischen Bücher* (Hellerau: Jakob Hegner, 1928), 530; idem, *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge* (Berlin: Schocken, 1937), 268. He also included it later in both editions of his *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim*.

medieval Jewish mysticism, but Buber characterized Hasidism as “Kabbalah become ethos.”¹³ That is, Hasidism transformed mystical *gnosis*—or, “knowledge” of divine mysteries—into an “agnostic” ethical-cum-spiritual *way of life*.¹⁴ He also describes this aspect of the movement as the “deschematization of the mystery,”¹⁵ a concept that bears some resemblance to Moshe Idel’s concept of “dearcanization” in Hasidism, which we shall discuss further below. For Buber, the essence of religious meaning was no longer in transcendent secrets or abstract knowledge, but in immanent presence and concrete encounters. He regarded Hasidism as a radical religious movement whose theological potency did not derive from doctrine.

To a large degree, this perspective was not unique to Buber. Indeed, Scholem himself claimed that the essential features of Hasidism, unlike those of earlier movements in the history of Jewish mysticism, were not to be found squarely in theoretical or ideational innovations. For example, in his lecture on Hasidism in *Major Trends*, Scholem reflected,

If you were to ask me: what is the new doctrine of these mystics, whose experience was obviously first hand, more so perhaps than in the case of many of their predecessors? What were their new principles and ideas? I say, if you were to ask me this, I should hardly know what to answer. In the previous lectures it was always possible to lay down a blueprint, so to speak, of the spiritual architecture of the subject-matter and to give a more or less precise definition of its ideational side. In the case of Hasidism, certainly a creative religious movement, we cannot do so without repeating ourselves innumerable times.¹⁶

¹³ Buber introduced this concept in his very first book about Hasidism, *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (Frankfurt a.M.: Rütten & Loening, 1906), 13. Cf. Buber, “Christ, Hasidism, Gnosis,” in *OMH*, 252. Cf. Urban, *The Aesthetics of Renewal*, 23-26.

¹⁴ On Hasidism as “agnostic,” see Buber, *OMH*, 178; German: “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz,” *Eranos Jahrbuch 1934*, 363. On the notion that Hasidic innovation had little to do with new doctrines or “teachings,” see Buber, *OMH*, 24-25, 124; idem, “Replies to My Critics,” 732.

¹⁵ Buber promotes this characterization of Hasidism in his essays “Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement” and “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” in *OMH*, 124, 179; German: *Der große Maggid*, 124; “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz,” in *Eranos-Jahrbuch 1934*, 363.

¹⁶ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 338.

Whereas other movements in Jewish mysticism tended to exhibit distinct theological “doctrine,” “principles and ideas,” and “subject-matter,” Scholem suggested, much like Buber, that the unmistakably “creative” dimension of Hasidism took a different form. Ultimately, Scholem concluded,

The whole energy and subtlety of emotion and thought, which in the case of the orthodox Kabbalist went into the exploration of the theosophical mysteries, was turned about in the quest for the true substance of ethico-religious conceptions and for their mystical glorification. The true originality of Hasidic thought is to be found here and nowhere else.¹⁷

For Scholem, then, the original and innovative forces of Hasidism, which were undeniably present and powerful, were irreducible to “theosophical mysteries” or any other type of esoteric or conceptual content.¹⁸ While ḥasidim employed the terminology and imagery of earlier Kabbalah, their main goal was to penetrate and elevate the experiential-emotional marrow of that mystical matrix, beyond the systematic structures of their predecessors. In fact, Buber and Scholem affirmed repeatedly their agreement on this point, despite their numerous disagreements.¹⁹

However, Buber differs significantly in his conception of the nature of what, exactly, filled this void where kabbalistic mysteries had once throbbed. In Scholem’s eyes, Buber was too quick to conclude that ḥasidim simply abandoned doctrinal wisdom. In his earliest known critique of Buber’s writings on Hasidism—a private letter in response to Buber’s book *Der große Maggid*—Scholem writes, “You have introduced the concept of ‘deschematizing the mystery.’” But the question is, after all, why one should be so one-sided as to separate that from the

¹⁷ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 343.

¹⁸ Mendel Piekarcz was also a leading proponent of this perspective on Hasidism, suggesting that the movement offered nothing new from a speculative point of view. See Idel, *Hasidism*, 29.

¹⁹ See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 342; idem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation of Hasidism,” in *Messianic Idea*, 232; Buber, *OMH*, 173; idem, “Interpreting Hasidism,” 221.

‘teaching (*Lehre*).’ I mean, the deschematizing of the mystery is something of a theoretical act.”²⁰ For Buber, however, the Hasidic shift away from schematizable knowledge of mystical secrets was indeed an intentional and decisive break from “teachings” in the theoretical sense. “The fact that Hasidism adds no new element to the teaching must be understood as a principled self-restriction,” he insisted in his letter of response to Scholem.²¹ Insofar as the movement is “against the schematization of the mystery,” Buber elaborated years later, “Hasidism is agnostic; it is not concerned with the objective knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) that can be formulated and schematized, but with the vital, Biblical ‘knowing (*Erkennen*)’ in the reciprocity of the essential relation to God.”²² In other words, Hasidic deschematization is, for Buber, precisely a recasting of religious meaning in the media of concrete presence and personal encounter, as opposed to abstract ideas or mappable images.

However, it would be misguided to suggest that Buber simply regarded Hasidism as non-theological. Indeed, he wrote to Scholem quite openly on another occasion about his plans “to write a Hasidic theology (*Theologie*).”²³ What is essential to grasp is that the theological core of Hasidism attained expression, for Buber, not primarily through objective statements but through intersubjective meetings. Just as religious truth, according to Buber’s dialogical writings, is manifested ultimately through *Bewährung*, or “putting to proof in action,”²⁴ Buber casts the

²⁰ October 15, 1921 letter from Scholem to Buber, in *The Letters of Martin Buber*, 259; German: *MBB*, 2:87. On this being the first known instance of Scholem’s critique of Buber’s writings on Hasidism, see Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 91.

²¹ October 19, 1921 letter from Buber to Scholem, in *Letters of Martin Buber*, 261.

²² “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” *OMH*, 179; German: “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz,” in *Eranos-Jahrbuch 1934*, 363. I have emended the English translation slightly according to the original German.

²³ *Letters of Martin Buber*, 385; German: *MBB*, 2:435-6.

²⁴ See above in chapter one.

Hasidic *tsaddiqim* as “*die Bewährten*,” the ones in whom truth is put to proof in action.²⁵ In his estimation, these sages, much like himself, are not theologians in the strict sense, insofar as they do not *have* any teaching—and yet they do convey theological meaning, for they *are* the teaching. “The men in whom ‘being a Torah’ fulfills itself are called zaddikim, ‘the righteous,’ the legitimate ones, the ones in whom truth is put to proof in action (*die Bewährten*). They hear the Hasidic teaching, not only as its apostles, but its working reality. They are the teaching.”²⁶ Thus, Buber counts the founder of Hasidism, the Ba‘al Shem Tov, among those extraordinary religious figures who “did not proceed *from* a teaching, but moved *to* a teaching, in such a way that their life worked (*wirkte*) as a teaching, as a teaching not yet grasped in words.”²⁷ In the same vein, Buber asserts in the section entitled “Body” of his introduction to *Der große Maggid*, “Again and again, it says in the hasidic writings that one should learn ‘from every limb of the tzaddik.’”²⁸ In fact, this is somewhat of an overstatement, as the particular formulation that one ought to learn Torah from every limb of a tsaddiq is not as pervasive in Hasidic literature as Buber suggests here.²⁹ Two decades later, actually, he offered more modest and precise

²⁵ See *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 129; idem, *Werke* 3:813. This translation of *tsaddiq* corresponds to Buber and Rosenzweig’s rendering of terms derived from the root *ts-d-q* in their Bible translation. See Martin Buber, “Über die Wortwahl in einer Verdeutschung der Schrift,” in *MBW*, vol. 14, 79. Cf. Fishbane, “Justification Through Living,” 124ff. In Buber’s Hasidic writings, he usually leaves the word *tsaddiq* untranslated, unless it occurs in a biblical verse. In the earlier handwritten drafts of his introduction to *Die Erzählungen*, Buber also rendered the term *tsaddiqim* as “Bewährenden.” See his “Einleitung,” p. 2, in Martin Buber Archives, Arc. Ms. 350 04 3.

²⁶ Buber, *Werke*, 3:813. Buber added the words “*die Bewährten*” here in a later version of this essay, so it does not appear in *Der große Maggid* (1922), xxxi, and it is not reflected in the English translation in *OMH*, 129. However, Buber’s original handwritten draft of this essay demonstrates that he was already thinking of the *tsaddiqim* in terms of *Bewährung*, as he struggled to find the right words: “*die ‘Zaddikim,’ das heisst: die Ger was gewöhnlich mit ‘die Gerechten’ übersetzt wird, aber eigentlich die Bewährten, die Rechtbeschaffenen, die Rechtmassigen die*

²⁷ Buber, “The Beginnings,” in *OMH*, 25; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 254.

²⁸ Buber, “Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement,” *OMH*, 147; German: *Der große Maggid*, LI.

²⁹ While this particular dictum that one should learn “from every limb of the tsaddiq” is not as common in Hasidic literature as Buber suggests here, it is indeed based on a common trope in Hasidism, namely that the tsaddiq is the embodiment of Torah. In light of the talmudic teaching that the 613 commandments of Torah correspond to the number of limbs in the human body, it follows that the very limbs of the tsaddiq

references to the same teaching: “Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov used to say that he had learned Torah from every limb of his teacher, Rabbi Elimelek,”³⁰ and “As a zaddik once said: ‘I learned the Torah from all the limbs of my teacher.’”³¹ In any case, Buber’s initial exaggeration only underscores what we wish to highlight about his personal refractions of Hasidic sources.³²

One can hardly overstress that the Hasidic teaching or “Torah” embodied by the tsaddiqim is no abstract content or schematizable information. It is rather, to use Buber’s key term, a *Sinn*, a sensible-cum-sensuous “meaning” that bears the same multivalence as the English “sense.” As discussed above in chapter one, in Buber’s embodied theology “the meaning (*Sinn*) itself cannot be transferred or expressed as a universally valid and generally acceptable piece of knowledge,” and “the meaning (*Sinn*) we receive can be put to the proof in action (*bewähren*) only by each person in the uniqueness of his being and in the uniqueness of his life.”³³ It is only in this light that Buber’s characterization of Hasidism as “sacramental existence” becomes intelligible, where “existence” denotes the concreteness of reality and wholeness of being, and “sacrament” is precisely the “binding of meaning to the body (*Bindung des Sinns an den*

would be imagined as incarnations of Torah. For a foundational formulation in Hasidic literature, see Moshe Hayyim Ephraim of Sudilkov, *Degel Maḥaneh Ephraim* (New York, 2010), 148. Cf. Alan Brill, “The Spiritual World of a Master of Awe: Divine Vitality, Theosis, and Healing in the Degel Maḥaneh Ephraim,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8.1 (2001), 51-57. For the classical rabbinic view that the 613 commandments correspond to limbs in the body, see b. Makot 23b; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahanah* 12:1.

³⁰ Buber, “The Place of Hasidism in the History of Religion,” *OMH*, 229; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 209.

³¹ Buber, *Tales*, I:6; German: *MBW*, vol. 18, 134.

³² In his unpublished notebook, Buber cites this teaching as Menaḥem Mendel of Rimanov, *Aṭeret Menaḥem* (Bilgoraj, 1910), 72:186. See his notes on Menaḥem Mendel of Rymanow in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #18, “Von allen Gliedern des Zaddiks lernen.” This text reads: “I heard from the mouth of the holy one, our teacher, a man of God, Menaḥem Mendel of Rimanov, saying: For one who is worthy of complete knowledge, when he sees the tsaddiq and also contemplates (וימסתקל) every limb, he can learn actual Torah, as he learned actual Torah from every limb of his rabbi. And one who is not so worthy, nevertheless, when he contemplates the face of his rabbi, the tsaddiq, light thereby emanates upon him from every limb of the tsaddiq.” In characteristic form, Buber omits the overtly mystical aspects of this teaching, as well as the notion that different disciples glean different types of Torah from the tsaddiq’s limbs, depending on their intellectual-spiritual prowess. For some reason, Buber never anthologized this teaching as a tale, although he references it repeatedly in his essays (see below).

³³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 159; German: *Ich und Du*, 106–107.

Leib).³⁴ This sacramental existence is symbolic of theological meaning inasmuch as divine reality is represented therein, but the qualities of binding and boundedness saturate Buberian sacramentalism with a significance that exceeds any static symbol, for the event and its meaning are utterly inseparable. Sacramental existence, the embodied *Botschaft* of Hasidism, is more than just an “image” of meaning—it is more *Sinn* than *Sinnbild*.³⁵ To formulate this matter in the language of media theory, “the medium is the message.”³⁶ For Buber, theological expression in Hasidism is the transmission of a meaning—a sense—that is bound to the bodily ephemerality of events.

Buber recognizes that this embodied theology might be difficult for his contemporaries to understand, but he sees this difficulty as symptomatic of a historic degeneration of spirit. Given the tyranny of objectivity and abstraction in modern thought, the notion of a teaching that is inseparable from the teacher must sound inane. In his introduction to *Die Erzählungen*, however, Buber suggests that such epistemological and pedagogical sensibilities are commonplace in times of spiritual flourishing:

Only in eras when the world of the spirit is on the decline is teaching, even on its highest level, regarded as a profession. In epochs of flowering, disciples live with their master just as apprentices in a trade lived with theirs, and ‘learn’ by being in the radius of his

³⁴ Buber, *OMH*, 165; German: “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz,” *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 351.

³⁵ See Buber, “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” in *OMH*, 165; German: “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz,” 351. In this essay, Buber defines the biblical “symbol” as “the appearing and becoming apparent of meaning (*Sinn*) in the form of corporeality (*Leiblichkeit*),” and “the embodiment of the [divine] message (*Leiblichkeit der Botschaft*).” Buber, “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” 165, 161; German: “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz,” 351, 347. See also Buber’s friend Paul Tillich’s characterization of sacraments as “symbolic,” in Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, xxiii. See also Buber’s early use of the term “Sinnbild” in his *Die Geschichte des R. Nachman*, where the mystic tries to convey the unspeakable nature of his mystical experience, and the resultant myth becomes no more and no less than a “Sinnbild” of the original experience. Cf. Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 115-116.

³⁶ See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Gingko Press, 2013), chapter 1. Cf. Sam Berrin Shonkoff, “Internet Searchers, God Seekers, and Longing for the Unmediated,” *Symposia* 6 (2014): 20-33.

breath (*in seinem Atemkreis*),³⁷ learn many things for their work and their life both because he wills it, or without any willing on his part. That is how it was with the disciples of the Maggid. Over and over they say that he himself as a whole human being was the carrier of teaching. He had an effect on them as if he himself were a Torah, a divine instruction.³⁸

For Buber, Hasidic theology is conveyed through the very palpable presence of the tsaddiq—in his actions, gestures, breaths—and disciples attain religious insight like apprentices learning a trade. One can see why Buber regarded narrative, more than theoretical sermons, as the foundational genre of Hasidic expression. This preference was not so much an abandonment of theology as a regeneration of it, as Buber wished to grant his readers access to the very sensuous sensibility, the *Sinnlichkeit*, of religious instruction. Buber's tales are meant to exhibit the embodied theology of Hasidism.

First Encounters with Tsaddiqim

Buber published many tales that stressed the non-discursive, bodily nature of theological transmission from tsaddiqim to ḥasidim. One subset of these pertains to first encounters with sages, when students realize—sometimes as they hoped, but usually to their shock—that bookish knowledge is superficial and perhaps even misleading compared to the embodied wisdom of tsaddiqim. Buber's intention is not to suggest that it is impossible to glean profound wisdom from texts, but rather to affirm that the most essential religious teachings are inseparable from the sensory presence of intersubjective encounters, irreducible to static schemata or written

³⁷ Cf. Buber's tale "*Der Atemhauch* (The Breath)," where in lieu of intellectual understanding, a Ḥasid opens his mouth during the Zhitshover's sermon in order to receive the rebbe's "holy breath." See *TH*, II:221; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §998; Hebrew: *OhG*, 393.

³⁸ Buber, *TH*, I:18; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 143; Hebrew: *OhG*, 24. I have emended the translation slightly according to the original German. Pierre Hadot has made similar claims with regard to ancient versus modern philosophy. See his *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, edited by Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

words. Philosophical-theological treatises may very well be logically persuasive and intellectually stimulating, even spiritually gripping—but as long as they remain encased within lofty realms of thought, they lack the embodied significance of a *Sinn*. That is to say, from a dialogical religious standpoint, they are quite literally *non-sense*.³⁹

One particularly well-known anecdote about a young person's desire to seek out a tsaddiq is a memory that Rabbi Leib, son of Sarah, shares about his journey to Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritsh. Buber's version, which is a quite straightforward rendition of the original sources, reads: "I did not go to the Maggid in order to hear Torah from him, but to see how he unlaces his felt shoes and laces them up again."⁴⁰ In its original context, the image of the Maggid tying his shoes may have had mystical significance. "Indeed," Elliot Wolfson notes, "the basic issues of Hasidic mysticism all coalesce about the motif of walking which expresses in a symbolic manner the theurgical, magical, and soteriological role of the charismatic master in relation to his disciples. The religious texture of Hasidism, I submit, is enframed by the image of walking and the basic elements that it entails, to wit, the foot, the shoe, and the path."⁴¹ Among Hasidic listeners and readers, Rabbi Leib's striking reference to the Maggid's shoes would likely have evoked images of Enoch the Cobbler, who was portrayed quite commonly in Hasidic texts as performing mystical unifications of the masculine Holy One, blessed be He, and the feminine

³⁹ On this literal use of "non-sense," cf. Buber's statement regarding the dialogical attunement of "primitive" people: "Any assumption that the non-sensible (*Unsinnliches*) exists must strike him as nonsense (*widersinnig*)." *I and Thou*, 71; German: *Ich und Du*, 28.

⁴⁰ Buber, "Thora sagen und Thora sein," in *Der große Maggid*, 13; idem, "Lehre sagen und Lehre sein," in *MBW* 18, §146. Buber drew this source from Menahem Mendel Bodek, *Seder ha-Dorot mi-Talmidei ha-Besht* (Lemberg, 1865), 41; Pinhas of Dinovitz, *Siftei Tsaddiqim* (Warsaw/Jozefów, 1893), 91; and Rakats, *Siftei Qodesh* (Lodz, 1929), 26:16. The version in *Siftei Tsaddiqim* is as follows:

וכן אמר הרב הצדיק וכו' ר' ליב שרהת ז"ל נסיעתי לבית הרב המגיד הגדול ר' דוב ז"ל לא לשמוע תורה ממנו כי אם לראות איך פושט אנפסאותיו ואיך קישרם עכ"ל.

⁴¹ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), xvii. On the mystical equivalence of the "shoe" with God's Presence and Glory in earlier Ashkenazi mysticism, see *ibid.*, 41.

Shekhinah through his stitching of shoes.⁴² However, Buber was uninterested in any mystical or theurgic interpretations of such earthly images. In his own references to Enoch the Cobbler, Buber frames the figure precisely as a fulfillment of the spiritual tasks to “know Him in all your ways,”⁴³ to “hallow the everyday,”⁴⁴ and even to perform all actions with one’s “whole spiritual-physical (*geistig-leibliche*) being.”⁴⁵ Without a doubt, Buber embraces Rabbi Leib’s statement about the Maggid’s shoe-tying in a similar fashion. Above all, this tale is an expression of the fact that the Maggid’s highest “teaching” went far beyond any theoretical or even verbalizable content. It is very significant, therefore, that Buber entitles this tale “*Thora sagen und Thora sein* (Saying Torah and Being Torah),” highlighting how Rabbi Leib’s testimony intimates an entire mode of theological instruction that transcends discursive communication. This is also, of course, reminiscent of Buber’s introductory remarks, cited earlier, about how the Maggid “as a whole human being was the carrier of teaching” and affected his students “as if he himself were a Torah, a divine instruction.”

In other *mayses*, Jewish seekers do indeed journey to the Maggid with hopes of great textual or intellectual illuminations, but their encounters with *tsaddiqim* frustrate their

⁴² The image of Enoch the Cobbler’s mystical unifications through shoe-stitching date back at least to the fourteenth-century, but it became especially central to Hasidism as a call to infuse even the most everyday activities with spiritual-theurgic significance. Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 67-70, 365 n. 101; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Along the Path*, 106-108.

⁴³ Buber, “The Foundation Stone,” *OMH*, 84-85. The verse “You shall know Him in all your ways” (Prov. 3:6) was a crucial catchphrase in Hasidic discourse for the hallowing of everyday existence, what scholars came to call “worship in corporeality (*avodah be-gashmiyut*).” For the authoritative book on the topic, see Tsippi Kauffman, *Be-Khol Derakhekha Da’ehu: Tefisat ha-Elohut veba-‘Avodah be-Gashmiyut be-Reshit ha-Hasidut* (Ramat-Gan: Hotsa’at Universitat Bar-Ilan, 2009).

⁴⁴ Buber, “The Foundation Stone” and “Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement,” *OMH*, 126-127.

⁴⁵ Buber, “The Foundation Stone,” *OMH*, 85. For the sources that Buber likely had in mind when he mentions here the Besht’s teaching about Enoch the Cobber, see Ya’akov Yosef of Polnoye, *Toledot Ya’akov Yosef* (Medzibezh: 1817), 14a, 18b; Aaron ha-Kohen of Apt (attributed to the Besht), *Keter Shem Tov* (Zolkiev: 1794), 9b. For a related reading of Buber’s reinterpretation of Enoch the Cobbler, see Jacobs, “Aspects of Scholem’s Study of Hasidism,” 181.

expectations.⁴⁶ Buber is clearly drawn to such accounts, and he accentuates their textures of embodied theology. Consider, for example, his rendition of a *mayse* about how Rabbi Israel of Kozhenits became a disciple of the Maggid. The original source from which Buber drew this tale reads as follows: “Before he traveled to the great Maggid of Mezritsh, [Israel of Kozhenits] had already learned (למד) 800 books of Kabbalah. But when he came to the holy Maggid, he saw (ראה) that he still had not begun to learn (ללמוד) anything.”⁴⁷ This tale does not identify what it was, exactly, that made Rabbi Israel “see” how much more he had to “learn.” Was this an immediate epiphany upon arrival, or perhaps only after he started studying with the Maggid? Also, what sort of learning did he realize he must undertake? Indeed, the tale uses only one verb to denote Rabbi Israel’s learning both before and after his meeting the Maggid.

Let us turn now to Buber’s rendition: “Rabbi Israel had thoroughly researched (German: *durchforscht*; Hebrew: העמיק לחקור) 800 books of Kabbalah. But when he first stepped before the face of the Maggid, he recognized (German: *erkannte*; Hebrew: הכיר) instantly that he knew nothing (German: *nichts wußte*; Hebrew: שלא ידע כלום).”⁴⁸ In Buber’s mind, then, Rabbi Israel began with bookish research, but then the very palpable presence of the Maggid over-against him was transformative. Rabbi Israel’s realization in that moment was not that he had failed to “learn” enough, but that he had not “known” truly. As the Maggid’s student, he did not need to study a new branch of discourse; he had to open himself to new ways of knowing. Buber called this tale “*Die Erkenntnis*” in German and “הכרה” in Hebrew, and both should be translated in this

⁴⁶ On tales about why seekers came to the Maggid, see Evan Drescher (Ariel) Mayse, *Beyond the Letters: The Question of Language in the Teachings of Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritch* (doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 2015), 122-125.

⁴⁷ Ḥayyim Me’ir Yekhiel Shapiro of Mogelnits, *Tif’eret Ḥayyim* (Jassy, 1909), 13. The Hebrew reads: וכמי שאמרו על הרב המגיד הקדוש זצלה”ה זי”ע מקאזניץ שקודם שנסע להרב המגיד הגדול זצ”ל זי”ע ממעזריטש זצ”ל למד מקודם שמונה מאות ספרי קבלה ואחר כ”ז כשבא להמגיד הקדוש זצ”ל ראה שלא התחיל עדיין ללמוד מאומה.

⁴⁸ *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §546; *Or Ha-Ganuz*, 249.

case as “Recognition,” as the title highlights that moment when Rabbi Israel “recognized” in the Maggid’s face a new epistemology for which no intellectual knowledge could prepare him.⁴⁹ To be sure, the term “Erkenntnis” tends to denote “knowledge,” but this somewhat surprising use of the word only underscores how Buber guides his readers here to consider more intersubjective and embodied modes of religious insight.⁵⁰

In Buber’s hermeneutical imagination, a similar theological message was present in the famous *mayse* about how the Maggid of Mezritsh first became a disciple of his own master, the Ba‘al Shem Tov. However, Buber’s presentation of that narrative diverges significantly from the

⁴⁹ Perhaps Buber was aware of the practice of *hakarot panim* (metoposcopy) in the history of Jewish mysticism. To be sure, his personal understanding of Rabbi Israel’s “*hakarah*” before the Maggid’s face is far from any doctrine of metoposcopy. However, it is possible that the original *mayse* drew upon such elements, although the fact that the disciple in this case would have been the exerciser of the divination would certainly deviate from the norm. On metoposcopy in Jewish mysticism, see Gershom Scholem, “*Hakarot Panim ve-Sidrei Shirtuṭin*,” in Moses D. Cassuto, Joseph Klausner, and Joshua Gutmann, eds., *Sefer Asaf: Qovets Ma’amrei Mehqar Mugash Likhvod ha-Profesor Simḥah Asaf* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1953); idem, “Ein Fragment zur Physiognomik und Chiromantik aus der Tradition des spätantiken jüdischen Esoterik,” in *Liber Amicorum: Studies in Honour of Professor Dr. C. J. Bleeker* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 175-193; Ithamar Gruenwald, “*Qeṭa ‘im Ḥadashim mi-Sifrut Hakarat Panim u-Sidrei Shirtuṭin*,” *Tarbits* 40 (1970): 301-319; Schafer, *Hekhalot-Studien*, 84-95; Lawrence Fine, “The Art of Metoposcopy: A Study in Isaac Luria’s ‘Charismatic Knowledge,’” *AJS Review* 11.1 (1986): 79-101; idem, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 96, 153-164.

⁵⁰ Cf. Buber’s juxtaposition of these terms *Schauen* and *Erkennen* to characterize I-Thou encounter: “Here alone beholding and being beheld (*Schauen und Geschautwerden*), recognizing and being recognized (*Erkennen und Erkenntwerden*), loving and being loved are a reality that cannot be lost.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 151; German: *Ich und Du*, 122. For other examples of Buber’s tales in which students behold (*schauen*) the face of the Maggid, see *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §§132-133. See also Scholem’s reading of this particular *mayse*: “Rabbi Israel of Koznitz, a typical Kabbalist among the Zaddikim, used to say that he had read eight hundred Kabbalistic books before coming to his teacher, the ‘Great Maggid of Meseritz,’ but that he had really learned nothing from them. If, however, you merely read his books you will not find the slightest doctrinal difference between his teachings and those of the old authors whom he affected to despise. The new element must therefore not be sought on the theoretical and literary plane, but rather in the experience of inner revival, in the spontaneity of feeling generated in sensitive minds by the encounter with the living incarnations of mysticism.” Scholem, *Major Trends*, 338; German: *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), 371. Insofar as Scholem locates the Maggid’s teaching not in “the theoretical and literary plane” but in “the encounter with the living incarnations of mysticism,” Scholem’s interpretation of the tale is quite similar to that of Buber. However, whereas Scholem emphasizes “the experience of inner revival” and the “feeling generated in sensitive minds,” Buber accentuates a more bodily, intersubjective way of knowing.

traditional versions. The original tale, which Buber drew primarily from *Qeḥal Ḥasidim*,⁵¹ is as follows:

A story about how our divine rabbi, the great Maggid of Mezritch, became close to our holy rabbi the Besht, may his memory be a blessing:

I heard from one ḥasid about when the holy rabbi Dov Baer [first] heard of the great name of the Besht. All the people were journeying to [the Besht], and he enacted great and wondrous actions in his prayers. Now Rabbi Dov Baer was sharp, prodigious, and expert in all the Talmud and all the legal commentators, and he was exceedingly knowledgeable in the wisdom of Kabbalah, so he was amazed by what he heard about the high level of the Besht.

At one point, his mind was set to journey to [the Besht] in order to test him. But he was so diligent in his studies that when he was on the road one day and two [days] and was unable to persist in his studies as [he could] at home, he started to regret the journey. Later on, when he arrived to the Besht, may his soul be in the upper spheres, he thought that he would hear Torah from him. But the Besht told him a story about how he had journeyed on the road for a few days and did not have any more bread to give to his Gentile⁵² wagon driver, and then a poor Gentile happened to arrive with bread, and the Besht bought bread from him in order to compensate his wagon driver—and other stories like this.

Then on the second day, [Dov Baer] came again to the Besht, and [the Besht] told him how when he was on the road he did not have any more hay to give to the horses, and then [a poor Gentile] happened to arrive, as before. Now all of the stories that the Besht told contained very wondrous wisdom, but Rabbi Dov Baer did not understand this. Thus, he went to the guesthouse and said to his servant, “I wanted to journey back to our place today, but it is very dark out, so let us stay here until the moon rises and sheds light—then we will set off on our way.”

And it happened that at midnight when [Dov Baer] prepared himself for the journey, the Besht sent his servant to summon him. And [Dov Baer] went with him. The Besht asked him, “Do you have knowledge in the wisdom of Kabbalah?” “Yes,” he said to him. And the Besht said to the servant, “Bring me the book ‘Etz Ḥayyim.” The Besht showed a passage in ‘Etz Ḥayyim to Rabbi Dov Baer. Rabbi Dov Baer said to him, “I will read and contemplate this.” Then he told the Besht the peshat [plain meaning] of this passage. The Besht said to him, “You do not know anything.” [Dov Baer] returned [to the

⁵¹ In his unpublished notebook, Buber lists sources for two different versions of the story about how the Maggid became a student of the Besht. For the first version, he lists *Qeḥal Ḥasidim*, 24b; *Keter Shem Tov*, part 2; and the introduction to *Maggid Devarav le-Ya‘aqov*. For the second version of the tale, Buber lists *Qeḥal Ḥasidim*, 25a; and *Shivḥei ha-Besht* [Berlin, 1922], 37. Ultimately, Buber’s rendition follows the first version of the tale, although he lists the sources as *Shivḥei ha-Besht* and *Qeḥal Ḥasidim* in the source index for his *Or ha-Ganuz*. It is clear for a variety of reasons that Buber’s rendition is based primarily on *Qeḥal Ḥasidim*, 24b–25a, but we shall have more to say below about his use of *Shivḥei ha-Besht*. See Buber’s notes in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. “Der große Maggid,” ##3–4; cf. Martin Buber, *OhG*, 472.

⁵² The term used here in the *Keter Shem Tov* version is ערל, or “uncircumcised.”

passage]⁵³ as before and said to the Besht, “The correct peshat is as I said. If one knows a different peshat from his excellency, then let him speak and I will listen to whoever has the truth.” “Stand up!” the Besht said to him. And he stood. Now in this passage [of the ‘Etz Hayyim] there were some names of angels, and immediately when the Besht spoke this passage, the entire house was filled with light, and fire flamed all around, and they saw sensorially (בחוש) the angels mentioned. And [the Besht] said to our teacher Rabbi Dov Baer, “It is true that the peshat is as you said. But your studying has no soul.” Immediately, Dov Baer commanded his servant to journey back home, and he stayed there with the Besht and studied with him great and profound wisdoms.⁵⁴

There is much to say about this narrative.⁵⁵ For our present purposes, however, let us highlight two main issues in the source that evidently troubled Buber, and then we shall see how he attends to them in his renditions. First, why does Dov Baer remain so unimpressed with the Besht in their initial meetings? Is it simply because his stories are nonsensical? But the text says explicitly that all of the *mayases* that the Besht told contained “very wondrous wisdom (חכמה),” and Dov Baer simply “did not understand (לא הבין זאת).” What was it, exactly, that this brilliant scholar failed to appreciate? In the original context, it is likely that the Besht’s

⁵³ The version in *Keter Shem Tov* reads: “And he returned and read it and told him the correct peshat...”

⁵⁴ Walden, *Qehal Hasidim*, 24b–25a. The Hebrew reads:

מעשה איך נתקרב רבינו האלקי המגיד הגדול ממעזריטץ לרבינו הקדוש הבעש"ט ז"ל שמעתי מחסיד אחד כששמע הרב הקדוש מו"ה דוב בער זצלה"ה מהשם הגדול של הרב הקדוש הבעש"ט וכל העם נוסעים אליו ופועל בתפלתו פעולות גדולות ונוראות והנה הרב מו"ה דוב בער זצ"ל היה חריף גדול ובקי בכל השי"ס ובכל הפוסקים והיה לו עשר ידות בחכמת הקבלה והיה מהמי' על דבר השמועה מגודל מעלת הבעש"ט ופעם אחת נתיישב בדעתו לנסוע אליו כדי לנסותו ומחמת שהיה מתמיד גדול בלימוד כשהיה בדרך יום ושתיים ולא הי' אפשר לו להתמיד בלמודו כמו בביתו התחיל להתחרט על שנסע. והנה אח"כ כשבא אל הבעש"ט נבג"מ וסבר שישמע ממנו תורה והבעש"ט זצ"ל סיפר לו מעשה א' איך שנסע דרך כמה ימים ולא הי' לו עוד לחם ליתן לנכרי שלו בעל העגלה ונזדמן לו נכרי עני אחד עם לחם וקנה ממנו הלחם כדי לפרנס הנכרי בעל העגלה שלו ועוד ממעשיות כאלה. ואח"כ ביום השני בא עוד אצל הבעש"ט וסיפר לו איך שבדרך לא היה לו עוד שחת לתת להסוסים ונזדמן לו כנ"ל והנה כל המעשיות שסיפר הבעש"ט זצלה"ה היה בהם חכמה נפלאה מאוד והנה הרב מו"ה דוב בער שלא הבין זאת. ע"כ בא לבית אכסניא ואמר למשרת שלו אצל הייתי חפץ לנסוע היום למקומנו אך מפני שהחשוך מאוד. ע"כ נלון פה עד שתזרח ותעל מאור הלבנה אזי נסע לדרכינו. ויהי בחצות הלילה כשהכין א"ע לנסוע אז שלח הבעש"ט את משרת שלו לקרוא אותו והלך אצלו ושאל אותו הבעש"ט יש לך ידיעה בחכמת הקבלה א"ל כן ואמר הבעש"ט למשרת קח לי ספר עץ חיים והראה הבעש"ט להרב רדו"ב מאמר אחד בעץ חיים. א"ל הרב ר' דו"ב אקח לעיין ולהתיישב ואח"כ אמר להבעש"ט ז"ל את הפש"ט במאמר הזה א"ל הבעש"ט אינך יודע כלום וחזר כן כנ"ל וא"ל להבעש"ט הפשט הנכון כמו שאמרתי ואם יודע מעלתו פשט אחר יאמר ואשמע האמת עם מי וא"ל הבעש"ט עמוד על רגלך ועמד והנה במאמר הזה היה כמה שמות מלאכים ומיד שאמר הבעש"ט זצלה"ה וזה המאמר נתמלא כלו הבית כול אורה ואש היה מתלהט סביבותיו וראו בחוש את המלאכים הנזכרים וא"ל להרב מו"ה דו"ב אמת שהפשט הוא כמו שאמרת אבל הלימוד שלך הוא בלי נשמה ותיכף ומיד צוה הרב מו"ה דוב בער את המשרת שלו לנסוע לביתו והוא נשאר שם אצל הבעש"ט ולמד אצלו חכמות גדולות ועמוקות. כל זה שמע מפה קדוש הרב מו"ה דוב בער זצלה"ה.

⁵⁵ For a bibliography of secondary literature related to this text, see Idel, *Hasidism*, 353 n. 3; idem, *Absorbing Perfections*, 541-2 n. 103. In addition to the sources Idel mentions, see also Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, 56; Louis Jacobs, “Aspects of Scholem’s Study of Hasidism,” 180.

stories were meant to communicate metaphysical mysteries. Indeed, according to an oft cited dictum in *Shivhei ha-Besht*, “One who recounts the praises of the tsaddiqim, it is as if he engaged in the study of the *merkavah* [metaphysical or mystical wisdom, lit. the heavenly “chariot” of Ezekiel’s vision],”⁵⁶ and in this particular case, it is perhaps suggestive that the Besht’s stories were about his own journeys in a wagon.⁵⁷ As Naftali Loewenthal notes, the story was in general “a medium...whereby the Baal Shem Tov could make available to the common man esoteric themes which otherwise are found only in the most radical of his teachings.”⁵⁸ Naturally, the notion that a tsaddiq’s stories might somehow “translate” or “disguise” esoteric content and metaphysical secrets would not have resonated for Buber.⁵⁹ Such a dualism between religious expression and religious meaning, theological form and theological content, is discordant with his own religious sensibilities and his concept of sacramental existence in Hasidism. For Buber, divine reality is not “translated” so much as embodied.

A second issue in this text that surely challenged Buber pertains to what, exactly, was so powerful about the Besht’s final teaching. What was it about the Besht’s presentation of the passage from ‘*Etz Hayyim* that filled the house with sublime firelight and angels? We are told that these wild wonders erupted “immediately when the Besht spoke this passage”—but perhaps

⁵⁶ See *Shivhei ha-Besht* (Kapust, 1815), first page of the “printer’s preface” (unnumbered), and 26a. Cf. the dictum attributed to Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov in Eleazar Dov Geiman, *Gan Hadasim* (Lublin, 1928), 4: “מעשיות הצדיקים הוא מעשה מרכבה כי הגדיקים הם המרכבה”; and the teaching attributed to the Besht in Dov Berish Beril, *Devash ha-Sadeh* (Bilgoraj, 1907), 31. See also Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, 54; Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 25.

⁵⁷ Nigal comments: “The Maggid himself would later talk of horses and carriages at a sabbath meal; but his audience then was composed of hasidim, who sensed that this related to matters abounding in the mysterious.” Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, 56. It is also significant perhaps that in alternate versions of this *mayse*, the Besht announces to Dov Baer in his final teaching the next day: “We are engaged in *ma’aseh merkavah*.” See *Shivhei ha-Besht* (Berlin, 1922), 37–38; *Qehal Hasidim*, 25a.

⁵⁸ Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 25.

⁵⁹ Loewenthal uses the terms “translate” and “disguise” in this sense throughout his book *Communicating the Infinite*.

it is implied here that the Besht was engaged simultaneously in some deeper mystical contemplation? Indeed, this implication would likely have been assumed in early transmissions of the tale. Idel has indicated that whereas pre-modern Jewish mystics tended to regard ecstatic experiences as gateways to discrete mystical insights—so, for example, ecstatic experiences could unveil the esoteric significance of sacred sources—Hasidic masters came to celebrate mystical experiences themselves as the ultimate goal, irrespective of any distinct mental topic. This reflects the tidal shift in Hasidism that Idel terms “dearcenization,” or the subordination of the “objective and communicable secrets of Kabbalah” to “the more vague and emotional experiences related to the apprehension and experience of God.”⁶⁰ He identifies this particular *mayse* as a “major example” of this process of dearcenization, as “an appropriate recitation of the mystical text is presented as its study. This shift is of paramount importance for understanding the new attitude toward the text: it is not so much the source of secrets as a tool for attaining an experience.” Thus, Idel explains, “If the arcana were the purpose of the Heikhalot literature and the experience was instrumental, in the Hasidic text the arcana disappeared and the experience remained the main purpose of study.”⁶¹ In the *mayse* at hand, then, the enlightening power of the Besht’s final teaching is not rooted simply in the physical fact of recitation, but more precisely in the Besht’s mystical experience vis-à-vis the text during the act of recitation. Through “penetrating to the core of the letters by the act of cleaving,”⁶² the Besht accesses the divine force therein and causes it to descend into his lowly sphere with Dov Baer. That is, the Besht’s ecstatic experience in relation to the words of *‘Etz Hayyim* made that text come alive, as it were,

⁶⁰ Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 185.

⁶¹ Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 183. Idel presents the version of this tale from *Shivhei ha-Besht*, but the main issues he highlights from the source apply as well to the version from *Qehal Hasidim* rendered above. Moreover, Buber did also consult the *Shivhei ha-Besht* version.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 184.

and manifest in space. Whereas Dov Baer had attempted to articulate the esoteric dimensions of the source, as was customary in the kabbalistic hermeneutics he had mastered, the Besht performs a more ecstatic-experiential approach, which has virtually nothing to do with theoretical discussion. Indeed, the mystic who concentrates completely on the energetic radiance locked in letters must let go of other hermeneutical devices, for these would only thwart the unitary consciousness required for cleaving. In the words of Scholem,

If you concentrate on the spiritual core of the Torah, on the mystic light shining through the letters, and if this is *devekut* [cleaving], it follows that you cannot concentrate with equal fervor on the specific and concrete meaning of the words, and certainly not on the intricacies of talmudic lore and discussion. To penetrate an intricate discussion is one thing, and to contemplate the divine light that pervades the words is another.⁶³

Thus, in reciting the text while under the influence of *devekut*, the Besht demonstrates to Dov Baer what it truly means to study “with soul.” And in drawing down the divine vitality into the room, the Besht facilitates an equivalent—or at least connected—mystical experience within Dov Baer. Indeed, according to other versions of this *mayse*, during his textual recitation the Besht lay Dov Baer down “like a circle on the bed,” which may reflect the ancient Jewish mystical technique of placing one’s head between the knees.⁶⁴ While the phenomenological details of this tale remain opaque—to the present-day reader, at least—it is quite clear that the

⁶³ Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 215. Cf. Weiss, “Torah Study in Early Hasidism,” *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism*, 60-61: “It is clear...that this manner of studying the Torah through *devekuth* does not lead to an intellectual concentration on the text, but to a contemplative, emotional concentration. The lights that shine in the holy texts are of doubtful value to the student searching for intellectual understanding.” See also Idel’s formulation: “Penetrating to the core of the letters by the act of cleaving amounts to leaving behind the mental cargo of the word to which that letter belongs and achieving an encounter with the immanent divine force.... This means that what is crucial is not so much the semantic content of the texts to which one is adhering but unknown ciphers that organize those texts, whose efficacy is a matter of belief. The immersion of the student or the person who prays in the text as compounded of discreet [*sic*] letters enables a form of approach that is less dependent on the original content of the canonical texts and more guided by the spiritual propensities of the mystic.” Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 183-184. See also Jacobs’ comment: “Torah study, at least in early Hasidism, involves attachment to the spiritual light inherent in the letters of the Torah and is a devotional rather than an intellectual exercise.” Cf. Jacobs, “Aspects of Scholem’s Study of Hasidism,” 186-187.

⁶⁴ *Shivhei ha-Besht* (Berlin, 1922), 37–38; *Qehal Hasidim*, 25a. See Moshe Idel, *Hasidism*, 353 n. 4.

Besht is reported to have conveyed to Dov Baer some metaphysical content by means of storytelling and some mystical awareness by means of ecstatic recitation.

Buber was certainly attracted to this tale's elements of dearcenization, or what he called "deschematization of the mystery," inasmuch as religious meaning is manifest more in the qualities of live communication than any esoteric principles. However, he would not have appreciated the notion that the Besht's stories contained some concealed metaphysical content. Moreover, he would have repudiated the idea that the potency of the Besht's final teaching was rooted in the mystical contemplation of letters, where the textual recitation was merely, in the words of Idel, "an avenue to a mystical experience" and "a tool for attaining an experience."⁶⁵ For Buber, the revelatory quality of the Besht's religious instruction should not be rooted in any subjective, inner "experience" within the Besht or within Dov Baer, but rather in an intersubjective, interpersonal encounter between them. At a quick glance, Buber's rendition of this *mayse* appears quite straightforward and faithful to the original, yet upon closer examination we can see that he tweaks the text in ways that bend it closer to his embodied theology. In short, his telling hints that Dov Baer's initial lack of understanding and his ultimate illumination had more to do with the dynamics of his encounter with the Besht than with the content, per se, of the teachings, or any internal ecstatic experience.⁶⁶

First of all, Buber clearly detects in the original source that Dov Baer begins with an attitude of objectification, and Buber accentuates this in his version. Indeed, we saw how Dov Baer, the bookish prodigy, journeys reluctantly to the Besht in order "to test him (לנסותו)," and he seems completely uninterested in any of the Ba'al Shem Tov's utterances that are not intellectually stimulating words of "Torah." Yet Buber goes even further to accentuate the I-It

⁶⁵ Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 182, 183.

⁶⁶ See "Die Aufnahme," in *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §124; Hebrew: "Ha-Sipuah," in *Or ha-Ganuz*, 107.

textures of this interaction. When Dov Baer first arrives, he greets the Besht and then, Buber adds, “without even looking at him properly (*ohne ihn auch nur recht anzuschauen*), waited for teachings from his mouth, in order to test and weigh them.”⁶⁷ Buber’s addition here about an absence of eye contact illustrates Dov Baer’s utter lack of interest in the concrete presence of the Besht. Furthermore, whereas the original source informs us that “all of the stories that the Besht told contained very wondrous wisdom, but Rabbi Dov Baer did not understand this,” Buber omits the first part of that line and writes only: “The Maggid did not understand what the tales were supposed to mean *to him*.”⁶⁸ Thus, whereas the original text hints that the Ba‘al Shem Tov’s stories allude indirectly to some esoteric content that Dov Baer fails to discern, Buber’s version suggests that Dov Baer fails to understand because he listens only to that which he already knows and cares about. Buber’s Dov Baer misses the meaning of the stories precisely because he is interested exclusively in scholarly substance. In short, for Buber, the hermeneutic that Dov Baer lacks in the initial meetings is not some mystical mode of interpretation, but rather a certain quality of dialogical attentiveness. In the original Hasidic context it may have been mystically evocative that the Besht’s stories were set in a “wagon” reminiscent of Ezekiel’s chariot; in Buber’s version, however, the reader’s eye would surely be drawn more to the Besht’s gracious dealings with animals and peasants (indeed, Buber’s Besht speaks not of “Gentiles” but of “*Bauern*”).⁶⁹

⁶⁷ On the verb “schauen” and its various locutions in Buber’s thought, see above in chapter one. Buber’s Modern Hebrew rendition does not describe Dov Baer’s lack of eye contact here, but does emphasize that Dov Baer “waited for teachings in the words of his mouth in order to test and weigh them intellectually (בשכלו כדי לבהון אותם ולשקלם).”

⁶⁸ German: “Der Maggid verstand nicht, was die Geschichten *ihm* sollten”; Hebrew: המגיד לא הבין מה יתנוּ ומה יוסיפו לו הספורים האלה (emphasis added).

⁶⁹ On Buber’s “consistent tendency to remove xenophobic elements (against non-Jews)” from Hasidic tales, see HaCohen, “Einleitung,” in *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 24-25.

Now let us turn to the second main issue for Buber in the narrative, namely: What is so powerful about the Besht's final teaching that triggers Dov Baer's illumination? Again, with relatively subtle alterations to the text, Buber hints that the sublime scene has everything to do with interpersonal dynamics. First of all, Buber sets the stage a bit differently: Whereas the original source suggests that Dov Baer returns simply to the house of the Besht, Buber's rendition adds that he enters "his room (German: *seiner Kammer*; Hebrew: בַּחֲדָרוֹ),” a more intimate space.⁷⁰ And whereas the original text suggests that the Ba'al Shem Tov's servant is present in this final scene—remember, the Besht asks him to fetch the *'Etz Hayyim* book—Buber omits any mention of a third person, so one now imagines this late-night meeting as one-on-one. Furthermore, in the original source Dov Baer explains the *peshat*, or plain meaning of the passage, which the Besht deems correct but “without soul.” In Buber's rendition, however, he substitutes the word “interpretation” (German: *Deutung*; Hebrew: פִּירוּשׁ) for the more specific hermeneutical term *peshat*. In this light, the lack of “soul” in Dov Baer's teaching lies not so much in the fact that it is a superficial interpretation or an incorrect interpretation, but that it is *merely* an interpretation, just a product of bookish analysis.⁷¹ While this terminological change appears to be consistent with the original source's elements of “dearcanization,” Buber then introduces additional alterations that steer in a decidedly different theological direction. Whereas in the original *mayse* the Besht presumably attained a state of *devekut* through mystical meditation on the letters and thereby facilitated Dov Baer's ecstatic vision, Buber's version hints rather that the “soul” of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching was revealed precisely through the

⁷⁰ It is likely that Buber justified this decision through recourse to the alternate versions of this *mayse* wherein the Besht lay Dov Baer down “on the bed.” See *Shivhei ha-Besht*, 38; *Qehal Hasidim*, 25a.

⁷¹ Cf. Idel's comment regarding this part of the narrative: “The spiritual riches one brings to the text are of tantamount importance, even more important than the technical knowledge of the ‘plain’ sense of the text.” Idel, *Hasidism*, 174.

dynamics of embodied encounter between the two men. In the original text, the Besht made Dov Baer “stand up” for the climactic teaching—or in alternate versions that Buber consulted, the Besht lay Dov Baer down “in a circle on the bed.” However, Buber introduces his own bodily positions: When the Besht commands Dov Baer to stand up, Buber adds that he then stands “over-against him (*ihm gegenüber*),” and then after the dramatic vision of fire and angels, the Besht again stands “over-against him (*ihm gegenüber*; Hebrew: כנגדו)”—a key term throughout Buber’s writings for the spatiality-cum-spirituality of dialogue.⁷² Thus, for Buber, when Dov Baer first meets the Besht, he does so without even looking at him (*anzuschauen*), but now he beholds him face to face—and this makes all the difference. The audacity of these added details about Dov Baer and the Besht’s physical encounter is even more striking when we consider those versions of the tale in which Dov Baer lay down on the bed, wherein Dov Baer noted that during the Besht’s textual recitation, “I could not see him anymore. I could only hear voices and see awesome flashes and flames.”⁷³ This explicit lack of any interpersonal beholding makes Buber’s depiction of Dov Baer and the Besht standing “over against” each other all the more provocative. And inasmuch as Dov Baer’s peculiar position on the bed “like a circle” may refer to an ancient Jewish mystical technique, Buber’s changes are no less than modifications of the

⁷² For some illuminating examples of Buber’s use of the key term *gegenüber*, see “it bodies over against me (*gegenüber*)” (*IT*, 58; *ID*, 14); “The I of the basic word I-It, the I that is not bodily confronted (*gegenüber leibt*) by a You” (*IT*, 63–64; *ID*, 19); “No thing is a component of experience or reveals itself except through the reciprocal force of confrontation (*Kraft des Gegenüber*)” (*IT*, 77; German: *Ich und Du*, 34); “The man who has acquired an I and says I-It assumes a position before (*vor*) things but does not confront (*gegenüber*) them in the current of reciprocity” (*I and Thou*, 80; *Ich und Du*, 29); “I see it, radiant in the splendor of the confrontation (*Glanz des Gegenüber*). . . . Not as a thing among the ‘internal’ things, not as a figment of the ‘imagination,’ but as what is present (*das Gegenwärtige*)” (*IT*, 61; *Ich und Du*, 10–11); “The created work is a thing among things and can be experienced and described as an aggregate of qualities. But the receptive beholder may be bodily confronted (*leibhaft gegenüberreten*) now and again” (*IT*, 61; *Ich und Du*, 11). These few examples demonstrate sufficiently that the term *gegenüber* is indicative of dialogical encounter and that it gestures especially toward bodily presence.

⁷³ *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, 38; *Qeḥal Ḥasidim*, 25a.

very postures and physicality of religious illumination. It is fitting, therefore, that Buber emphasizes specifically that the fire passed “before the eyes of Rabbi [Dov] Baer” and that he personally “heard the angels...until his senses forsook him.” In Buber’s imagination, the Maggid is out of his mind—not in the sense of insanity, but in the sense of bursting out of heady inner-monologue into the palpable perceptivity of dialogical life, represented here in a wild storm of sensation.

These alterations to the original text reflect Buber’s convictions that religious truth does not lie in esoteric interpretations or mystical experiences so much as in opening oneself to the immediacy of earthly encounter. Whereas the Besht tells Dov Baer in the original source, “It is true that the *peshat* is as you said, but your learning (הלימוד שלך) has no soul,” Buber’s Besht says: “The interpretation you said is correct, but you have no knowledge, for your knowledge (German: *dein Wissen*; Hebrew: ידיעותיך) has no soul.” In this alternate formulation, Dov Baer is not instructed to develop new methods of studying, but rather new ways of knowing—in a wholly dialogical, embodied sense. It follows, then, that Buber omits the concluding clause of the narrative, where Dov Baer “stayed there with the Besht and studied with him great and profound wisdoms.” For Buber, it is enough that Dov Baer simply “stayed.”⁷⁴

Thus, Buber’s “deschematization of the mystery” amounts to a radicalization of Hasidic “dearcanization”: The latter involved a shift from interpretation to recitation, where, above all, the letters themselves—as opposed to their semiotic significance or their esoteric-exegetical layers—propelled mystics into the depths and heights of divinity, and thus represented deep

⁷⁴ In an alternate account of this meeting between Dov Baer and the Besht in Bodek, *Seder ha-Dorot*, 16:24, the retelling is virtually identical to the version in *Keter Shem Tov*, but it continues at the end to emphasize all the esoteric wisdom that the Besht taught Dov Baer after their relationship began. Since we know from elsewhere in Buber’s Hasidic corpus that Buber worked quite extensively with *Seder ha-Dorot*, Buber’s abrupt conclusion to this legend is all the more striking.

linkages between signifier and signified, material text and mystical meaning, below and above. This ontological linkage was, of course, rooted in the Hasidic notion of *hishtalshelut*, or the “enchainment” of all levels of being. However, Buber elevated—or lowered, as it were—this enchainment to a more radically monistic mode of unification, where sensory attunement and concrete attentiveness in embodied existence is fundamentally homologous with spiritual vision. One no longer melts through the shells of letters and words to the metaphysical state of cleaving—now one lends inner ears to the very vibrations of speech, and opens eyes to the gestural expressions of speakers. Spiritual illumination is no longer thought to radiate within one or another individual—now it is between them, over-against them. In the original tale, the Besht’s teachings were indeed instances of “indirect” or “emotional communication of the esoteric,” as Naftali Loewenthal notes,⁷⁵ but Buber’s Besht conveys nothing more transcendent than a moment of everyday existence—the unprecedented present, pressing upon Dov Baer’s senses that had been lost in thought. The original *mayses* about Dov Baer and the Besht’s first meeting do indeed signal Hasidism’s “leap from the theosophic dimension of kabbalah to the ecstatic-theurgic,”⁷⁶ but Buber’s version takes an additional leap—away from the interiority of ecstasy and the otherworldliness of theurgy, toward an eminently relational and embodied religiosity. In Buber’s estimation, it was precisely in and through the concreteness of interpersonal encounters that Hasidic sages expressed their most essential and transformative teachings. The encounter itself was theological instruction, and everything else was commentary.

⁷⁵ See Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, 23-25.

⁷⁶ Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the Habad School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 18.

The Hermeneutics of Silence in Buber's Hasidic Theology

For Buber, Hasidic theology was not necessarily verbal at all. To be sure, “speaking Torah”—*zogen toyre*, as it rolled off Yiddish tongues—was the main term for religious instruction in Hasidism, but even this phrase appears at times in Hasidic literature to refer to nonverbal communication, and Buber accentuates this rare usage. Indeed, except in rare cases, he reserves that precise locution—“*Thora sagen*” or “*Lehre sagen*”—as a technical term for nonverbal theological teaching.⁷⁷ Consider, for example, the following teaching from *Seder ha-Dorot mi-Talmidei ha-Besht*, which actually appears immediately before the statement we examined earlier regarding the Maggid's shoes:

[Rabbi Leib, son of Sarah] used to say about the rabbis who “speak Torah”: What does it mean to “speak Torah”? Isn't it that one should take heed and take notice so that all his actions and conduct will be Torah and he himself will be Torah? That is, one should conduct himself in all his ways according to the Torah, so that people will learn from him and from his conduct, his actions, his movements, his cleavings, and his speaking (ומדיבור). His conduct itself should be Torah to learn from. As it is said, “There is no speech and there are no words; their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (Ps. 19:4).⁷⁸

⁷⁷ For the single exception among all the tales of Buber's *Die Erzählungen*, when the phrase “*Thora sagen*” or “*Lehre sagen*” refers literally to vocalized homiletics, see *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §982 (this tale does not appear in English translation). In this tale, according to Buber's interpretation, Rabbi Hayyim of Zans refuses “to speak Torah (*Thora zu sagen*)” out of fear that the original purity of Hasidic discourse has been corrupted. Buber uses the phrase “speaking Torah” in reference to this tale in *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 162; English: *TH*, II:12. See also Buber's description of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin in his introductory essay to *Die Erzählungen* as “a distinguished expounder of Torah (*Thora Sager*).” *TH*, II:16; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 165. Note: Buber is less strict with his use of the phrase לומר תורה in his Modern Hebrew tales in *OhG*.

⁷⁸ Bodek, *Seder ha-Dorot*, 41. Cf. Pinhas of Dinovitz, *Sifte Tsaddiqim*, 67; Rakats, *Sifte Qodesh*, 26:16. It seems that Buber consulted primarily with the version in *Seder ha-Dorot*. Although he cites all three sources in his unpublished notebook, he cites only *Seder ha-Dorot* and *Sifte Tsaddiqim* in the source index to his *Or ha-Ganuz*, and his tale adheres far more to the former than to the latter. In any case, the versions in *Seder ha-Dorot* and *Sifte Qodesh* are virtually identical, and the alterations that Buber imposes, which we shall discuss shortly, apply equally to both of them. The text in *Seder ha-Dorot* reads:

הוא היה אומר על הרבנים שאומרים תורה מה זה שאומרים תורה הלא יראה וישגיה האדם שכל עשיותיו והנהגותיו יהיה תורה והוא בעצמו יהיה תורה היינו שיתנהג בכל דרכיו עפ"י התורה עד שילמדו בני אדם ממנו ומהנהגותיו ומתנועותיו ומדיבורו ומדיבורו והנהגותיו עצמם תהא תורה ללמוד מהם ע"ד שנאמר אין אומר ואין דברים בלי נשמע קולם בכל הארץ יצא קום ובקצה תבל מליהם.

Buber's version is very similar to the original, but a closer look reveals his efforts to eliminate all elements of verbal religious instruction.⁷⁹ When the text says that one's "conduct, movements, cleavings, and speaking" should be Torah from which to learn, Buber omits only the last action: "speaking." In this subtle alteration, we witness Buber's embrace of the strongest possible reading of the source, indicating a purely non-verbal way of "speaking Torah," a wholly embodied theological instruction. A similar hermeneutical impulse is evident in Buber's translation of the psalmic verse into German. Certainly, the proof-text served already to affirm silence, but whereas the original Hebrew indicated that "their voice is not heard (בלִי נשמע קולם)" and "their words (מליהם) [are gone out] to the end of the world," Buber renders these phrases ultimately as "their voice remains inaudible (*unhörbar*)" and "their murmuring (*Geraun*) [goes out] to the end of the world."⁸⁰ Thus, for Buber's Rabbi Leib, there are no words whatsoever to be discerned in genuine embodiments of Torah, even in the deepest reverberations of the tsaddiq's motions. Buber presents here a maximally sharp contrast between verbal and nonverbal instruction. Indeed, he entitles this tale "To Say a Teaching and to Be a Teaching" (*Lehre sagen und Lehre sein*), highlighting the opposition between two modes of religious pedagogy.⁸¹

⁷⁹ See *MBW* 18, §297; Buber, *Or ha-Ganuz*, 162.

⁸⁰ German: "Kein Sprechen ists, keine Rede, unhörbar bleibt ihre Stimme, über alles Erdreich fährt aus ihr Schwall, an das Ende der Welt ihr Geraun" (emphasis added). Buber, *Werke*, 3:287. Note that this is a later version of Buber's own tale, printed in 1963. In his first published version of this tale in German in 1949, his translation of the psalmic verse here was more conservative: "Kein Spruch und keine Worte, nicht wird ihre Stimme gehört, an die ganze Erde geht aus ihre Meßschnur, ans Ende der Welt ihre Kundgebungen." *MBW* 18, §297. While Buber's rendering of מליהם as "Kundgebungen" (expressions, declarations) reflects some effort to eliminate the utterance of words, Buber's later edition goes even further to do so.

⁸¹ Although it is clear that Buber's rendition of this legend is based primarily on *Seder ha-Dorot*, it is also possible that he justified his omission of "speaking" through reference to the version in *Siftei Tsaddiqim*, which bears no mention of speaking. Indeed, this may be the reason that Buber lists *Siftei Tsaddiqim* but not *Siftei Qodesh* as a source for this tale in his source index to *Or ha-Ganuz*, despite the fact that his version is far closer to the latter than it is to the former. That said, however, the *Siftei Tsaddiqim* version relates "speaking Torah" not only to one's movements and conduct but also to one's "thoughts (מהשבחו)," which implies elements of mentality and language that Buber strives to minimize.

Moreover, immediately after Buber quotes this teaching in the opening paragraph of the “Body (*Leib*)” section of his introduction to *Der große Maggid*, he cites another related Hasidic pronouncement: “The wise man shall aspire that he himself be a perfected teaching and all his deeds bodies of instruction (*Körper der Unterweisung*).”⁸² It is unclear what source Buber cites here, but the words “*Körper der Unterweisung*” are surely a translation of the classical Rabbinic phrase גופי התורה—literally “bodies of the law” or “bodies of instruction,” yet technically and traditionally referring to the “essential parts” or “fundamental principles of the Torah,” particularly the laws.⁸³ The hyperliteral turn of phrase was fairly common in Hasidic homiletics, drawing upon an earlier Zoharic gloss,⁸⁴ but such hermeneutical maneuvers were generally employed to differentiate between the external “bodily” Torah and the inner “spiritual” Torah.⁸⁵ In contrast, the unidentified teaching in Buber’s essay dissolves the very distinction between spiritual and bodily wisdom, as it offers a rare formulation of “speaking Torah” in an unmistakably nonverbal sense. Moreover, Buber’s translation of גופי התורה as “*Körper der Unterweisung*” is particularly bold, as it emphasizes the religiously *instructive* potency of Hasidic existence.⁸⁶

⁸² Buber, “Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement,” *OMH*, 128-129; German: *Der große Maggid*, xxix.

⁸³ See b. Berakhot 63a; b. Hagigah 11b.

⁸⁴ See Zohar, parshat Be-ha’alotekha, 3:152a.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Shimon Menahem Mendel Wodnik, *Ba’al Shem Tov* (Lodz, 1937), parshat Yitro, p. 37; *Degel Maḥaneh Ephraim*, parshat He’ezinu, s.v. “כי לא דבר ריק הוא מכם”; Menahem Naḥum of Chernobyl, *Me’or ‘Enayim* (Brooklyn, 2006), parshat Netsavim, 260; *ibid.*, parshat Be-ha’alotekha, 359; Tsadok ha-Kohen of Lublin, *Peri Tsaddiq* (Jerusalem, 2005), parshat Be-ha’alotekha. The earlier Zoharic gloss of גופי התורה, cited above, was similarly a way to direct mystical consciousness to the essential spiritual content concealed within the external “bodies” of Torah.

⁸⁶ In general, Buber renders the term תורה in his Hasidic writings as either “Thora,” as in the phrase “Thora sagen” above, or “Lehre” (Teaching), as in the title “Lehre sagen und Lehre sein” that he gives to this very tale. For a very different “Neo-Hasidic” portrayal of the phrase “body of Torah”—namely, as the dry technicalities, rather than the spiritual essence, of Torah—see Nicham Ross, “I.L. Peretz’s ‘Between Two Mountains’: Neo-Hasidism and Jewish Literary Modernity,” in *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 116-118. Whereas Buber casts the “bodies of Torah” as the embodiment of religious meaning, Peretz celebrated the “soul of Torah” as the superior expression of meaning.

In Buber's Hasidic anthologies, the preeminent sage of nonverbal "speaking Torah" is Rabbi Mendel of Vurke (1819–1868), the so-called "Tsaddiq of Silence."⁸⁷ Rabbi Mendel presided during an era that Buber identified with the decline of the movement, which was not so much a degradation "in the sphere of the spirit and teachings" of Hasidism, "but in that of its inner structure."⁸⁸ That is, while tsaddiqim verily continued to offer innovative discourses and intriguing sermons, their interpersonal relationships and communal bonds lacked the immediacy of their predecessors;⁸⁹ they eroded the earlier Hasidic unities of learning and life, teaching and prayer;⁹⁰ they neglected the bond between heaven and earth⁹¹—and, for Buber, these were all simply different faces of the same fundamental breakdown of the Hasidic *Botschaft*. In truth, Buber's depiction of the decline of Hasidism was strikingly similar to his critique of religion and intellectual life in his own time, which he saw as dangerously disembodied and asocial.⁹² Buber suggests that some tsaddiqim along the way were critically aware of the movement's decline, and his portrayals of their protests shed at least as much light on his own sensibilities. Indeed, Buber concludes his entire, extensive introduction to *Die Erzählungen* with such a portrayal of Mendel of Vurke: "By reading between the lines we discover that it is particularly Mendel of Vorki's reaction to the hour in which 'the present too is corrupted.' The time for words is past. It has become late."⁹³ And Buber asserts that this rebbe "gave an immediate and forceful

⁸⁷ See Glenn Davis Dynner, "Vurke Hasidic Dynasty," in *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Vurke_Hasidic_Dynasty>, accessed July 16, 2017.

⁸⁸ Buber, *TH*, II:7.

⁸⁹ "The real problems of the second period...emerge in three different sets of relationship: that of the zaddik to the congregation, of the zaddikim and their congregations to one another, and that of the zaddik to his school." Buber, *TH*, II:7. Cf. *ibid.*, 13, 39.

⁹⁰ Buber, *TH*, II:23, 30, 35, 37-38, 40,

⁹¹ Buber, *TH*, II:39, 44.

⁹² See my more detailed discussions of this above in chapter 1 and below in chapter 4.

⁹³ Buber, *TH*, II:46. For thoughtful reflections on this statement, see Simon, *Ye'adim, Tsemitim, Netivim*, 110-111.

expression to the crisis, not so much in one or the other of his sayings, as through his silence.”⁹⁴

In an era when teachings floated vacuously above the grounds of life, practice, and relationships, Rabbi Mendel was known to sit in silence with his Ḥasidim at their Third Meal gatherings, where it was customary for the tsaddiq to “speak Torah.” Indeed, these pregnant moments *were* Rabbi Mendel’s “words” of Torah. Buber emphasizes that his silence “was not based on a negative principle; nor was it merely the absence of speech. It was positive and had a positive effect. Mendel’s silence was a shell filled with invisible essence, and those who were with him breathed it.”⁹⁵ Just as Buber claimed that in epochs of spiritual flourishing disciples actually live with their master and “‘learn’ by being in the radius of his breath,”⁹⁶ here Buber envisions the palpable atmosphere of Rabbi Mendel’s silence, wafting as if on the soundwaves of words.

In the original Hasidic *mayses* that Buber consulted, the editors intimate that Rabbi Mendel communicated discrete content in his silence, as if telepathically.⁹⁷ However, as we should expect, Buber envisions the tsaddiq’s wordless teachings in a different light. This is pointedly and poignantly evident in a series of three consecutive tales that Buber presents in his chapter on Rabbi Mendel. The first one Buber drew from Azriel Ḥayyim Zamlung’s *Eser Zekhiyot*, which reads as follows:

Once, after the death of his father, the Sabba Qaddisha of Vurke,⁹⁸ when he [Rabbi Mendel] and his older brother, Rabbi David of Amshinov,⁹⁹ started to form a community (למשוך עדה), they met together in one place and [the ḥasidim] made a meal in their honor. Rabbi David spoke Torah extensively (אמר תורה הרבה), but he [Rabbi Mendel] did not

⁹⁴ Buber, *TH*, II:46; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 188.

⁹⁵ Buber, *TH*, II:46; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 188.

⁹⁶ Buber, *TH*, I:18; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 143.

⁹⁷ On telephatic transmission in Hasidism, see Garb, *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah*, 108-112, and references therein. Notions of direct mind-to-mind communication between teacher and student were also present among the earlier kabbalists of Safed and among various Sabbatean figures.

⁹⁸ Rabbi Mendel’s father, Yitshak Kalish (1779–1848), served as rabbi in Gowarczów and Ruda, and later became a rebbe in Vurke.

⁹⁹ Rabbi Yitshak’s eldest son, Ya‘akov David (1814–1878), founded the Amshinov dynasty, still functioning today in Israel and the United States.

speak. Rabbi David asked him, “My brother, why are you not speaking Torah (אומר תורה)?” and [Rabbi Mendel] responded to him, “‘There is no speech and there are no words; their voice is not heard,’ but nevertheless, ‘Their line is gone out through all the earth’ [Ps. 19:4].” Also, one time the tsaddiqim of the generation asked him [Rabbi Mendel], “Why do you not speak Torah (אומר תורה)?” and he responded to them, “Shim‘on ha-Imsoni would interpret every ‘את’ in the Torah, and yet when he reached ‘You shall be in awe of (את) the Lord your God’ [Deut. 6:13], he desisted and he spoke no more (ויותר לא אמר).”¹⁰⁰ And the intention is understood: When he reached ‘awe of the Lord,’ he was no longer able to speak Torah (לומר תורה).”¹⁰¹

This double-*mayse* offers two instances in which Rabbi Mendel responds to the skeptical, perhaps impatient, question of why he does not “speak Torah.” In both cases, he answers in the form of citations. To his brother, he quotes the same psalmic verse that we encountered earlier in Rabbi Leib’s teaching about “speaking Torah” through one’s very bodily actions—and Rabbi Mendel’s interjection of “nevertheless (אף על פי כן)” in the middle of the verse accentuates the sublime way in which even wordlessness can conduct far-reaching messages. In the second instance, Rabbi Mendel responds to the illustrious “tsaddiqim of the generation” with a Talmudic anecdote about when it is and isn’t appropriate to interpret Scripture. However, Rabbi Mendel’s paraphrase here diverges somewhat from the ancient version. Most notably, he omits the Rabbinic explanation that one generally receives a reward for interpreting the “אתים” of Scripture, but in the case of the verse “You shall be in awe of (את) the Lord your God” one

¹⁰⁰ This is a paraphrase of a teaching in b. Pesahim 22b; b. Bava Kamma 41b; b. Qiddushin 57a; b. Bekhorot 6b.

¹⁰¹ In his unpublished notebook, Buber cites this story as Azriel Ḥayyim Zamlung, *‘Eser Zekhiyot* (Piotrków, 1931), 40. See Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, section on Mendel von Worki, s.v. #32, “Kein Spruch u. keine Rede.” In addition to this source, HaCohen cites idem, *‘Eser Nifla’ot* (Piotrków, 1932), 36. There are only very slight differences between those two versions of the *mayse*, none of which will be significant for our discussion of Buber’s changes. Strangely, Buber cites this tale in his source index for *OhG* as Eleazar Dov Geiman, *Gan Hadasim* (Lublin, 1928), although it does not appear therein. The version in *‘Eser Zekhiyot* is as follows:

פ"א לאחר הסתלקות אביו הסבא קדישא מווארקי זצלה"ה והתחילו למשוך עדה הוא ואחיו הגדול הה"ק ר"ד זצלה"ה מאמשינוב ונודמנו יחד במקום אחד ועשו סעודה עבורם והה"ק ר"ד אמר תורה הרבה והוא הקדוש לא אמר ושאל לו הה"ק ר"ד אחי מפני מה אין אתה אומר תורה והשיב לו אין אומר ואין דברים בלי נשמע קולם אעפ"כ בכל הארץ יצא קום גם פ"א שאלו לו צדיקי הדור מפני מה שאינו אומר תורה והשיב להם שמעון העמסוני הי' דורש כל אתין שבתורה כיון שהגיע לאת ד' אלקיך תירא פירש ויותר לא אמר והכוונה מובן כיון שהגיע ליראת ד' פירש ולא הי' יכול עוד לומר תורה :

receives a reward through desisting. Instead, Rabbi Mendel meditates on the mystical-ascetic act of פרישות, “desisting,” in the face of God-fearing, and the speechlessness that accompanies such a moment. For Rabbi Mendel, the commentator does not simply avoid interpreting the “את” in this passage; “he desisted,” and Rabbi Mendel adds, “he spoke no more” Torah. And, for Rabbi Mendel, this cessation of speech is not merely a pious restraint to be rewarded; it is a spiritual state wherein one is “*no longer able* to speak Torah.”

Of course, for Buber, “speaking Torah” is not necessarily verbal, so one might expect him to mitigate this *mayse’s* sharp dichotomy of silence versus speaking Torah. Indeed, this is precisely what he does:

Some time after Rabbi Yitzhak’s death, when each of his sons already had his own communities, they once met in a town far from the home of either and a banquet was held in their honor. Rabbi David delivered a lengthy lecture, but Rabbi Mendel was silent. “Why don’t you also speak words of the Teaching?” asked his brother. “As it says in the Psalms,” he responded, “There is no speech and no talk, neither is their voice heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth.”¹⁰²

* * *

Some time later, when a great zaddik asked Mendel why he did not speak Torah (*Thora sage*; אומר תורה), he replied: ‘The Gemara says that Simeon of Emmaus interpreted all the passages of Scripture in which the word *et* is used.¹⁰³ But when he reached the verse where this word introduces the utterance: ‘Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God,’ he desisted.’ One who reaches fear itself does not interpret anymore.’¹⁰⁴

In Buber’s rendition, Rabbi Mendel never once utters the phrase “speaking Torah,” and thus he leaves open the possibility that he does indeed speak Torah in his silence.¹⁰⁵ Conversely, in the

¹⁰² On Buber’s various translations of Psalms 19:4, see also our discussion above of Buber’s tale “Lehre sagen und Lehre sein.”

¹⁰³ Buber’s footnote: “This indicates the accusative.”

¹⁰⁴ Buber, *TH*, II:300-301; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §1229; Hebrew: *OhG*, 452-453.

¹⁰⁵ For a similar alteration, see Buber’s tale “Lehre” in *Die Erzählungen*. Whereas the original source in *Irin Qaddishin* noted that Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin “sat at the table and didn’t speak Torah (ולא אומר תורה), and didn’t even say one word; he just wept a great deal,” Buber writes that he “did not speak words of the Teaching to his students, as he usually did at this hour, but rather was silent (*schwieg*) and wept.” Thus, Buber refrains from using the technical phrase “speaking Torah,” leaving open the possibility that the Ruzhiner rebbe does speak Torah in his silence. In the same spirit, Buber replaces the Ruzhiner’s negative lack of words with the positive action of being “silent.” See Israel of Ruzhin, *Irin Qaddishin Tinyana*

same spirit, Buber separates Rabbi David completely from the act of “speaking Torah,” as if that verbose orator lacked any real concept of it: Whereas in the original source Rabbi David “spoke Torah extensively (אמר תורה הרבה)” and then asked his brother why he does not also “speak Torah (אומר תורה),” Buber’s Rabbi David “delivered a lengthy lecture/interpretation (*einen ausgedehnten Lehrvortrag*; דרוש ארוך בתורה)” and then asked Rabbi Mendel why he does not also “speak/voice words of the Teaching (*sprichst...Worte der Lehre*; משמיע...דברי תורה).” Furthermore, whereas Rabbi Mendel in the original text “did not speak (לא אמר)” Torah at this meal, Buber notes that Rabbi Mendel “was silent (*schwieg*; שתק).” Buber is unwilling to conclude that Rabbi Mendel failed to speak Torah in his silence. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Buber saw his silence as more than just “a negative principle” or “the absence of speech. It was positive and had a positive effect.”¹⁰⁶

In the second part of the *mayse*, Buber does keep the phrase “speaking Torah” (*Thora sage*) in the mouth of an anonymous “great zaddik” (yes, Buber portrays this interaction also as a one-on-one dialogue, in contrast to the original text’s “tsaddiqim of the generation”), although even this sage fails to grasp the form of Rabbi Mendel’s wisdom. For very significant reasons, Buber then removes the phrase “speaking Torah” from Rabbi Mendel’s response: Whereas in the original source, Rabbi Mendel described the exegete who “desisted and spoke no more (פירש ויותר לא אמר)” Torah, for he was “no longer able to speak Torah (לומר תורה),” Buber’s Rabbi Mendel says simply that the exegete “desisted (*zog er sich zurück*; פרש),” for one in such a state of fear “does not interpret (*deutet*; דורש) anymore.” Thus, Buber’s Rabbi Mendel differentiates—implicitly, somewhat—between sermonic “interpreting” and genuine “speaking Torah,” and

(Bartfeld, 1907), 24b; Buber, “Teaching,” in *TH*, I:103; German: “Lehre,” *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §135. We shall have more to say about this tale below.

¹⁰⁶ Buber, *TH*, II:46; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 188.

thereby does not necessarily affirm the assumption of his inquisitor. Any minimally knowledgeable orator can offer “interpretations,” but Buber reserves “speaking Torah” for a more inspired mode of religious expression, which does not necessarily involve words. When one attains higher states of theological awareness, loquacious lectures no longer serve—“one who reaches fear itself does not interpret anymore”—and yet the illuminated individual may nevertheless, or perhaps all the more, speak Torah from this place.

Indeed, the tale that Buber presents immediately after this one confirms the notion that Rabbi Mendel did actually speak Torah to his ḥasidim in silence. He draws it from Rakats’s collection *Siah Sarfei Qodesh*, and the original reads as follows:

One time the holy rabbi Mendel of Vurke sat all night with the ḥasidim—not even a whisper was heard, and there was great decorum (דרך ארץ גדול)—and in the end he said the following: Happy is the Jew who knows that ‘one’ means ‘one.’” (And these are lofty words.)¹⁰⁷

This anecdote is all the more striking because it takes place at the tsaddiq’s *tisch*, his “table,” the quintessential cite of speaking Torah. Rabbi Mendel’s ḥasidim wait on the edges of their seats with praiseworthy patience and politeness—great *derekh erets*—for the holy words of their leader. And anyone who suspects that the tsaddiq conveys no wisdom here is mistaken. After a whole night in the absence of speech, Rabbi Mendel intimates that the Torah of this *tish* was an exposition of the meaning of oneness, where the takeaway of the teaching and the quality of the silence were one and the same. Indeed, Buber vacillated between the titles “One” and “The Silent Night” for this tale before settling on the latter.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Rakats, *Siah Sarfei Qodesh*, vol. 4, p. 86. The original language is as follows:

עוד סיפר לי הרב הנ"ל אשר פעם אחת ישב הרה"ק ר"מ מווארקו כל הלילה עם החסידים ולא נשמע אף דיבור קל והי' דרך ארץ גדול ולבסוף אמר בזה"ל וואויל דעם יוד וואס וויסט אז אחד איז טייטש אחד (והם דברים רמים) :

¹⁰⁸ Buber entitles this tale “Einer” in his unpublished notebook. See Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, section on Mendel v. Worki, #32.

However, there are two main ambiguities in this source, which bear significantly upon our discussion. First of all, the text provides little information whatsoever about the experiences of the ḥasidim at the table. We know that they were extremely quiet and respectful, but we learn nothing about their receptivity, or lack thereof, in the presence of their silent rebbe. Was this atmosphere simply a “negative” lack of words, or did they perceive some “positive” element? Second, how are we to understand Rabbi Mendel’s pedagogy and epistemology at this *tisch*? Did he transmit some esoteric content or “knowledge” to his ḥasidim, or did he guide them somehow through the silence to a more intuitive sense of “knowing”?

Buber’s version offers definite resolutions to these questions:

Once Rabbi Mendel spent an entire night with his ḥasidim. No one spoke (*redete*; דיבר), but all sensed great reverence and a great uplifting. In the end the rabbi said: “Happy is the Jew who knows that the meaning (*Sinn*) of ‘one’ is one!”¹⁰⁹

Thus, for Buber, the significant details of this scene are not that “not even a whisper was heard and there was great decorum,” as in the original, but that the ḥasidim “sensed” (*spürten*; הרגישו) a great transformation in the room and in themselves. To be expected, then, Buber casts the absence of speech as a positive presence. This alteration sets up the significance of the tale’s conclusion, where Rabbi Mendel adds his vocal seal to the silent seminar on “one,” which is evidently not to be comprehended as conceptual information but rather “sensed” as full-bodied “*Sinn*.”

Such a vision of “speaking Torah” in the medium of embodied presence gains even more clarity in the third tale of this series, which Buber draws also from Rakats’s *Siah Sarfei Qodesh* and entitles “Speech in Silence (*Rede im Schweigen*).” The original text is as follows:

One time [the ḥasidim] sat for hours at the table of the holy rabbi, Rabbi Mendel of Vurke, and not even a whisper was heard due to the great fear and very great decorum.

¹⁰⁹ Buber, *TH*, II:301; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §1230; Hebrew: *OhG*, 453.

The silence was so great that even the hovering of a fly on the wall was heard. And following the grace after meals, the holy rabbi of Biala¹¹⁰ said, “Now that was a *tisch*! He studied me and my veins burst, but I didn’t back down. I responded to all the things that he asked me.” And it was wondrous because nothing was heard, as everything occurred through thought and hinting.¹¹¹

Just as in the previous *mayse*, this silence at the rebbe’s *tisch* is portrayed here as polite and reverential. But in his exclamation, the Bialer rebbe suggests that Rabbi Mendel had been conducting intense interrogations telepathically with those at the table, penetrating their minds with his questions and reading their minds for their answers.

As we might expect, Buber presents the scene in a different light:

Rabbi Mendel’s hasidim once sat silently together at his *tisch*. The silence was so great that one could hear the fly on the wall. After the *tisch*-blessing (*Tischgebet*), the rabbi of Biala said to his neighbor: “What a *tisch* we had today! He probed me so [deeply] that my veins threatened to burst, but I stood firm and responded to all questions.¹¹²

Thus, as before, Buber emphasizes the active, reciprocal nature of the silence in the room.

Whereas Rakats’s hasidim sustained the silence before their master out of “great fear and very great decorum,” Buber’s hasidim simply “sat together silently (*saßen...schweigend beisammen*; (ישבו...יהד ושחקו),” ready and receptive. Most significantly, however, Buber erases the elements of telepathic communication, in favor of more embodied modes of encounter. In the original text, Rabbi Mendel “studied (גילערינט)” the Bialer’s thoughts like a mind-reader, but Buber says enigmatically that the tsaddiq “probed” or “tested” (*geprüft*; בחן) him. And whereas Rakats’s Bialer boasts that he “didn’t back down (נישט געלאזט),” Buber’s Bialer notes that he

¹¹⁰ Dov Berish of Biala (1820–1876) was the spokesman and closest disciple of Rabbi Mendel. After the latter’s death, most Vurke hasidim accepted Dov Berish as their new rebbe.

¹¹¹ Rakats, *Siah Sarfei Qodesh*, vol. 4, 86. The original text is as follows:

עוד סיפר לי הרב הנ"ל אשר פעם אחת ישבו אצל שלחן הרה"ק ר"מ מווארקא איזה שעות ולא נשמע אף דיבור קל כי הי' מורא גדול ודרך ארץ מאוד ואף זכוב על הכותל נשמע פריחתו כך הי' גודל השתיקה ואחר ברכת המזון אמר הרה"ק מביאלע איז דאס היינט גיוועזין א טיש ער האט מיט מיר גילערינט און גיטרענט די אדערין און איך האב מיך נישט געלאזט איך האב איהם גיענטפערט אויף אלע זאכען וואס ער האט מיך גיפרעגט והיי פלא כי לא נשמע שום דבר אך הכל הי' במחשבה והי' ברמיזה :

¹¹² Buber, “Speech in Silence,” in *TH*, 301; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §1231; Hebrew: *OhG*, 453.

“stood firm (*standgehalten*; עמדתי בשלי)” in the pressing presence of the tsaddiq. This difference may appear only stylistic, but “*standhalten*” is a key term in Buber’s philosophical writings for capturing the awakened posture or *Haltung* of dialogue. For example, in the section of his 1929 essay *Zwiesprache* entitled “Responsibility/Responsiveness (*Verantwortung*),” Buber writes about what it takes to perceive and respond to the unique “question” posed by every moment of existence, and he describes this dialogical “attentiveness” as “withstanding (*standhalte*) creation as it happens.”¹¹³

In fact, Buber’s reflections on responsiveness in this essay shed much light on his understanding of the Bialer rebbe’s report. Rakats’s formulation, “I responded to all the things that he asked me (איך האב איהם גיענטפערט אויף אלע זאכען וואס ער האט מיך גיפרעגט)”, suggests that Rabbi Mendel posed literal questions about various matters (*zakhn*). In contrast, Buber’s Bialer says more vaguely, “I responded to all questions (*ich...habe auf alle Fragen Antwort gegeben*; והשבתי תשובות על כל שאלותיו).” From this context alone, it is unclear how, exactly, Buber understood that statement. Although the original source went on to note explicitly that the content of this conversation was conveyed psychically “through thought and hinting,” Buber omits that sentence completely and just lets the enigmatic words, “I responded to all questions,” linger. Our previous hermeneutical analyses of Buber’s tales do provide some assistance, but Buber’s discursive reflections in *Zwiesprache* elucidate even more. For Buber, the dual imagery of responding (*Antworten*) and responsibility (*Verantwortung*) are foundational in the dynamics of dialogue. However, this does not imply that one is literally answering a verbalizable question. Buber clarifies,

¹¹³ *BMM*, 16; German: *DP*, 162. On Buber’s use of the term “*standhalten*” in his dialogical writings, see also his note to Ronald Gregor Smith about this term regarding a draft of the latter’s English translation of *I and Thou*. Buber suggests that “*standhalten*” should be translated as “to hold one’s ground.” Martin Buber Archives, ARC. Ms. Var. 350 008 741a.I, s.v. Buber’s correction to p. 33, line 14.

Responding to what?

To what happens to one, to what is to be seen and heard and felt (*spüren*). Each concrete hour allotted to the person, with its substance drawn from the world and from destiny, is speech for one who is attentive (*dem Aufmerkenden*). One who is attentive; for no more than that is needed in order to begin to read the signs that are given to you.¹¹⁴

As mentioned earlier, this “attentiveness” is exercised precisely when one “stands firm (*standhalte*) [with] creation as it happens,” and while Buber employs the image of “speech” to characterize this happening, he underscores the fact that this is more primordial than any sequence of words. “This speech has no alphabet,” he writes. And furthermore, “the sounds of which the speech consists—I repeat it in order to remove the misunderstanding, which is perhaps still possible, that I referred to something extraordinary and larger than life—are the events of the personal Everyday (*die Begebenheiten des persönlichen Alltags*).”¹¹⁵ From these explicit reflections, in tandem with our hermeneutical findings, it is clear that in Buber’s view, Rabbi Mendel’s silent “questions” at the *tish* are not formulable inquiries communicated through thought, but rather stirring “events” conveyed concretely through his very presence over-against attentive Hasidim. In Buber’s eyes, the tsaddiq is here a master at eliciting attentiveness, making his presence—and presence itself—sensible and striking, without any words at all. And it is with this spiritual-corporeal gravity that Rabbi Mendel addresses his hasidim.

Now, then, how might Buber conceive of the Bialer’s “responses” to Rabbi Mendel? His reflections in *Zwiesprache* are again illuminating: “The words of our response are, like the address, spoken in the untranslatable speech of action and letting be (*des Tuns und des Lassens*)—whereby the action may behave like a letting be, and the letting be may behave like an action. What we say thus with the being is our entering upon the situation, into the

¹¹⁴ *BMM*, 16; German: *DP*, 161. I have emended the English translation slightly according to the original German.

¹¹⁵ Buber, *BMM*, 16; German: *DP*, 162.

situation.”¹¹⁶ And, for Buber, this ephemeral yet timeless *Situation*—the renewed sense of being situated in life as a responsive, responsible subject—is immeasurably transformative.

A situation of which we have become aware is never finished with, but we subdue it into the substance of lived life. Only then, faithful to the moment, do we experience a life that is something other than a sum of moments. We respond to the moment, but at the same time we respond for it, we take responsibility for it. A newly-created concrete reality has been laid in our arms.

In Buber’s religious imagination, Rabbi Mendel’s ḥasidim emerge from the silent *tisch* with such a clarified air of dialogical responsibility in their “newly-created concrete reality.” It is in this spirit that Buber’s Bialer does not just blurt out to the crowd about his personal experience, as he seems to have done in the original source; rather, he turns “to his neighbor (zu seinem Nachbarn)” to relate his gleanings. The call to respond, the heightened attention to responsibility—this is the “Torah” that Buber’s Rabbi Mendel speaks in silence at the table. And it is also the core of the Bialer rebbe’s testimony, “I stood firm, and responded to all questions.” For Buber, the renewal of beholding and responsibility is itself the religious kerygma of this teaching. The message of this *mayse* is one of embodied theology, irreducible to dogma or concept, yet as sensible as body and breath.

Speaking Torah Aloud

There are, of course, numerous instances in Buber’s tales when tsaddiqim speak Torah discursively to their disciples, and it is instructive for us to examine how Buber portrays that art of effective theological oration. Indeed, Buber drew many of his “tales” from collections of homiletical teachings, which means that they are themselves based, however indirectly, on actual

¹¹⁶ *BMM*, 17; German: *DP*, 163.

sermons that were delivered orally. In general, Buber blends these *derashot* into his anthologies through transforming them into a tsaddiq’s response to a disciple’s question, or by adding narrativizing phrases such as “Rabbi ___ once said” or “Rabbi ___ expounded this verse as follows.” Evidently, Buber felt licensed to employ such literary devices, insofar as the *derashot* were originally oral events—mainly from discourses at *tisches* or synagogue services—and, as mentioned already, Buber regarded his own work as a restoration of Hasidic discourse to its original orality or “spokenness.” However, what will be most relevant for our purposes are those tales and teachings that function as meta-discourse and reflect explicitly upon the very act of speaking Torah. And we shall see how Buber emphasizes in his renditions of these texts the perils of public rhetoric and, in certain cases, its utter futility.

When executed properly, homiletic utterances in Hasidism are “parts of a unified thinking life (*einer denkerischen Lebenseinheit*),”¹¹⁷ so pious ones speak only about that which they know in the most personal, concrete sense. In the words of Rabbi Simḥah Bunem, according to the collection *Ḥashavah le-Ṭovah*, “If I wanted to speak basic interpretations, I could do a lot of that. But the fool says what he knows, and the sage knows what he says.”¹¹⁸ Thus, the unwise are quick to regurgitate information that they have ingested, while sages say only what they have genuinely integrated into their being. Consequently, the latter are more often silent. Indeed, Rabbi Bunem goes on to laud the contemplative quiet of the sage, in contrast to the sporadic silence of the fool who merely wishes to seem wise.¹¹⁹ However, Buber appreciates Bunem’s

¹¹⁷ Buber, *TH*, II:16; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 165.

¹¹⁸ Ḥanokh Henikh Hakohen Levin, *Ḥashavah le-Ṭovah* (Piotrków, 1929), 61.

רבי ר"ב ז"ל אמר, באם הי' ברצוני לומר פשעטליך, יכול אני הרבה, אך השוטה אומר מה שהוא יודע, והחכם מה שהוא אומר הוא יודע.

¹¹⁹ The teaching continues: “[Sometimes] the fool is also silent, but when the fool is silent it’s because he wants to seem wise.” *Ibid.*

words primarily as they pertain to sagacious *speech*.¹²⁰ He omits the continuation of the teaching about silence, and Buber's Bunem aims his critique specifically at "elaborate scriptural interpretations (*kunstreiche Schriftdeutungen*)," as opposed to just any "basic interpretations (פשעטליך)." Thus, Buber is especially wary of pretentious posturing and rhetorical flourish in religious discourse, which springs more from effortful narcissism than from elemental experience.

In this spirit, Buber anthologizes a *mayse* in which a learned scholar compliments Barukh of Medzhibozh on being a beautiful orator and the tsaddiq responds, in Buber's formulation, "Before I speak beautifully (*schön*), may I be made dumb!"¹²¹ And Buber presents a homiletical teaching of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin about the biblical command, "Make for Me an altar of earth...and if you make for Me an altar of stones, do not build it of hewn stones" (Exod. 20:21), wherein the Ruzhiner rebbe interprets this to mean, as Buber renders it, "The altar of earth is the altar of silence, which pleases God above all. But if you do make an altar of words, do not hew and chisel them, for with such prideful artistry you would profane it."¹²² Buber presents this teaching in the middle of a series of tales about personal wholeness and humility before God.¹²³

¹²⁰ Buber, "The Fool and the Sage," in *TH*, II:256; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §1085; Hebrew: *OhG*, 417.

¹²¹ Buber, "Fine Words," in *TH*, I:94; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §115. The original source that Buber consulted is Barukh of Medzhibozh, *Butsina de-Nehora ha-Shalem* (Lvov, 1903), 19. Buber's wording softens the particularistic sass of the original, which reads: "If I speak so beautifully, as in a theatrical, Gentile speech (דְרוּשׁ גּוֹי וְאוֹלָמִי), better that I should be made dumb and not speak at all!"

¹²² Buber, "The Right Kind of Altar," *TH*, II:59; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §639. The original sources that Buber consulted was Israel of Ruzhin, *Irin Qaddishin* (Warsaw, 1885), 29; Hayyim Avraham Deitschman, *Shemu 'ot Tovot – Razin de-Orayta* (Chernovtsy, 1885), 23a. Buber adds in his version that the altar of silence "pleases God above all." Note: This is a prime example of Buber's frequent transformation of homiletical teachings into legendary anecdotes. In this particular case, Buber adds the words: "The rabbi of Rizhyn expounded this as follows..." On Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin, see David Assaf, *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

¹²³ See *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §§638-640. These three tales appear within a larger section on religious practice in Buber's chapter on Israel of Ruzhin.

Hasidic speech, including all religious instruction, should draw fully upon the reservoir of one's life, without treading beyond that.

However, Buber's selection of materials reminds readers that the efficacy of religious speech is ultimately less a matter of conveying the right content or words than about truly being *heard*, in a dialogical sense. According to a *mayse* in the collection *Amarot Tehorot*, Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin once said the following after speaking Torah at his *tisch*:

All the words that I spoke at my table, I see within myself that not one was received in any heart. And if you ask how I know this, as I am neither prophet nor son of a prophet, I will tell you: Because, in truth, words that come from the heart enter the heart. And if the words do not enter the heart of the listener, then Hashem, blessed be He, wants to act lovingly for the person who speaks so that the words are not left homeless, heaven forbid, and thus all the words return to the heart of the speaker. And I see that all my words have returned to me, and the words have slammed me back in the heart, so I know that they did not enter the heart of any man.¹²⁴

In this rich monologue, the Kobriner rebbe suggests that his words are only effective if they penetrate to the very core of listeners. In his own rendition of this *mayse*, Buber emphasizes the textures of dialogical reciprocity in the tsaddiq's message. Readers familiar with Buber's philosophical writings will surely hear echoes of his meditations on "the word that is spoken (*das wort, das gesprochen wird*)"¹²⁵ where, in this tale, Buber translates the "words that I spoke (הדיבורים שדברתי)" into German as "Worte, die ich sprach," and even more so when he renders "the heart of the speaker (לב המדבר)" as "das Herz, aus dem sie [die Worte] gesprochen worden."

¹²⁴ Moshe of Kobrin, *Amarot Tehorot* (Warsaw, 1910), 34.

פ"א אמר כל הדיבורים שדברתי בשולחני אני רואה בעצמי אשר אף אחד לא נמצא שקבל ללבו, ואם תשאלו מניין אני יודע הלא לא נביא אנכי ולא בן נביא, אך אני אגיד לכם כי באמת דברים היוצאים מן הלב נכנסים ללב ואם לא נכנס הדיבורים ללב השומע אזי השי"ת שרוצה לעשות חסד עם האיש המדבר שלא ישארו חלילה הדיבורים בלי מקום אזי כל הדיבורים חוזרים בחזרה ללב המדבר ואני רואה אשר כל הדיבורים שלי כולם חזרו אלי און עם האט אקלאפ גיטוהן די דיבורים מיר אין הארצין צריק, ע"כ אני יודע אשר לא נכנס ללב שום איש.

¹²⁵ See especially Martin Buber, "The Word That Is Spoken," in *KM*, 110-120; German: "Das Wort, das gesprochen wird," in *MBW*, vol. 6, 125-137. See also Mendes-Flohr, "Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger in Dialogue," 2-25.

The original *mayse* employed imagery of words that float between speaker and listener, in search of a resting place, but Buber lays greater emphasis on the active receptivity of listeners. Whereas the original text described words that “do not enter the heart of the listener (לא נכנס הדיבורים ללב (השומע),” Buber clarifies that this refers precisely to the heart “that does [not] receive (*empfinge*) them.” Buber uses this verb “*empfangen*,” a key term in his writings for dialogical receptivity, twice in this tale to underscore the active engagement of the listener.¹²⁶ He also highlights this receptivity even further with another related key term, “*aufnehmen*,” in the very title he gives to the tale, “Unreceived (*unaufgenommenen*) Words.”¹²⁷ For Buber, the Kobriner’s image—words that are spoken, yet knock back on the heart from whence they came—is a legendary reflection of a failed encounter, or what Buber calls a “mismeeting (*Vergegnung*).”¹²⁸ With such a lack of

¹²⁶ Regarding the term *empfangen*, see, for example, “Der Mensch *empfängt*, und er *empfängt* nicht einen ‘Inhalt’, sondern eine Gegenwart”; “Der Sinn kann *empfangen* werden, aber er kann nicht erfahren werden.” Buber, *ID*, 130-131. See also “Man besinnt sie [die Wahrheit in her Welt des Menschen] nicht, man sagt sie nicht aus, man vernimmt sie nicht, sondern man lebt sie, une man *empfängt* sie als Leben.” *MBW*, 17:209-210.

¹²⁷ In Buber’s Hasidic tales, the term *aufnehmen* and its cognates tend to denote an eminently interpersonal and dialogical mode of learning. For example, see Buber’s portrayal of the Besht’s “Geschichten, die gerade vermöge ihrer Primitivität und anscheinenden Ungeistigkeit den Hörer aufrühren, bis er sie als Hinweis auf seine eigenen heimlichsten Nöte erfaßt und *annimmt*” (*MBW*, vol. 18.1, 140). Also, in his explanation of how the tsaddik teaches his true disciples, Buber suggests that the interaction must attain a personal intimacy: “er muß sich mit dem Volk so abgeben, daß es ihn *aufnehmen* kann” (*ibid.*, 134). Given what we observed earlier in Buber’s rendition of how Dov Baer became a disciple of the Besht, it is also telling that Buber entitled that narrative “Die Aufnahme,” literally “The Reception” (*ibid.*, §124), and according to his unpublished notes he had also considered calling it “Die Annahme.” Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. a loose page entitled “Baer von Mesritsch.” Finally, it is certainly significant that Buber reminds his readers repeatedly that the term *Kabbalah* is related etymologically to “aufnehmen”: “Merke wohl, daß das Wort *kabbala* von *kabbel*, annehmen, aufnehmen.” *Ibid.*, §875; cf. Buber, *Der große Maggid*, xxxiv. For illuminating examples of Buber’s use of the term in his other philosophical and dialogical writings, see *ID*, 114-115; *Vom Geist des Judentums* (Münich: K. Wolff, 1916), 89. See also Buber’s note to Ronald Gregor Smith regarding how to translate the etymologically related term “vernehmen,” where Buber stresses that this should not be rendered loosely as “become aware” but rather literally as “hear.” Martin Buber Archives, ARC Ms. Var. 350 008 741.I, s.v. Buber’s correction to p. 83, lines 11-12.

¹²⁸ See Buber, *Meetings*, 18.

personal connection, when speech fails to pierce through hearing minds into listening hearts, then religious teachings are lifeless—or at least dormant until the next opportunity.

One much discussed *mayse* about the Besht offers an even more striking lesson about the destiny of an ineffectively transmitted teaching. The earliest published version, recorded in *Shivhei ha-Besht* reads:

Once a man wrote down the *Torah* of the Besht, as he heard it. One time the Besht saw a demon walking and holding a book in his hand. [The Besht] said to him, “What is this book that you are carrying in your hand?” He responded to him, “This is the book that you composed.” Then the Besht understood that a man was writing down his *Torah*. He gathered all of his followers and asked them, “Who among you is writing down [my] *Torah*?” The man admitted it and he brought the writings to [the Besht]. The Besht examined them, and he said, “There is not even a single word here that I said.”¹²⁹

This *mayse* functions, in part at least, as a warning against committing oral “Torah” to writing. From this perspective, the problem that the Besht identifies pertains specifically to the medium of religious instruction.¹³⁰ Hence, his statement that “is not even a single word here *that I said* (שאמרתי).” Of course, there is an irony inherent in this interpretation of the story, as this very statement of the Besht is ultimately disseminated and appreciated through writing. Another possible reading of the *mayse* is that the problem lay not so much in the medium of writing as in the reliability of the scribe. Indeed, Rabbi Pinḥas of Korets tells a different version of the story along those lines:

The Besht told that there was someone who was writing down his words of Torah, and [the Besht] commanded the preacher to examine [these writings]. [The preacher] said that there was not a single word of his words therein, and the Besht said, “Because he did not

¹²⁹ *Shivhei ha-Besht* (Kapust, 1815), 23a.

פ"א כתב איש אחד תורת הבעש"ט מה ששמע ממנו פ"א ראה הבעש"ט ששד א' הולך ואוחז ספר בידו אמר לו מה זה הספר שבידיך שאתה נושא השיב לו זה הספר שחברת אז הבין הבעש"ט שיש איש אחד שכותב תורתו וקיבץ כל אנשיו ושאל אותם מי בכם כותב תורת הודא אותו האיש והביא לו כתבים ועיין בהם הבעש"ט ואמר אין כאן אפילו דבור אחד שאמרתי :

¹³⁰ See Idel's comment: “What went wrong is not a matter of bad intentions or sheer misunderstandings: it seems that, as in Plato's famous critique of writing, it is the very nature of the medium that is imagined as problematic, and not the faulty manner of its performance.” Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 472. Cf. Green, “The Hasidic Homily: Mystical Performance and Hermeneutical Process,” 238.

listen for the sake of heaven, and thus he was enwrapped in an evil force (קליפה) and heard other words.”¹³¹

In this alternate version of the *mayse*, the Besht is not necessarily perturbed by the fact that someone was writing down his teachings—although it seems to make him nervous—but rather that the scribe was a poor listener and thus distorted the teachings. Indeed, the preacher confirms that the scribe’s manuscript is thoroughly flawed, and the Besht’s explanation for this is that the man “did not listen for the sake of heaven.” He listened wrong, and thus he heard wrong.

In Buber’s rendition, he blends the two versions of the *mayse* into a single narrative, and while he has much to say in general about the spiritual superiority of oral versus written communication, this is evidently not the main point that he wants to make in his formulation:

It is told: A disciple secretly wrote down all the discourses that he had heard from the Baal Shem. One day the Baal Shem saw a demon going through the house, carrying a book in his hand. He asked him: “What is that book in your hand?” “This is,” answered the demon, “the book that you composed.” The Baal Shem then understood that there was a student who had secretly written down his discourses. He gathered all of his followers and asked: “Who among you wrote down my teaching?” The scribe admitted it and brought him what he had recorded. The Baal Shem inspected it for a long time, page by page. Then he said: “There is not a word that I have spoken. You did not listen for the sake of heaven, and so the evil force clothed itself in you and you heard things that I did not say.”¹³²

For most of the tale, Buber follows the version in *Shivhei ha-Besht*, yet he incorporates some significant changes. First, he adds the word “secretly (*insgeheim*)” twice in the narrative to emphasize that the man acted surreptitiously, committing the words of the Besht’s “discourses

¹³¹ Pinhas of Korets, *Midrash Pinhas he-Hadash* (Warsaw, 1910), 9. Cf. Israel Friedman of Ruzhin, *Pe'er li-Yesharim* (Jerusalem, 1921), 29b. Buber cites both of these sources, along with *Shivhei ha-Besht*. The original language in *Midrash Pinhas* is as follows:

סיפר מהבעש"ט שאחד הי' כותב ד"ת משמו, וצויה את המוכיח לעיין, ואמר שאין בו ד"א מדבריו, ואמר הבעש"ט כי לא שמע לש"ש, ע"כ נתלבש בו קליפה, ושמע ד"א :

¹³² See Buber, “Writing Down,” *TH*:66; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §54; Modern Hebrew: *Or ha-Ganuz*, 85.

(*Lehrreden*)” to memory only to then commit them to writing behind closed doors.¹³³ This reference to secrecy highlights a consequential quality of the man’s listening. At the end of the tale, Buber offers his own idiosyncratic blend of the two versions of the *mayse* that maximizes images of the scribe’s poor listening: First, Buber’s Besht’s declaration, “There is not a word that I have spoken (*nicht ein Wort, das ich gesprochen habe*),” derives from the quotation in *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, “There is not even a single word here that I said (איין כאן אפילו דבור אחד שאמרתי),” and Buber’s distinctive language of spokenness here is certainly evocative of his dialogical writings.¹³⁴ However, Buber then follows this utterance immediately with a quotation from *Midrash Pinḥas*, “You did not listen for the sake of heaven.” Buber is clearly drawn to this Beshtian line as a statement about the scribe’s quality of listening, but Buber introduces a crucial alteration: Whereas in *Midrash Pinḥas* the Besht relates this to the preacher who had just confirmed the manuscript’s faultiness, Buber imagines that the Besht says this directly to his disciples after personally examining the manuscript himself. This change—and Buber’s total omission of the preacher from this narrative—recaptures the possibility in *Shivḥei ha-Besht* that the scribe’s recordings could very well have been verbatim and yet nonetheless wrong. Finally, Buber’s tale concludes with a reformulation of the Besht’s statement from *Midrash Pinḥas* that the scribe “heard other words (שמע ד”א),” as “You heard things that I did not say (*du hast gehört, was ich nicht sprach*).” Here again, Buber emphasizes the spokenness of the Besht’s teachings,

¹³³ Although this part of Buber’s tale follows *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, which refers consistently to the Besht’s spoken and scribed teachings as his “*Torah*,” Buber seems to borrow the term “discourses” (*Lehrreden*, lit. “words of the teaching”) from the locution “words of Torah (דברי תורה)” in *Midrash Pinḥas* and *Pe’er li-Yesharim*. It is perhaps significant that Buber uses the term “teaching (*Lehre*)” only when the Besht refers to his own “*Torah*,” intimating that the scribe failed to penetrate beyond the recordable “words” of the Besht’s theological instruction.

¹³⁴ The formulation in *Midrash Pinḥas*, where the preacher says that “there was not a single word of [the Besht’s] words therein (שאיין בו ד”א מדבריו),” is less conducive with Buber’s language of spokenness. It is understandable, therefore, why Buber drew from *Shivḥei ha-Besht* in this case in order to hint that the scribe may have heard, but he did not listen.

which was not only intranscribable but more essentially imperceptible to the sneaky scribe. For Buber, therefore, while orality does verily convey layers of meaning that writing cannot capture, the scribe's error was not so much his impulse to transcribe the Besht's teachings—indeed, Buber himself, as well as the authors of *Shivhei ha-Besht* and *Midrash Pinhas*, participate in the written transmission of these teachings—but rather his inability to listen properly in the moment of spokenness. For Buber, the scribe failed to appreciate that the Besht's teachings were more than sequences of words, concepts, and schema; they were unique, irreducible events.¹³⁵

In a similar spirit, Buber highlights and accentuates the eminently personal nature of religious instruction in Hasidism. According to one *mayse*, Rabbi Bunem complained that “when there is a big crowd on the holy Sabbath, it is difficult for him to speak Torah because Torah must be for the sake of every single individual, Torah must include every single individual, and everyone must receive his own [Torah].”¹³⁶ In other words, the *tsaddiq* must strive to articulate various levels of meaning simultaneously in order to stir and stimulate the various members of their diverse communities. And Buber's Bunem adds, “What I impart to all, I withdraw from each.”¹³⁷ Every saying must also be an unsaying. There is no credal formula that fits all

¹³⁵ Cf. Arthur Green's comment that, in addition to a warning against writing down oral secrets, as Jewish mystics long believed that the esoteric mysteries “are by definition not amenable to the medium of writing,” the tale at hand in *Shivhei ha-Besht* may also suggest “that each teaching was offered at a particular moment, to a certain individual who needed to hear it, and in circumstances that were lost once the teaching was abstracted from its original setting and placed in a book.” Green, “The Hasidic Homily,” 237-238. Green's alternative, “perhaps more ‘existential’” interpretation of the tale would certainly resonate for Buber. However, Buber's own interpretation, now revealed through our hermeneutical analysis, departs even more from concerns about oral versus written “media” in order to make a forceful point about how to listen when a person speaks.

¹³⁶ Israel Berger, *Simhat Yisrael* (Piotrków, 1910), 62; Shmuel of Shinova, *Ramatayim Tsofim* (Warsaw, 1908), 96. HaCohen, as well as Buber in the source index of his *OhG*, cite only the latter source. However, in his unpublished notebook, Buber cites only the former source. See Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, section on Simcha Bunam, #93, “Jedem seine Lehre.” The version in *Simhat Yisrael* reads:

כתב בספר רמ"צ [רמתים צופים], שמעתי מאדמו"ר מפרשיסחא ז"ל שאמר כשיש עולם [sic] גדול על ש"ק אזי קשה לו לומר תורה כי צריך תורה בשביל כל אחד ואחד ולכלול בתורה כל אחד ואחד, וכל אחד יקבל שלו וכו' :

¹³⁷ Buber, “All and Each,” *TH*, II:248; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §1055; Hebrew: *OhG*, 410.

individuals, or even a single individual at all times. In is incumbent upon sages to share words of teaching to ignite the fires of their ḥasidim, but the essential, most combustible energy transmitted through those torches of Torah is ultimately beyond words.

Sometimes in Hasidic literature the capacity of tsaddiqim to speak different messages in the same breath to diverse discipleships is represented in a wholly mystical light. Let us turn here to two versions of a *mayse* that Buber would eventually re-present in his own terms. The first formulation is found in *Irin Qaddishin*, composed by the Maggid of Mezritsh's great-grandson Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin:

There was [once] a debate between students of the Great Maggid about the Torah that the Maggid, may his memory be a blessing, had spoken. One claimed that the Maggid said one thing, and the other claimed that the Maggid said otherwise. And the Maggid, blessed be his memory, answered them: “These and those are the words of the living God,¹³⁸ for the words that I spoke include the words of everyone [i.e., all interpretations]. End of the words of the Maggid. And he, blessed be his memory, said that there are seventy faces of Torah,¹³⁹ and in fact the Torah is drawn from the place of true oneness. Indeed, in the very source of its root, the Torah is oneness; only when it is drawn into these worlds does it become seventy faces.¹⁴⁰

In his response to his students' debate, the Maggid offers a theosophical explanation—one that is fairly common in Jewish mysticism—for how a single passage of Torah may diverge into multiple, legitimate interpretations. However, when he then applies this comparison to interpretations of his *own* spoken “Torah,” the Maggid implies a more radical lesson, namely that he is so unified with divinity that his own words emerge from the very source of God's Torah.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ b. Eruvin 13b.

¹³⁹ The notion that there are seventy “faces” or hermeneutical possibilities in each part of Torah was first introduced in the midrashic collection Bamidbar Rabbah 13:16, and it became a widespread concept in medieval Jewish thought. See, for example, Zohar 26a.

¹⁴⁰ *Irin Qaddishin*, 98.

סיפר אשר בין תלמידי המגיד הגדול ז"ל היה וויכח על תורה שאמר המגיד ז"ל. זה אומר כך אמר המגיד וזה אומר כך אמר המגיד. והשיב להם המגיד ז"ל אלו ואלו דברי אלקים חיים. כי הדיבורים שאמרתי כולל דברי כולם ע"כ דברי המגיד ז"ל. ואמר הוא ז"ל כי יש שבעין אנפין לאורייתא. ובאמת נמשכת התורה ממקום האחדות האמיתי. אמנם התורה במקור שרשה היא אחדות רק כשנמשכת לאלו העולמות נעשה שבעין אנפין לאורייתא.

¹⁴¹ See Idel, *Absorbing Perfection*, 476; idem, *Hasidism*, 241.

When the tsaddiq delivers oral teachings at his tisch, according to this view, he reveals a new, polysemous, “canonical text,” as it were, reflecting the “semi- or quasi-divine status” of the rebbe in various Hasidic circles. After all, if the interpretations of the Maggid’s disciples are deemed “words of the living God,” then how much more so are the utterances of their master.¹⁴²

A second version of this *mayse* is told by Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin to his own ḥasidim in Sadigura:

Once on the night of the holiday *Shavuot*, [Israel of Ruzhin] sat at the table and did not speak Torah or say anything at all. He just wept a great deal. And on the second night, he behaved just as he had on the first night. However, following the grace after meals, he said: “When the students walked to their homes after the Maggid spoke Torah at the table, they reviewed the [Maggid’s] Torah among themselves. One said he heard it this way, and the other said he heard it a different way, for every individual heard it in his own way. And I say that this is no great novelty, as the Torah has seventy faces, and every individual heard the Torah from the Maggid according to his particular face of the Torah.” And he said: “But when one looks intently at the faces, one does not need to speak Torah, for ‘the show/recognition of their faces witnesses against/answers them’ (Isa. 3:9).”¹⁴³

The Ruzhiner rebbe recapitulates the Maggid’s teaching that his Torah, like God’s Torah, refracts into multiple meanings, yet the Ruzhiner states as well that every one of the Maggid’s ḥasidim apprehended the words through the prism of his own personal “face of Torah.” The precise meaning of this assertion and the whole scene at the Ruzhiner’s *tisch* are ambiguous. On one hand, the rebbe seems to suggest that a silent, mystical contemplation (*histakelut*) of “faces” reveals the primordial Torah and thus precludes the need to “speak Torah” at all. Whether this practice involves gazing at the physical faces of his ḥasidim, who represent here the “seventy

¹⁴² On the Maggid’s miraculous capacity to address multiple audiences at once, see also Mayse, *Beyond the Letters*, 472-476.

¹⁴³ *Irin Qaddishin Tinyana*, 24c.

פעם אחת בליל חג השבועות ישב [ישראל מרוזין] בשלחן ולא אמר תורה ולא דיבר אפי' דיבר אחד רק בכה מאוד ובליל ב' נהג ג"כ כמו בליל א' רק אחר ברהמ"ז [ברכת המזון] אמר הלא המגיד זצ"ל כשאמר תורה על השלחן ואח"כ כשהלכו לביתם הי' חוזרים התלמידים בניהם את התורה זה אמר באופן זה שמעתי וזה אמר באופן אחר כי כל אחד ואחד שמע באופן אחר [..] ואומר אני שאין זה חידוש כי יש ע' פנים לתורה וכל אחד ואחד באיזה פנים שהי' לו בהתורה באותו פנים שמע את התורה מהמגיד זצ"ל ואמר אבל כשמסתכלין היטב בהפנים אין צריכין לומר תורה כי הכרת פניהם ענתה במ וד"ל :

faces of Torah,” or some other visualization technique remains unclear. Nevertheless, according to this reading of the *mayse*, the Ruzhiner’s wordless weeping would appear to be the visible manifestation of his immediacy with the singular Source of Torah, and this powerful performance, along with the contemplation of faces, appears to transmit the essence of Torah to his disciples.¹⁴⁴ From this perspective, then, it is significant that this *tisch* takes place on Shavuot, the holiday of Revelation *par excellence*, commemorating the receiving of Torah directly from God on Sinai. In this light, the Ruzhiner’s gloss of Isaiah 3:9 would remove the words from their condemnatory biblical context—“The show of their faces witnesses against them (כי הכרת פניהם ענתה בם)”¹⁴⁴—and interpret them more literally, “The recognition/regarding of their faces answers them,” as if gazing into the students’ faces reveals the very meaning or “answer” that one would normally seek through exegetical discourse.

On the other hand, a very different reading of this *mayse* is conceivable. Idel suggests that Israel of Ruzhin’s silent weeping is due to his “tragic situation” in the remote and “relatively forgotten territory” of Sadigura, where there were no rigorous or inspired interpreters among his disciples, so any sermon he shared would be for naught.¹⁴⁵ He looks at the faces of his students and observes metoposcopically that their faces do not actually correspond to the seventy “faces” of Torah. Consequently, the Ruzhiner looks back longingly to his great-grandfather’s illustrious community in Mezritsh, where the Maggid’s ḥasidim had perceived rich multiplicities of

¹⁴⁴ On the idea that the Ruzhiner contemplated his students’ faces and thereby affected them in this tale, see Ariel Mayse, *Beyond the Letters*, 475 n. 1592. On weeping as a perennial technique in Jewish mysticism, including Hasidism, for attaining revelations and the disclosure of secrets, see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 75-88. On mystical techniques of weeping in late-medieval Safed, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Weeping, Death, and Spiritual Ascent in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism,” in John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane, eds., *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 207-247.

¹⁴⁵ Idel, *Hasidism*, 241, 243. For the full discussion, see Idel, *Hasidism*, 241-244; idem, *Absorbing Perfections*, 476-480.

meanings and thus infused their tsaddiq's utterances with the polysemous potency of canonical texts, that is, where the lush hermeneutical matrix of that scholarly circle made the Maggid's words *Torah*. According to Idel,

This alienation between the aristocratic leader and his apparently common followers seems to have been the existential basis for his crying. To deliver a sermon meant—at least according to the implicit message of this passage—to open the gates for multiple interpretations, to offer to everyone in the audience something that belonged uniquely to him. Torah without the capacity to arouse the imagination of its listeners is worthless, and it would be better for the *Zaddiq* not to deliver a sermon that lacks this quality.¹⁴⁶

Thus, the Ruzhiner looked out at his pitiful ḥasidim and concluded that they were unfit for his Torah, even at the rebbe's holy *tisch* on Shavuot. From this perspective, then, the significance of the Ruzhiner's citation of Isaiah 3:9 was quite concordant with the biblical context, “the show of their faces witnessed against them.”¹⁴⁷

In his chapter on the Maggid, within a sequence of tales about the effect that the Maggid had on his disciples, Buber presents his own synthesis of the two *mayses* at hand. This anthological positioning, as well as the title that he chooses, “Teaching (*Lehre*, תורה),”¹⁴⁸ demonstrate immediately much of what Buber found salient in this tale. He was clearly intrigued by the notion that the Maggid could convey arrays of direct, personal messages to different disciples through a single speech-act.¹⁴⁹ Buber was also evidently so moved by the Ruzhiner's silence that he incorporated this element into his tale, despite the fact that this was in a chapter on the Maggid. All in all, he was inclined to focus on the complex picture that this pair of *mayses* painted about the meaning and medium of religious instruction. Such communication must be

¹⁴⁶ Idel, *Hasidism*, 242.

¹⁴⁷ Indeed, this is how the verse is translated in Idel, *Hasidism*, 241; idem, *Absorbing Perfections*, 476.

¹⁴⁸ Buber entitles the original pair of *mayses* in his personal notebook as “The Debate of the Students (Die Disputation der Schüler),” but entitles his version of them “Teaching” in all his actual publications of it. Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. Der grosse Maggid, #9.

¹⁴⁹ For a related tale about the Besht that Buber includes in his anthology, see Buber, “Die Rede,” in *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §39 (Die Rede); *TH*, I:55; *OhG*, 77.

personal and multi-dimensional, deeper than any static content that a crowd could ingest and regurgitate. And, as we shall now see, Buber accentuates these elements of directness and dynamism:

On the eve of the Festival of Revelation, the Ruzhiner once sat at his Tisch and did not speak words of the Teaching to his students, as was customary at this hour, but rather was silent and wept. And it was the same on the second night. After the Tisch-blessing, however, he spoke:

“Oftentimes, when my ancestor, the holy Maggid, taught at his Tisch and the students went home and conferred about the words of their teacher, each one quoted him differently and each thought that he had heard it in this way and no other, and speech was pitted against speech. And there was no resolution, for when they came to the Maggid and asked him, he would only repeat the traditional saying: ‘These and those are the words of the living God.’ But when the students reflected, they understood the meaning of the contradiction. For, at its source, the Torah is one; [only] in the worlds it has seventy faces. But if one truly beholds one of its faces, then there is no longer any need for words or teachings; for the features of the eternal face speak to him.”¹⁵⁰

For Buber, Israel of Ruzhin’s silent weeping is not in any way indicative of forlornness or disapproval, as the original source may have suggested. Indeed, Sadigura was the same “dirty village” where Buber personally had his first eye-opening encounter with Hasidism,¹⁵¹ so perhaps it did not even occur to him that the Ruzhiner’s conduct there was in protest against the spiritual impotence of his community. Rather, in Buber’s imagination, the Ruzhiner’s silence and closing words in the *mayse* were no less profound than the Maggid’s discourse. Indeed, once again, Buber omits any explicit suggestion that the Ruzhiner did not “speak Torah,” thereby leaving open the possibility that he did indeed convey theological meaning through his silence.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Buber, “Lehre,” *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §135; English: “Teaching,” *TH*, I:103; Hebrew: “תורה”, *OhG*, 110.

¹⁵¹ See Buber, “My Way to Hasidism,” in *HMM*, 52-53.

¹⁵² Whereas the original source stated that Rabbi Israel “did not speak Torah or say anything at all (ולא דיבר אהד אמר תורה ולא דיבר אפי' דיבר אהד),” Buber notes that he “did not speak words of the Teaching to his students, as was customary at this hour (*sprach nicht wie sonst in dieser Stunde zu seinen Schülern Worte der Lehre*).” And whereas Rabbi Israel said in the original source that when one contemplates the faces of Torah, “one does not need to speak Torah (אין צריכין לומר תורה),” Buber’s Rabbi Israel says simply, “there is no longer any need for words or teachings (*da bedarf es keiner Worte und keiner Lehre mehr*).” As discussed above, Buber generally reserves the precise phrasing “*Thora sagen*” or “*Lehre sagen*” as a technical term for nonverbal, embodied communication of theological meaning.

However, Buber's most consequential alterations occur near the end of the tale. In both original sources, the Maggid's students are baffled by a stark contradiction, and then there is a resolution. In the first version, the Maggid responds, "These and those are the words of the living God," and then the source supplements this with a theoretical explanation about the seventy faces of Torah that emanate out of divine oneness, and so on.¹⁵³ In the second version of the *mayse*, the Ruzhiner himself goes on to explain the presence of the contradiction, applying the paradigm of the "seventy faces of Torah" to the ḥasidim themselves, whom he casts as the "seventy faces of Torah," and then—depending on how one interprets the text—he either affirms a silent contemplation of faces as penetrating beyond the fragmentation of interpretations, or he denounces his manifestly ignorant students as unfit for Torah. However, while Buber incorporates the Maggid's statement, "These and those are the words of the living God," he then shifts the tale's focus to the insight of the students themselves. Initially, the Maggid's traditional citation strikes them as irrelevant to the contradiction they are trying to resolve, but then, "when the students reflected (*besannen*), they understood the meaning (*Sinn*) of the contradiction." The students realize that their contradictory interpretations reflect the "seventy faces of Torah," and thus there is nothing inherently wrong with their contradictoriness. However, Buber's Ruzhiner goes on further to elucidate the "*Sinn*" that these students develop through their "*Besinnung*," which departs finally from any theoretical frame: "But if one truly beholds one of its faces (*Schaut einer aber eins ihrer Antlitze wahrhaft an*)"—already, here, Buber has substantially transfigured the contours of Rabbi Israel's statement. This is neither metoposcopic examination of a crowd's faces nor mystical visualization of a primordial oneness on the hither side of multiplicity; this is dialogical seeing, (*An*)*schauen*, over-against the face of another *singular*

¹⁵³ The source goes into significantly greater theoretical depth than the excerpt that I presented above. For the entire teaching, see *Irin Qaddishin*, 98-99.

individual. And whereas in the original source, Rabbi Israel suggests that after contemplation of the faces there is no longer any need for him “to speak Torah (לומר תורה),” in Buber’s version we learn more universally, through the experience of the students themselves, that after truly beholding a single face, “there is no longer any need for words or teachings (*da bedarf es keiner Worte und keiner Lehre mehr*).” Dialogical encounter unveils a new type of speaking Torah. At first the students had quarreled with one another, parsing and dissecting the lecture of their teacher, but now they loosen their grips on analytical debates, turn to one another, and thereby grasp the deeper meaning of the Maggid’s polysemous speech-act. As Buber suggests elsewhere, “Central to Hasidism is faithfully to endure the contradiction and thus to redeem the contradiction itself.” And one does not accomplish this like the earlier Kabbalists who mapped out the metaphysical origins of earthly contradictions, but rather in the way of the ḥasidim, through a transition from objective “knowledge (*Erkenntnis*)” to vital, “Biblical ‘knowing (*Erkennen*).”¹⁵⁴

Buber then recasts the Ruzhiner’s closing words in this new light. In the personal presence of face-to-face beholding, the need for clever words and captivating teachings dissipates, “for the features of the eternal face speak to him (*denn die Züge des ewigen Angesichts reden zu ihm*).” This is Buber’s reformulation of Isaiah’s declaration, “כי הכרת פניהם ענתה בם”. His rendering of the biblical term הכרה as the “features” or “expressions” of the other’s face is reminiscent of the tale that Buber entitled, in Hebrew, “הכרה,” wherein Israel of Kozhenits had “recognized (הכיר)” a new, embodied epistemology in the Maggid’s face.¹⁵⁵ And this emphasis on the features of the face also reaffirms that Buber envisages this gaze in a very concrete sense. His rendering of

¹⁵⁴ Buber, “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” *OMH*, 178; German: “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz,” *Eranos Jahrbuch 1934*, 363.

¹⁵⁵ *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §546; *Or Ha-Ganuz*, 249.

“פניהם” as “the eternal face” does not suggest some immaterial or impersonal countenance. Indeed, as in Buber’s dialogical writings, this eternity pertains to the timelessness of the I-Thou relation itself, which is nonetheless manifested in the very momentary presence and ephemeral particularity of the person, here and now. In Buber’s own words, “When a man loves a woman so that her life is present in his own, the You of her eyes lets him behold (*schauen*) a ray of the eternal You.”¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, Buber’s translation of the biblical words “ענתה בם” in this Hasidic tale is telling. Clearly, given his interpretation of the *mayse* as a whole, Buber’s Ruzhiner would not wish to suggest that the face of another “witnesses against him.” However, given Buber’s own theological sensibilities, he also would not want to say that beholding the features of another’s face provides some discrete, formulable “answer” in lieu of sermons, as a literal translation of “ענתה” would suggest. Hence, Buber’s revision, “for the features of the eternal face *speak* to him (*reden zu ihm*).” The face of the other speaks, albeit in a more primordial tone than that between the debating disciples, for whom “speech was pitted against speech (*Rede stand der Rede gegenüber*), and there was no resolution.” The expressions of the face do not solve puzzles or crack codes—they do not “answer”—but, for Buber, they do *address*, they do speak Torah.¹⁵⁷

The theological takeaway from this tale is of course not that tsaddiqim should refrain from speaking words of teaching, but that they should do so in ways that enable their students to glean what is truly most significant. Hasidic sages may share many narratives and concepts with their disciples, but the inner meaning that they convey reverberates beyond words. When communication is genuine, the central theological *Sinn* is eminently *sinnliche*, sensible in a

¹⁵⁶ Buber, *IT*, 154; *ID*, 125.

¹⁵⁷ In his Bible translation, Buber renders this verse in Isaiah 3:9 as “Das Gepräg ihrer Antlitze überantwortet sie.” With this translation of the term “ענתה” as “*überantwortet*” (meaning to “hand someone over,” as in to the police or the courts, but quite literally to “over-answer”), Buber manages to capture the double-meaning of the term. We should note as well that it is a sharp divergence from Luther’s translation: “Ihres Wesens haben sie kein Hehl (Their being holds no secret).”

sensuous sense, inseparable from the very bodily concreteness of communicating. Indeed, Buber celebrates the simplicity of “believers who do not need to know the content of a litany since the arrangement of sounds and tones alone give them all that they need, and more than any content could.”¹⁵⁸ And amidst the cerebral hubbub of “seventy faces,” one may turn to a face, whose features refocus the mind upon the protean flesh of presence, the most sublime contradiction of all. As Buber wrote to his beloved, Paula Winkler, when he was but twenty-four years old, “In general, one must tie the whole riddle of the universe to a single person, otherwise one is in a bad way.... Meditate upon all mysteries, but in one person who is yours, and you lie upon the heart of the universe. For everything is in everyone and only love can extract it.”¹⁵⁹

Evidently, even when we attempt to examine Buber’s portrayals of verbal theological instruction and religious rhetoric in his Hasidic tales, we are led back repeatedly to the dialectic of embodied theology. The tales in Buber’s anthologies that reflect upon the act of “speaking Torah” veer consistently away from theoretical discourse, toward silence. To be sure, this tendency illuminates a tension within Hasidism itself. But it also reflects Buber’s own principle of selection and textual alterations that are at work in his anthologies, if we only follow his paper trail.

“Embodiment” versus “Incarnation” in Buber’s Hasidic Writings

In discussing embodied theology in the context of Hasidism, it is necessary to say a word about the semantically similar concept of incarnational theology, and how these do and do not

¹⁵⁸ Buber, “My Way to Hasidism,” in *Hasidism and Modern Man* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 27-28. Interestingly, Buber refers here to a gathering where he felt almost as if he himself were functioning as a tsaddiq among hasidim.

¹⁵⁹ Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, *Letters of Martin Buber*, 84-85.

overlap. A clarification of this matter is especially pertinent in the wake of Shaul Magid's recent study of "incarnational thinking" in Hasidism, which contributes to a larger discussion about incarnational elements in Judaism, most notably in the works of Elliot Wolfson.¹⁶⁰ For good reason, the figure of the tsaddiq in Hasidism has led many scholars to explore intersections with Christian notions of incarnation. Some have preferred to use alternate terms such as "embodiment" (e.g., Idel) or "theosis" (Brill) to characterize the striking relationship between tsaddiqim and divinity,¹⁶¹ which may minimize oversimplifications of the closeness between Hasidic views of the tsaddiq and Christian views of Christ. However, Magid and Wolfson suggest that such terminological boundaries may also obfuscate theological and philosophical commonalities and thwart possibilities of fruitful interdisciplinary and interreligious discourse.¹⁶²

Given Buber's insistence that the hallowing of corporeal life and the sanctity of the person lay at the very heart of Hasidism, as well as his consistent portrayals of bodily manifestations of religious meaning, one might suppose that he would be sympathetic to the idea of incarnational elements in Hasidism. Indeed, after reading Buber's essay "Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz in Judentum," Abraham Joshua Heschel cautioned Buber that he appeared

¹⁶⁰ Shaul Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015). See also Elliot R. Wolfson, "Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God," in Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, ed., *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 239-254; idem, "The Body in the Text: A Kabbalistic Theory of Embodiment," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95.3 (2005): 479-500; idem, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), chapter 2; idem, "Revisioning the Body Apophatically: Incarnation and the Acosmic Naturalism of Habad Hasidism," in Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, eds., *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 147-199.

¹⁶¹ See Moshe Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (London: Continuum, 2007), chap. 6; Brill, "The Spiritual World of a Master of Awe," 49-51, and passim. Brill does also use the term "incarnation" at times to characterize the relationship between tsaddiq and Shekhinah according to the *Degel Maḥaneh Ephraim*.

¹⁶² See Wolfson, "Judaism and Incarnation," 240; Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate*, 7. Cf. Garb, *Shamanic Trance*, 6.

to be bordering on notions of divine incarnation.¹⁶³ And, in fact, Buber does teeter at times on identifying such elements in Jewish religiosity. Consider, for example, his 1953 letter to Will Herberg, wherein he suggests that the Christological notion of Jesus as God incarnate is actually a mitigated version of the biblical view of the People of Israel:

The Biblical concept of קדוש גוי [holy nation], in which the word גוי (cf. גויה, living human body, dead body) designs the people in its corporeal existence, in the generative connexion of its generations,¹⁶⁴ has no romantic character at all; Rosenzweig was even inclined to translate it by *heiliger Leib* [holy body]. The pretension of the Church to be the realisation of that concept, a pretension based on the supposition of Israel being rejected by God, meant and means giving up the Biblical fullness of the concept, the unity of body and spirit, replacing the body-element by the mystical corpus Christi.¹⁶⁵

The holiness of the people of Israel, Buber suggests, is inseparable from their very bodily existence, and while the later Christian concept of a so-called “mystical body” of Christ builds upon this, he insists that this downplays the very concrete materiality—the “body-element”—of the Jewish paradigm. Buber’s sentiments here are reminiscent as well of his concept of “Being-Tradition (*Seins-Tradition*),” which he articulated in a 1934 lecture at the Frankfurt Lehrhaus. Buber suggested that the essential word and wisdom of Jewish tradition is so unified with the very physicality of the Jewish people that “spirit becomes body (*der Geist leibt*),” and “the values live on in the host who receives them by becoming part of his very flesh (*sich leiblich eingestalten*), for they choose and assume his body as the new form which suits the function of the new generation.”¹⁶⁶ Thus, the Jew is simultaneously the transmitter of tradition and the

¹⁶³ See Buber, *Briefwechsel*, 2:568–569. Cf. Edward K. Kaplan, “Sacred versus Symbolic Religion: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber,” *Modern Judaism* 14.3 (1994), 215; Alexander Even-Chen and Ephraim Meir, *Between Heschel and Buber: A Comparative Study*, 12-13.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Martin Buber, “Leitwort and Discourse Type: An Example,” in *Scripture and Translation*, 143.

¹⁶⁵ Buber, *Briefwechsel*, 3:326; a copy of the original English letter can be found in the Martin Buber Archives, ARC. Ms. Var. 350 008 270c.1. It is also located at the Maurice Friedman Archives, as Buber had sent him a copy.

¹⁶⁶ Buber, “Teaching and Deed,” *Israel and the World*, 138, 139; German: “Die Lehre und die Tat,” in *Die Stunde und die Erkenntnis*, 63-64.

“word” that is transmitted: “total, living Jewish humanity is transmitted. Tradition is concentrated in the existence (*Dasein*) of the Jew himself.”¹⁶⁷ It is not so far-fetched to perceive here elements of a shift from logos theology to incarnational theology, which is precisely what Magid claims is definitive of Hasidism.¹⁶⁸

However, Buber does indeed stop short of any doctrine of incarnation, in the strict sense. According to his religious thought, it is never actually the substance of corporeality that somehow contains or exhibits divinity but rather the dynamic wholeness of the dialogical event in corporeal life—and therein lies the main difference between Buber’s embodied theology and incarnational theology. For instance, as discussed above in chapter one, Buber’s “dialogical monism” does not amount to an objective postulate or scientific statement about the nature of reality or the relationship between body and soul. If it is ontologically located somewhere, we may say that it is in what Buber terms the “Between,” although this is not literally a spatial designation. The case is similar with Buber’s concept of Hasidic pansacramentalism. While he asserts that “meaning is bound to the body” in sacramental existence, this is an expression of the religious phenomenology and theological significance of hallowing; it is certainly not a statement about the anatomy of those who perform sacraments. Indeed, Buber differentiates explicitly between Hasidic pansacramentalism, which is thoroughly relational, and what he calls “primitive” or “naïve” pansacramentalism, according to which holiness dwells objectively in materiality so that one can find, possess, and manipulate it.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ “Teaching and Deed,” *Israel and the World*, 139-140; German: “Die Lehre und die Tat,” *Die Stunde und die Erkenntnis*, 65.

¹⁶⁸ “I argue in this book that it was in Hasidism that the transition from logos theology to incarnational theology reached its most radical, materialist articulation.” Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate*, 4.

¹⁶⁹ See Buber, *OMH*, 166–171.

Buber does affirm that one beholds God in the course of “I-Thou relations” and “sacramental existence,” but the moment one identifies some particular entity as an image of divinity and seeks to use, label, or laud it as such, the revelation vanishes, as it were, leaving only the company an objectified other, veiled behind fanciful projections. Indeed, when Buber underscores in *Ich und Du* that dialogue is ultimately “embodied (*verleiblicht*) in the whole material of life” and “put to proof in action (*bewährt*),” this is precisely to say that “it cannot be preserved (*bewahrt*).”¹⁷⁰ To the extent that I-Thou meetings or sacramental events are revelations of divinity, they are also concealments of it. And Buber locates this paradox at the very heart of Jewish religiosity:

‘Israel’, from the point of view of the history of faith, implies in its very heart immediacy towards the imperceptible Being. God ever gives Himself to be seen in the phenomena of nature and history, and remains invisible. That He reveals Himself and that He ‘hides himself’ (Is. xlv. 15) belong indivisibly together; but for His concealment His revelation would not be real and temporal. Therefore He is imageless; an image means fixing to one manifestation, its aim is to prevent God from hiding Himself, He may not be allowed any longer to be present as the One Who is there as He is there (Exod. iii. 14), no longer appear as He will; because an image is this and intends this, ‘thou shalt not make to thyself any image.’¹⁷¹

According to Buber, Judaism affirms that one can behold God in myriad images, in countless phenomena. He even goes so far as to say, “In the way of history, ever new regions of the world and of the spirit are lifted up into form, summoned to divine form, to the incarnation, as it were, of God (*gleichsam Verleiblichung Gottes*).”¹⁷² And yet it is precisely this imaginal dynamism that guards against any particular image being deified definitively. Indeed, he claims that it is

¹⁷⁰ See Buber, *IT*, 163; German: *ID*, 135.

¹⁷¹ Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, trans. Norman P. Goldhawk (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 130. For a penetrating analysis of these matters in Buber’s *Two Types of Faith*, which certainly informed my own discussion on these pages, see Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, 27–29.

¹⁷² Buber, “Religion als Gegenwart,” as Quoted in Horwitz, *Buber’s Way to “I and Thou”*, 126. Note that Buber omits the loaded term *Verleiblichung* in his formulation of this statement in *Ich und Du*. See Horwitz, *Buber’s Way to “I and Thou”*, 126n31.

precisely this theophanic fluidity that the Christian abandons when she “assigns to God a definite human countenance.”¹⁷³ In effect, Buber suggests, Christianity fails to preserve the primary paradox of “immediacy to the Imageless One, the One Who Hides Himself and appears again, Who bestows that which is revealed and withholds that which is concealed (Deut. xxix. 29).”¹⁷⁴ Leaving aside questions of the veracity of Buber’s depiction of Christian doctrine, his claims help to clarify the distinction between his embodied theology and incarnational theology.

Finally, when Buber portrays corporeality itself as ineffable and mysterious, as we discussed at length in chapter one, he does not imply whatsoever that it is immaterial or of some subtle spiritual substance. On the contrary, in his view, it is the very concreteness of corporeality—wholly prior to any abstraction—that makes embodiment so cognitively elusive. The ceaseless flux and radical irreducibility of fleshly existence is, for Buber, what makes these grounds of relationality so “unreliable, unsolid, unlasting, unpredictable, dangerous.”¹⁷⁵ It is in this sense that Buber affirms the unity of body and soul, materiality and spirituality. This wholeness is the medium and underlying principle of revelatory encounter, issuing uninterrupted demands for attentiveness to the subtleties of being, if only one listens. Indeed, while bodies are generally taken for granted as quintessentially immanent, accessible to consciousness, describable, *sayable*, the reality is more complex upon closer examination. In the words of Wolfson, “The texture, the touch, of what we confront and what confronts us in our materiality, however we are to construe the latter, resists the reduction of the corporeal to the linguistic.” Thus, “Language, on this score, is not a bridge that connects mind and matter.”¹⁷⁶ When we speak or think about bodies, there is a sense, if you will, of distance from the actual flesh of

¹⁷³ Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, 131.

¹⁷⁴ Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, 132.

¹⁷⁵ Buber, *I and Thou*, 126; German: *Ich und Du*, 74.

¹⁷⁶ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 67-68.

physicality. Even as such reflection may lead thereafter to a deepened attentiveness to corporeality, in those very fleeting moments of renewed awareness the instruments of articulation are once again speechless, wherein one can know and name but not conceptualize lips, tongue, breath, paper, pen, thought. It is in this light that we are to understand Buber's notion of body-spirit unity. It is more primordial than any spiritualization of corporeality or incarnation of spirituality, more immediate than any "mystical corpus" concept. It is, at bottom, a fundamental and radical wholeness, a homology of phenomenality and noumenality, neither measurable nor comprehensible, although embraceable and beholdable.¹⁷⁷ It is—presence.¹⁷⁸

In Buber's estimation, tsaddiqim are not incarnations of God. They are masters at embodying theological meaning, which is never a doctrine or fixed image. And they are masters at facilitating this revelation for others. "Reality calls forth reality; the reality of a man who has lived in intercourse with the reality of being in its fullness, awakens the reality in us and helps us to live in intercourse with the reality of being in its fullness."¹⁷⁹ The tsaddiqim are, once again, "*die Bewährten*," the ones in whom truth is put to proof in action. Their embodied actions, gestures, and even their very presence are theologically expressive to those who behold, but this is not to say that they are intrinsically divine. Given the incarnational elements in Hasidism that Magid, Wolfson, and others have indicated, and given our demonstrations of the centrality of embodiment in Buber's theological perspective, there is certainly potential for explorations of "incarnational" elements in Buber's thought. However, for the sake of conceptual and terminological exactitude, and also in order to maintain cognizance of the boundary between the

¹⁷⁷ See Buber, "With a Monist," *Pointing the Way*, 27.

¹⁷⁸ Buber could hardly be more explicit about this matter when he declares that Hasidism, in direct contrast to Christianity, affirmed and hallowed precisely "the great unholy body" of mortal human beings. Buber, "The Foundation Stone," in *OMH*, 88; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 292.

¹⁷⁹ Buber, "The Foundation Stone," in *OMH*, 71; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 282.

historical phenomenon of Hasidism and Buber's personal portrayals of it, I shall preserve a distinction in this dissertation between embodiment and incarnation, focusing on the former in Buber's thought.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have investigated Buber's portrayals of theological expression out of the sources of Hasidism. Characterizing the movement as "Kabbalah become ethos," a "deschematization of the mystery," and a way of "sacramental existence," Buber finds Hasidic texts to be gushing with very unusual conceptions and communications of religious meaning that resonate deeply for him. In the tales and essays of his own Hasidic writings, Buber renews those sources hermeneutically through his principle of selection, anthological structuring, and textual alterations. We have seen how he depicts students' transformative first encounters with *tsaddiqim*, particularly when bookish knowledge and intellectualist paradigms confront new epistemologies embodied in the presence of sages. We have examined Buber's portrayals of nonverbal theological expression, and how he identified such silent conduct as the very essence of what it means to "speak Torah." We have also plumbed Buber's tales for hints of how one can indeed employ language in ways that are consistent with, and in service of, embodied theology.

As a whole, this chapter has shed new light on the dynamics of Buber's engagement with Hasidic texts. Moreover, through our hermeneutical approach to Buber's tales, we have enhanced our understanding of the general phenomenological and theological issues surrounding religious expression that we introduced in chapter one. However, our insights into Buber's concept of theological *expression* in Hasidism leave us with myriad unanswered questions

regarding his concept of theological *cognition*. It is to these issues in Buber's Hasidic writings that we shall now turn.

CHAPTER 3

“We Do, We Hear”: Embodied Theological Cognition in Buber’s Tales

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we conducted hermeneutical investigations of Buber’s Hasidic writings in order to bring to light his notions of embodied theological expression. Naturally, this analysis must go hand-in-hand with an elucidation of his concept of theological cognition, as any effective communication implies some corresponding event of apprehension. Indeed, Buber’s portrayal of Hasidic sacramental existence as a “binding of meaning (*Sinn*) to the body” pertains as much to religious cognition as it does to religious expression, and the same can be said of course about his characterization of Hasidism as “agnostic.”¹ However, given what we have observed thus far regarding Buber’s non-noetic embodied theology, how are we to understand the concomitant form of theological insight? We introduced these issues in the context of Buber’s philosophical writings in chapter one, but we may now gain significantly more insight through turning to his Hasidic writings. If *tsaddiqim*, in his view, convey a wholly non-conceptual religious meaning through the very corporeal dynamics of their interpersonal encounters, sometimes even in complete silence, then what is it that their *ḥasidim* come thereby to grasp? What is the phenomenology of this theological grasping, and what is the theological “meaning” that is apprehended? In our analysis of matters of expression in chapter two, we have

¹ See Buber, “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” *OMH*, 165, 178; German: “Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz,” *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 351, 363. Buber’s use of the term „agnostic“ here does not imply a lack of faith in God, but rather a lack of information „knowledge“ (*gnosis*) about God.

of course touched upon some of these issues of cognition, but there are fundamental questions that remain unanswered.

At bottom, this inquiry into Buber's concept of embodied theological cognition bears directly upon his theological epistemology, elucidated in chapter one. Again, to be clear, our concern here is first and foremost Buber's "religious" epistemology, as opposed to his "philosophical" epistemology, as he understands those terms. Let us briefly review this distinction: For Buber, philosophy is discourse *about* the nature of things. It is scientific, and insofar as philosophers offer objectivity, they must objectify. In order to speak intelligently about reality, one must shift from the particular to the general, and regard individuals and events as data for rational reflection. Thus, Buber writes, "Philosophizing and philosophy...begin ever anew with one's definitely looking away from his concrete situation, hence with the primary act of abstraction."² In contrast, "religious expression is bound to the concrete situation."³ If philosophy is a "third-person" reflection upon what is generally, religion is a "second-person" relation with what is presently. Religion and philosophy, for Buber, are different epistemologies with divergent aims. Whereas philosophy pursues objective knowledge (*Erkenntnis*), religion seeks intersubjective knowing (*Erkennen*)—in the biblical sense.⁴ "In a great act of philosophizing," Buber writes, "even the finger-tips think—but they no longer feel."⁵ In this

² Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 38. Cf. idem, "Philosophische und Religiöse Weltanschauung," in *Nachlese* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1965), 128.

³ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 37.

⁴ For the difference between abstract *Erkenntnis* and dialogical or "biblical" *Erkennen*, see Buber, "Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz," 363; idem, *Ereignisse und Begegnungen* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1917), 29; idem, *Ich und Du*, 107; idem, *Nachlese*, 128; idem, *Die Chassidischen Bücher* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1927), 665. See also the section entitled „Erkennen“ in Buber's essay „Des Baal-Schem-Tow Unterweisung im Umgang mit Gott,“ in *MBW*, vol. 17, 103-104.

⁵ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 44. Buber's imagery here of bodily perception is significant. Indeed, in his more pointed critiques of particular philosophers, Buber tends to highlight their lack of attunement to corporeal life, suggesting that they are out of touch, so to speak, with the body. See above in chapter one.

light, the focus of our investigations of embodied theological cognition in Buber's Hasidic writings will diverge from the main concerns of cognitive science or philosophy of mind. While attempts to reconstruct Buber's philosophical conceptions of mind-body and spirituality-corporeality interrelations are indeed valuable, these theoretical issues are actually fairly peripheral in his writings.⁶ Ultimately, Buber is far more concerned with what is intersubjectively beheld and grasped in dialogical encounters, and with the phenomenology of that theological awareness, than he is interested in the objective physiological or psychological mechanisms underlying such perceptions. His primary aim and focus is embodied meaning, as opposed to abstract knowledge, and thus we shall prioritize the former in our investigations of his writings.

In light of these preliminary remarks, it is necessary to emphasize a most crucial and radical aspect of Buber's notion of embodied theological cognition: An awareness of God, for Buber, has nothing at all to do with questions about the existence of God, or even matters of theological "belief." Buber offers a post-doctrinal, non-noetic theology. He aligns his personal conception of religious faith with the Hebrew term *emunah*, which he interprets to mean *Vertrauen*, trusting. And this trust does not imply any assent to credal formulae or metaphysical postulates. It is rather a *Haltung* or posture of trust vis-à-vis the world itself—a trusting that emboldens one to stand vulnerably before the contradictory complexity of existence, to remain in responsive relation to the ineffable wholeness of moments, to open oneself to truly see and be seen by other living beings, and ultimately, to trust that there is actually no other path to divinity.

⁶ As stressed above in the "Introduction" and in chapter one, Buber was no theorist of embodiment, despite the fact that attentiveness to corporeal-spiritual wholeness is foundational in his dialogical thought, and theories of embodiment are indeed helpful for attempts to better understand his writings.

Let us not forget that Buber contrasts his conception of faith qua *emunah* with the Greek term *pistis* adopted by Christianity, which denotes doctrinal belief.⁷

The extent to which his concept of theological cognition was divorced from dogmatic faith is reflected audaciously in an exhortation at the Frankfurt Lehrhaus in 1922: “Act as if there were no God,” Buber declared, and he elaborated, “By not concerning himself with God, the man who acts touches upon the divine.”⁸ It seems that Buber alludes here to a Hasidic teaching of Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov, which Buber had rendered into German and published in 1916.⁹ According to Buber’s version, the Sasover exhorted, “You should act as if there is no God (*sollst du handeln, als wäre da kein Gott*), as if there were only one person in all the world who could help this man—only yourself.” The striking message here is that releasing pious thoughts of God from one’s mind can clear away distractions that forestall righteous action in the world. Yet this bold formulation itself was a departure from the original sources that Buber consulted.¹⁰

According to those texts, Rabbi Moshe said, “Be then as if, God forbid, there is no one who will save this poor person (תהיה אז כאלו ח"ו אין מי שיושיע את העני הזה),”¹¹ “Be in your mind as if, as it were, there is no one who will save him except you (תהי' בדעתך כאלו כביכול אין מי שיושיעהו כ"א) (אתה),”¹² or “Have in your mind that there is no one except you who will save him (תהיה בדעתך)

⁷ Buber differentiates between *pistis* and *emunah* most extensively in his *Two Types of Faith*.

⁸ See Buber’s lecture of January 22, 1922, translated and published in Rivka Horwitz, *Buber’s Way to ‘I and Thou’: The Development of Martin Buber’s Thought and His ‘Religion as Presence’ Lectures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 36-37.

⁹ Martin Buber, “Die gute Gottesleugnung,” in *Das Buch von den polnischen Juden*, edited by S. J. Agnon and Ahron Eliasberg (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1916), 151-2. Cf. Buber, “When It Is Good to Deny the Existence of God,” in *Tales*, II:89; German: *MBW*, vol. 18, §705.

¹⁰ For the full list of sources that he consulted, see his unpublished notes on Mosche Leib von Sasow, in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #17, “Erhebung der Gottesleugnung.”

¹¹ Menaḥem Mendel Bodek, *Ma’aseh Tsaddiqim* (Lemberg, 1864), 38; Aaron Walden, *Qehal Ḥasidim* (Warsaw, 1870), 53a.

¹² Israel Berger, *Eser Tsaḥtsaḥot* (Piotrków, 1909), 52-53.

שאיין זולתך מי שיושעהו).”¹³ Thus, whereas the original texts suggest that one should behave as if, “God forbid,” one’s belief in the particular doctrine of divine providence were called into question, “as it were,”¹⁴ lest that idea make one indolent, Buber sharpens the message into a command to act as if God were entirely absent. In the same spirit, whereas all the original versions frame this striking teaching as one about the potential benefits of “heresy” (אפיקורסיות), which encompasses any number of irreligious views, Buber uses the more pointed term “God-denial (*Gottesleugnung*).” And despite his initial impulse to entitle this tale “*Erhebung der Gottesleugnung* (The Uplifting of God-Denial),”¹⁵ which drew directly upon the original teachings’ takeaway that even the human being’s most lowly attributes and heretical thoughts can be “elevated” toward divine service, Buber opted ultimately for “*Die gute Gottesleugnung* (The Good God-Denial)—evidently, he was unwilling to cast such an emptying of the religious mind as merely an impropriety to be uplifted. If the original teaching of Rabbi Moshe pertained primarily to the Hasidic notion of elevating “strange thoughts”—in this case, heretical ideas and, depending on the version, also pride, hatred, and jealousy—then Buber’s version subverts this lesson quite astonishingly to suggest that the cessation of theological thoughts may actually clear the way for dialogical-cum-divine encounter.

This discourse of emptying the religious mind, however, illuminates only the outer edges of Buber’s concept of theological cognition. We see here only a negative space, revealed through the departure of doctrinal distractions, outlining what is presumably the positive textures of a still undefined theological meaning. As the core of religious cognition defies any abstract

¹³ Moshe Ḥayyim Kleinman, *Or Yesharim* (Warsaw, 1924), 208.

¹⁴ On the locutions “as if (כאלו)” and especially “as it were (כביכול)” in classical and related rabbinic sources, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 325–401.

¹⁵ See his unpublished notes on Mosche Leib von Sasow, in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #17, “*Erhebung der Gottesleugnung*.”

conceptualization, pithy formula, or static image, it is exceedingly difficult to articulate this positive element discursively. Paul Mendes-Flohr, more than any other scholar, has articulated the *philosophical* underpinnings of Buber's "non-noetic" conception of faith.¹⁶ In this chapter, I propose to shed light on the *hermeneutical* dimensions through analyses of embodied theological cognition in Buber's Hasidic tales.¹⁷ In part, Buber's tales are so instructive because they convey the contours of religious meaning in the wholly concrete medium of narrative, as embodied events. The theological cognition in Buber's exegetical imagination whose nature we are now seeking to clarify is what Rabbi Leib, son of Sarah, sought to behold in a tsaddiq's shoe tying; what Israel of Kozhenits recognized in his new master's face; what the ḥasidim perceived in Mendel of Vurke's silence. In the previous chapter, we held a hermeneutical lens up to Buber's Hasidic writings in order to discern his conception of embodied theological communication, but now we shall apply that methodology to focus specifically on dynamics of theological cognition.

Of course, this raises questions about what concepts of theological cognition were already manifest in Hasidic sources themselves. Particularly in the homiletical literature, consciousness of God is associated with psychospiritual states such as *devekut* (cleaving to divinity), *gadlut* (expansive spiritual consciousness), and *hitlahavut* (ecstasy), which ḥasidim sought through processes and practices such as *hitpashtut ha-gashmiyut* (divestment of corporeality), *bitul ha-yesh* (annihilation of being), and *yihudim* (unifications). And one of the most innovative and alluring aspects of Hasidism was the notion that one could enact and attain

¹⁶ See Mendes-Flohr, "The Aporiae of Dialogue"; idem, "Martin Buber's Conception of God," in *Divided Passions*. Martin Kavka describes the latter essay as "one of those rare academic articles that is so definitive that it becomes the last word on a topic for a generation." Martin Kavka, "Verification (*Bewährung*) in Martin Buber," 73. On the philosophical dimensions of Buber's concept of faith, see also above in chapter 1.

¹⁷ For thoughtful hermeneutical reflections on Buber's concept of faith in the context of his Biblical writings, see Fishbane, "The Biblical Dialogue of Martin Buber," in *Garments of Torah*, 86-90.

these transformations in the midst of everyday life. The normative Jewish practices of prayer and *mitsvot* (commandments) were of course the primary vehicles, but tsaddiqim insisted time and again, “You shall know Him in all your ways” (Prov. 3:6), for “His glory fills all the earth” (Isa. 6:3) and “There is no place empty of Him” (*Tiqqunei Zohar* #57). This radical emphasis on knowing God in the course of mundane spaces, actions, and interactions reflects a central element in Hasidism that scholars came to identify as *avodah be-gashmiyut*, worship/practice in corporeality.¹⁸ This phrasing in terms of *gashmiyut* is significant, for the notion that God is accessible in the very messy corporeality of life was rooted in a radical conviction that all dimensions of spiritual and material existence are fundamentally interconnected in the great “enchainment (*hishtalshelut*)” of existence. Thus, while Hasidic masters verily spoke about “annihilating” and “stripping away” the husks of sensuous corporeality through various forms of mystical contemplation in order to penetrate and “cleave” to the expansiveness of the Holy One, blessed be He, and even to the very Nothingness and Infinity that permeates and transcends All, those same sages also tended to affirm that bodily life was, at the very least, an indispensable rung on the spiritual ladder, if not utterly flush with the zenith.¹⁹

Of course, such lofty language and mystical terminology may be interpreted in radically different ways, and certainly the phenomenology of Hasidic religiosity remains opaque from a purely textual perspective. Does the theological cognition attained in *devekut* take place ultimately in a disembodied intellect, leaving materiality behind as merely a launchpad, at best? In other words, is the peak apprehension of divinity an “out-of-body experience”? Or is the pinnacle of religious awareness still in touch, as it were, with the sights, sounds, and sensations

¹⁸ See Kauffman, *Be-Khol Derakhekha Da'ehu*.

¹⁹ On this dialectic between materiality and spirituality in Hasidism, see Kauffman, *Be-Khol Derakhekha Da'ehu*; Margolin, *Miqdash Adam*, 125-287; Brody, “Open to Me the Gates of Righteousness.”

of *gashmiyut*, with whatever sensuous song, spokenness, dance step, food, or breath had catalyzed the ascent? To be sure, the first generations of Hasidic masters waged a bold campaign against the spirituality-corporeality dualism that pervaded medieval religious thought, but the actual epistemological and ontological dynamics between physicality and spirituality are difficult to discern. No less than Gershom Scholem read texts about *bitul* and *hitpashtut* quite literally, and thus characterized Hasidism as a decidedly acosmic movement, as we shall discuss further below in this chapter. And yet, academics have not been the only interpreters of Hasidism to understand the spiritual visions of the early sages in disembodied terms. Indeed, the revolutionary affirmations of soul-body unity in early Hasidism waned significantly in nineteenth-century Hasidism, even while those masters engaged intensively with the teachings of their predecessors.²⁰ For those later generations of *tsaddiqim*, at least, the path to knowing God tended to stray from any overtly embodied epistemology. And inasmuch as the *tsaddiqim* featured in Buber's Hasidic tales did not live beyond the nineteenth-century, those were the perspectives he had to work with.

But perhaps matters are not so simple. Indeed, a significant portion of the Hasidic sources that Buber consulted were published in the twentieth century, although those texts were transmissions of earlier, often strictly oral, traditions. In fact, Buber's early anthologies appeared contemporaneously with the works of prominent Hasidic author-editors such as Israel Berger and Abraham Hayyim Michaelson, and his later anthologies coincided with the publications of other

²⁰ For a general discussion of corporeality and spirituality in early and late Hasidism, see James Jacobson-Maisels, *The Self and Self-Transformation in the Thought and Practice of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira* (dissertation, University of Chicago, 2014), 145-160. See also idem, "Embodied Epistemology: Knowing through the Body in Late Hasidism," *Journal of Religion* (2016), 187; Allan Lawrence Nadler, "Holy Kugel: The Sanctification of Ashkenazic Ethnic Foods in Hasidism," in *Studies in Jewish Civilization* 15 (2005): 193-214; Mendel Piekarcz, *Polish Hasidism: Ideological Trends of Hasidism in Poland During the Interwar Period and the Holocaust* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1990), 61-71.

prodigious Hasidic collectors such as Moshe Ḥayyim Kleinmann, Yo‘ets Kim Kadish Rakats, and Azriel Ḥayyim Samlung in the 1920s and 1930s, all of whom Buber drew upon extensively.²¹ Given trends in European philosophical and religious thought, it is certainly plausible that twentieth-century Hasidic masters and authors alike exhibited greater emphases on embodiment, and were less likely to imagine a wholly immaterial intellect than their nineteenth-century predecessors. And there is little reason to conclude that such trends would have affected only the legendary literature. Indeed, James Jacobson-Maisels notes that one tsaddiq, Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira (1889-1943), who was a younger contemporary of Buber’s, reinvigorated the Hasidic “opposition to soul-body dualism by producing a sustained critique of disembodied knowing and developing an alternative, embodied epistemology in service of his vision of the true path to the divine.”²² Despite the deep cultural and religious divides between Buber’s world and the spheres of the Warsaw rebbe, it is certainly not beyond the realm of possibility that correlations between their respective conceptions of embodied theological cognition may be more than just coincidental.²³ While a thoroughgoing analysis of such connections is well beyond the scope of this dissertation, one might certainly appreciate Buber’s perspectives on Hasidic sources in this broader context. In any case, Hasidism itself was (and is) hardly a monolithic movement with regard to how its proponents imagined human knowledge of God, and different interpreters throughout the generations drew disparate conclusions about the role of

²¹ On the fact that these Hasidic author-editors played constructive roles in the formation of Hasidic literature, see Zeev Gries, “The Hasidic Managing Editor as an Agent of Culture,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, 141-155. Regarding Berger and Michelson, see Justin Jaron Lewis, *Imagining Holiness: Classic Hasidic Tales in Modern Times* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press), 2009; Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, 41-43; idem, *Melaqtei ha-Sippur ha-Ḥasidi*, 197-201, 206-207. On Kleinmann, Samlung, and Rakats, see Nigal, *Melaqtei ha-Sippur ha-Ḥasidi*, 208-211, 247-249, 263-264.

²² Jacobson-Maisels, “Embodied Epistemology,” 187.

²³ Indeed, Rabbi Shapira spent his adulthood in the relatively “enlightened” vicinity of Warsaw and was learned in various “secular” scientific, medical, and psychological disciplines, and even had a working knowledge of Latin. Jacobson-Maisels, *The Self and Self-Transformation*, 2-3.

corporeality in moments of theological illumination. With that in mind, let us turn now to Buber's views.

Embodied Theological Study

Our explorations of embodied theology as independent of theoretical thinking or doctrinal instruction may seem blatantly discordant with the historical reality of Hasidism. Jews flocked from far reaches of Eastern Europe to learn from tsaddiqim, meditate on their sermons, and ingest their astonishing new interpretations of canonical sources. This lively discourse revolved not only around communal meals and face-to-face interactions, but also around the tables of study houses. While there was certainly truth in the polemical claims of Mitnaggedim that Hasidic leaders prioritized affective spirituality over scholarly development, one must also bear in mind that Hasidism was nonetheless a highly intellectual movement. And Buber, himself a voracious intellect who nonetheless envisioned a religious renewal deeper than mental abstraction, had to deal with this aspect of Hasidism.

Fortunately, he had many fertile sources at his disposal, for the tsaddiqim themselves had to navigate related tensions in their own communities and selves. In the context of Buber's engagement with these texts, the most important term to track in his Hasidic writings is, unsurprisingly, *lernen* (to learn/study) and its various cognates such as *erlernen* (to learn, esp. in the sense of learning a skill or trade) and *Erlernte* (that which is learned), as well as other etymological relatives like *lehren* (to teach), *Lehre* (teaching/instruction), and *gelehrte* (learned/erudite).²⁴ At times, Buber employs these terms to refer to conventional studying,

²⁴ Both *lernen* and *lehren* derive from the Middle Low German *læra*, meaning "to teach" or "to learn." See entry for „lehren“ in the *Digitale Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*

“merely” bookish learning and lessons, which may very well lead to new knowledge but not necessarily to any novel “knowing” in an embodied, genuinely religious sense.²⁵ At other times, however, Buber uses the terms to denote a genuinely transformative engagement with wisdom, whether in the media of text, oral instruction, interpersonal encounters, or some combination thereof. We have already encountered the multiple valences that these words hold for Buber in his statement from the introduction to *Die Erzählungen*: “Only in eras when the world of the spirit is on the decline is teaching (*Lehren*), even on its highest level, regarded as a profession. In epochs of flowering, disciples live with their master just as apprentices in a trade lived with theirs, and ‘learn (*lernen*)’ by being in the radius of his breath,” as if the very presence and behavior of the sage himself were “a divine instruction (*Gotteslehre*).”²⁶ This striking statement reflects the polysemy of these terms in Buber’s theological consciousness. “Teaching” can be a dry lecture that remains confined to abstract content, or it can be a luminous event of immediacy between beings. In the latter case, one still “learns” (note Buber’s use of quotation marks here), but in an entirely different sense. When Buber uses the term *lernen* in this way, he defamiliarizes that common verb in ways that call into question what it really means to “learn” Torah or “learn” from a tsaddiq, to grasp a new “teaching,” or to become a “learned” person.

Buber uses terms of *lernen/lehren* with both connotations throughout his Hasidic tales, and both approaches are instructive for our efforts to understand his concept of theological cognition. Regarding the first sense of the term—that is, a mode of learning that is strictly intellectual—let us turn to Buber’s formulation of a *mayse* about Menaḥem Mendel of Kotsk:

Where does God dwell?

<<https://www.dwds.de/wb/lehren>>, s.v. “Etymologie.” Buber’s awareness of these connections is manifested most conspicuously in a thematic cluster of tales that he labels, as a whole, “Von den Lehren, von Lehren und Lernen,” in his anthology *Das verborgene Licht*.

²⁵ See, for example, Buber’s use of the term “*lernen*” in *MBW*, vol. 18, §§48, 513, 534, 1004.

²⁶ Buber, *TH*, I:18; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 143; Hebrew: *OhG*, 24.

This was the question with which the rabbi of Kozk surprised some learned men who were with him as guests.

They laughed at him: “What a thing to ask! Is not the whole world full of his glory!”

But then he answered his own question:

“God dwells where man lets him in.”²⁷

This teaching is deeply resonant with Buber’s own theological sensibilities. In their scholarly erudition, these “learned men” (*gelehrte Männer* / למדנים) find the Kotsker’s question to be laughably rudimentary—any literate Hasid should be able to answer that question in their sleep with a quick reference to Isaiah 6:3, let alone the liturgy of the Qedushah chanted every morning!²⁸ However, the Kotsker suggests that no amount of scholarly erudition can substitute for genuine receptivity and religious openness. The “learned” ones are Buber’s theological foil in this tale. And yet a glance at the original source shows that this is Buber’s own language. In the text that Buber consulted, the Kotsker confronts שהיו בזמנו הגדולים, “the great [rabbis] of his era.”²⁹ In recasting them specifically as “learned” ones, Buber draws attention to a perilous pitfall of pious studies: so-called knowledge of God can lead to delusions of grandeur that one knows God in a concrete sense. This is precisely the sort of *Gelehrsamkeit*, or encyclopedic “learnedness” that Herder contrasted with *Bildung*, the German ideal of education as edifying self-cultivation.³⁰

²⁷ Buber, *Tales*, II:277; German: *MBW*, vol. 18, §1155. Buber’s German is as follows:

»Wo wohnt Gott?«

Mit dieser Frage überraschte der Kozker einige gelehrte Männer, die bei ihm zu Gast waren.

Sie lachten über ihn: »Wie redet Ihr! Ist doch die Welt seiner Herrlichkeit voll!«

Er aber beantwortete die eigene Frage:

»Gott wohnt, wo man ihn einläßt.«

²⁸ In fact, the Kotsker’s teaching here that “God dwells where man lets him in” may be an interpretation of the line in the Qedushah directly after Isaiah 6:3, where the congregation says, “Blessed is the glory of God from his place (ממקומו).” While “his place” is commonly understood to refer to God’s place, the Kotsker seems to interpret it here as the human being’s place, where he lets God in.

²⁹ See Rakats, *Siah Sarfei Qodesh*, vol. 1, 71.

³⁰ See Aleida Assmann, *Arbeit am nationalen Gedächtnis: Eine kurze Geschichte der deutschen Bildungsidee* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1993), 24; Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 9-10. For the impact of German conceptions of *Bildung* on German Jews, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity*, especially chapters 1-2. For

In other tales, Buber employs terms of *lernen/lehren* with a quite opposite connotation, but in service of the same illustrations of theological cognition. In such instances, “learning” is a transformative practice that goes beyond disembodied pursuits of abstract information or established doctrines. Consider, for example, Buber’s formulation of a *mayse* about young Levi Yitshak of Berdichev’s first trip back home after his initial stint studying with Rabbi Shmelke:

When Levi Yitshak returned home from his first trip to Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg, which he had undertaken against the will of his father-in-law, he barked at him, “So, what have you learned (*erlernt*) from him?” “I learned (*erlernt*),” Levi Yitshak answered, “that there is a creator of the world.” The old man called to a servant and asked him: “Is it known to you that there is a creator of the world?” “Yes,” the servant said. “Of course,” Levi Yitshak cried, “everyone says it, but do they also learn (*erlernen*) it?”³¹

Buber’s Berdichever insists here that there is a crucial difference between orthodox ideas that one inherits passively, on the one hand, and personal points of view that one attains actively, on the other. Significantly, the term that Buber uses in this tale is *erlernen*, which connotes primarily a practical mode of learning for the sake of new expertise or mastery—for instance, a person *erlernt* a trade, a language, a dance. In the mouth of the father-in-law, the verb sharpens an already provocative challenge toward Levi Yitshak to articulate what useful knowledge or applicable skill he acquired. However, in Buber’s imagination, the word “*erlernen*” in the mouth of the Levi Yitshak himself highlights precisely the existential and experiential potency of

additional examples of tales wherein Buber uses the term “gelehrte” (learned/erudite) or “Gelehrsamkeit” (learnedness/erudition) with this connotation of merely encyclopedic knowledge that threatens to eclipse genuine theological cognition, see *MBW*, §§386, 629, 1155. See also his portrayal of “der Gelehrte” in his essay “Der Grundstein,” in *MBW*, vol. 17, p. 275.

³¹ Buber, *MBW*, vol. 18, §366. For some reason, this tale does not appear in English translation. Buber’s German is as follows:

Als Levi Jizchak von seiner ersten Fahrt zu Rabbi Schmelke von Nikolsburg, die er gegen den Willen seines Schwiegervaters unternommen hatte, zu diesem heimkehrte, herrschte er ihn an: »Nun, was hast du schon bei ihm erlernt?!« »Ich habe erlernt«, antwortete Levi Jizchak, »daß es einen Schöpfer der Welt gibt.« Der Alte rief einen Diener herbei und fragte den: »Ist es dir bekannt, daß es einen Schöpfer der Welt gibt?« »Ja«, sagte der Diener. »Freilich«, rief Levi Jizchak, »alle sagen es, aber erlernen sie es auch?«

theological learning in Rabbi Shmelke's *Lehrhaus*. And Buber highlights this meaning when he entitles the tale "*Das Erlernte*." As the Hebrew term for learning, ללמוד, does not bear the same nuance, Buber entitles this tale in *Or ha-Ganuz* differently as "הלֵקֶה (The Lesson)," which exhibits a similar valence of practical learning.³² And yet, in the Hasidic text from which Buber drew this *mayse*, the term "learn" does not even appear in Levi Yitshak's climactic declaration! In response to the servant's affirmation that she (the servant is female in the original source) is aware that there is a Creator of the world, Levi Yitshak declares, "In truth, she says it, but I *know* it (אז פאר וואהר זי זאגט נור אבער איך ווייס עס)"³³ Although Buber could have very straightforwardly rendered the Yiddish *veys* with the German *weiß*, he went out of his way to emphasize the personal process by which Levi Yitshak came to know about creation, as opposed to just the static endpoint of knowledge that any trained parrot could profess. Indeed, Buber suggests, the type of learning that Levi Yitshak invokes intimates two fundamentally different forms of knowing: doctrinal knowledge versus dialogical knowing. While the latter may involve engagement with theological terms that are familiar to any religious schoolchild, certain modes of learning may foster religious perspectives that can no longer be properly called doctrinal. Thus, whereas in the original source the father-in-law asks the servant "if she knows (תדע) that there is a creator of the world," in Buber's version he inquires, "Is it known to you (*dir bekannt*)." With this word *bekannt*, the father-in-law essentially asks if the servant is aware of this fact, if he has heard of it—not as a reality that he has pondered or investigated, but as a nugget of knowledge that is generally "known" or "famous." There is an additional element of

³² Buber, *OhG*, 197-198.

³³ Rakats, *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh*, vol. 5, p. 92. Emphasis added. This whole source reads as follows:

עוד מהנ"ל, שמעתי שכאשר נסע פעם הראשונה הרה"ק בעל קדושת לוי זצ"ל להרבי ר' שמעלקי זצ"ל בשוּבוּ לביתו שאל אותו חותנו מה למדת שם והשיב אנכי למדתי שם שיש בורא כל העולמים בשמים אזי קרא חותנו את המשרתת ושאלה האם תדע שיש בורא עולם ואמרה הן, ואז השיב הרה"ק מבערדישוב זצ"ל אז פאר וואהר זי זאגט נור אבער איך ווייס עס.

subliminal poetry in Buber's word choice here, insofar as *bekannt* is also the past participle of *bekennen*, "to profess" or "confess," especially in a religious context.³⁴ In any case, the epistemology implied in the father-in-law's question is a far cry from the embodied "knowing" that Buber identifies explicitly with biblical "ידיעה", the exact term that he stripped from the father-in-law's vocabulary.³⁵

Clearly, for Buber, the mode of learning whose fruit is genuine theological cognition penetrates deeper than informational content, but this is not to suggest that explorations of traditional ideas and doctrines should thus be necessarily absent in religious education. Rather, Buber indicates that apprehension of those elements ought to result in a cognition more elemental than some normative knowledge or ability to give the "right answer" in an encyclopedic sense to theological examinations. In other words, theological study should be no less "sacramental" than the most physical of practices, so that the meaning gleaned therefrom is indeed bound to the body as sacramental *Sinn*. The philosopher-psychologist Eugen Gendlin's conception of "focusing" is instructive here. While a basic understanding of the "symbolic representation" of a concept in words is of course indispensable, Gendlin asserts that this is only a preliminary stage of genuine understanding. In "focusing," Gendlin suggests, one is attuned to the bodily dimensions of learning, literally the physical sensations that accompany cogitation. Such awareness actually deepens one's cogitation, opening up pathways for new insights and ideas to emerge as one engages intellectually with some material or stimuli. And, in fact, any

³⁴ For a related wordplay between *bekennen* and (*be*)*kannt*, see: "I professed (*bekannte*) Judaism before I really knew (*kannte*) it." Buber, "My Way to Hasidism," *HMM*, 58; German: "Mein Weg zum Chassidismus," *Die chassidischen Bücher*, 665.

³⁵ For Buber's identification of dialogical "knowing (*Erkennen*)" with the biblical term "ידיעה", as in the verse "Adam knew (יָדַע) his wife Eve" (Gen. 4:1), see Buber, *Ereignisse und Begegnungen*, 29; *Nachlese*, 128. It is also significant to note that Buber and Rosenzweig rendered Gen. 4:1 in their Bible translation as "Der Mensch *erkannte* Chawwa sein Weib." Emphasis added.

ontological dualism of corporeality and cognition is proven false when one is aware of this “felt sense” in thinking. “In focusing one pays attention to a ‘felt sense.’ This is felt in the body, yet it has meanings. It has all the meanings one is already living with because one lives in situations with one’s body. A felt sense is body *and* mind before they are split apart.”³⁶ Such attentiveness to the “felt sense” and, ultimately, the “felt meaning” of an utterance can be as simple as closing one’s eyes after hearing speech so that its significance can take shape more vividly in one’s consciousness, or it can be as demanding as decades of experience necessary to grasp the concrete “context” of words.³⁷ It is important to emphasize that this is not a substitute for what we normally regard as “thinking,” but rather an intensification of it. “Thinking in the usual way,” Gendlin writes, “can be objectively true and powerful. But, when put in touch with what the body already knows and lives, it becomes vastly more powerful.”³⁸ I propose that this helps us to understand more vividly Buber’s conception of meaning as *Sinn*, and what Buber’s Berdichever means when he cries out to his father-in-law, “Of course everyone says it, but do they also learn it?” The thrust of this exclamation is not an elitist or intellectualist belief that people must go and immerse themselves in institutions of learning to grasp the inner meaning of religious concepts. On the contrary: in Buber’s Neo-Romantic imagination, the “simple” people of the Hasidic world enjoy qualities of down-to-earth immediacy that far exceed those of analytical scholars. Indeed, Buber’s revision of the original statement—from a sneer in response to a female servant (“In truth, she says it, but I know it!”), to a question in response to a male servant (“Of course everyone says it, but do they also learn it?”)—seems to soften a classist and sexist condescension in the editor Rakats’s formulation.

³⁶ Eugene T. Gendlin, *Focusing* (New York: Bantam, 2007), 191.

³⁷ See Eugene T. Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning. A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1970), 128.

³⁸ Gendlin, *Focusing* (Bantam, 2007), 191.

This crucial point—that, according to Buber, genuine theological learning is less contingent upon intellectual prowess or formal education than it is on the person’s dialogical openness and attuned presence—is visible throughout Buber’s anthologies. Consider, for example, a pair of tales that he presents consecutively in his section on Menaḥem Mendel of Kotsk in *Die Erzählungen*. The first, entitled “*Geben und Nehmen* (Giving and Accepting),” is as follows, according to Buber’s rendition:

Someone asked the Kozker: “Why is the Feast of Revelation called the time of the bestowal of our Torah, and not the time of the reception of our Torah?”

He answered, “On the day that the festival commemorates, the giving happened, but the accepting happens at all times. It was given to all in the same measure, but they have not all accepted it in the same measure.”³⁹

In response to a query about why the holiday Shavuot is designated traditionally as זמן מתן תורתנו, “the time of the giving of our Torah,”⁴⁰ the Kotsker differentiates between the existence of a given text and an individual’s personal engagement with it. Thus, whereas the Torah emerged historically at a particular time and place, the receiving of it will always depend on human activity.⁴¹ However, what type of engagement does Buber envision? He does not specify this explicitly. According to the original sources that Buber consulted, the Kotsker suggests quite

³⁹ Buber, *Tales*, II:278; German: *MBW*, vol. 18:1, §1158; Hebrew: *OhG*, 434. I have emended the English translation above according to Buber’s original German:

Man fragte den Kozker: »Warum wird das Fest der Offenbarung die Zeit der Verleihung unserer Thora genannt und nicht die Zeit des Empfangs unserer Thora?«

»An dem Tag«, antwortete er, »den das Fest erinnert, geschah das Geben, aber das Nehmen geschieht zu jeder Zeit. Gegeben worden ist allen im gleichen Maß, aber sie haben nicht im gleichen Maß genommen.«

⁴⁰ This formulation appears in the holiday liturgy, and it derives from the Rabbinic transformation of what was formerly a pilgrimage festival into the anniversary of the day on which the Torah was given on Mt Sinai. See *b. Pesahim*, 68b; *b. Shabbat*, 86b.

⁴¹ The notion that the Sinai revelation remains accessible throughout time, even ביום הזה, “on this day,” dates back to ancient Midrashic commentaries on Exodus 19:1—a verse, we should note, that also informed the Rabbinic designation of Shavuot as commemorating the Sinai revelation in *b. Shabbat*, 86b. See *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*, ed. B. Mandelbaum (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), vol. 1, *Ba-ḥodesh ha-Selishi*, 12.21, p. 219. Cf. *b. Berakhot*, 63b. See also commentaries on Deut. 6:6 in *Sifrei Devarim* 33:2 and Rashi. For modern Jewish philosophical reflections, see also Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, 192; Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*, 49.

clearly that the reception of Torah depends upon the individual's stage of intellectual or mystical development: the receiving (קבלה) corresponds either to the "aptitude of the one who comprehends (ערך המשיג)," or to the "stage of the individual" in terms of "vision and contemplation" (הראיון וההתבוננות בה כמדרגת כל אחד).⁴² Evidently, such hierarchization of hermeneutical capacities does not resonate with Buber's sensibilities, for he simply omits those phrases. It would seem, therefore, that we are simply left in the dark regarding Buber's perspective in this case, but attention to a significant word choice reveals a great deal. The term in both of the original sources for the "receiving" (קבלה) of Torah has an obviously mystical valence, and Buber goes quite conspicuously out of his way to downplay that implication. Buber's Kotsker refers only to the "accepting (*Nehmen*)" of Torah. One could say that this is simply his translation of קבלה, but Buber actually changes this term in his Modern Hebrew rendition as well, referring to the "acceptance (נטילה)" of Torah, and he even entitles this tale גְּבוּהָ וְנִטְיָלָה, "Giving and Accepting." This is not only to avoid using the mystically charged term קבלה, for "*Nehmen*" is a crucial term in Buber's writings for a very concrete type of dialogical receptivity, which differs fundamentally from those "supernatural (*überirdische*)" dispositions of Kabbalah.⁴³ Above all, for Buber, more than any degree of mystical prowess or training, the

⁴² Rakats, *Sifah Sarfei Qodesh*, vol. 1, 60; Ze'ev Volf Landau of Strikov, *Zer Zahav* (Warsaw: 1901), 58. Although Buber and HaCohen list only the former source for this tale in their published indices—and, indeed, this was Buber's main source—Buber's unpublished notes confirm that he also consulted the latter source. Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, Menachem Mendel of Kozk, #46, "Geben und Nehmen der Thora."

⁴³ See Buber, "Die ursprüngliche Bedeutung," in *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §875. In his formulation of this different teaching attributed to Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin, Buber emphasizes that the original, primordial meaning of קבלה is "to accept, to take in (*annehmen, aufnehmen*)," as in "to take upon oneself (*auf sich nehmen*) the yoke of God's will." Buber stresses that this should be kept in direct tension with "supernatural (*überirdische*)" conceptions of Kabbalah, although this has no basis in the original Hasidic sources from which he drew the teaching. See Moshe Kleinman, *Mazkeret Shem ha-Gedolim* (Piotrków, 1908), 192; Moshe of Kobrin, *Amarot Tēhorot* (Warsaw, 1910), 30. For an illuminating example wherein Buber employs the term *aufnehmen* to denote a mode of study that penetrates beyond logocentric concerns to the very spokenness underlying textual teachings, see Buber, "Wie man lernen soll," in *MBW*,

personal processing and integration of theological instruction demands that one is open and ready to encounter what is given.⁴⁴

The very next “tale” in Buber’s chapter on the Kotsker in *Die Erzählungen* is actually a homiletical teaching that goes even further to flesh out Buber’s image of genuine religious learning in Hasidism. In this case, the rebbe glosses Deuteronomy 6:6, “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart (על לבבך).” The original Hasidic teaching that Buber consulted is as follows:

It is not written, “in your heart (בלבבך),” for the heart is sometimes closed, and so the words must be placed like a weighty stone on the heart (על הלב). When it opens up in hallowed moments, the words will fall into the depths of the heart.⁴⁵

According to this meditation on the phenomenology of religious learning, there is a crucial difference between words that are merely comprehended and words that are truly taken to heart. Of course, the gates of deeper grasping are not always open, so oftentimes one just has to bear words in mind until those “hallowed moments” when the chambers of the heart are porous once again. Buber’s rendition of this source is basically a verbatim translation of the original.⁴⁶ The

vol. 18, §107. For other illustrative examples of the key term *aufnehmen* and its cognates in Buber’s writings, see above in chapter two.

⁴⁴ The fact that Buber originally published this tale in his anthology *Das verborgene Licht* under the category of “Von der Lehre, von Lehren und Lernen” accentuates the fact that Buber appreciated it as a testament to Hasidic conceptions of learning and the apprehension of religious instruction. See Buber, *Das verborgene Licht*, 67.

⁴⁵ Shmuel Bornstein, *Haggadah shel Pesach im Peyrush Shem mi-Shmuel* (Piotrków, 1928), p. 30. See also Shmuel of Shinova, *Ramatayim Tsofim* (Warsaw, 1908), p. 43; Rakats, *Siah Sarfei Qodesh*, vol. 4, 55; Moshe Alsheykh, *Qitsur Alsheykh ha-Shalem*, vol. 5 (Piotrków, 1911), p. 31. The version in *Shem mi-Shmuel*, which is identical to the version in *Siah Sarfei Qodesh*, is as follows:

וכמו שהגיד כ"ק זקני האדמו"ר הגדול זצלה"ה מקאצק בהא דכתיב והיו הדברים האלא אשר אנכי מצוך היום על לבבך, ולא כתיב בלבבך, שהלב עתים סגור אלא צריך שהדברים יהיו מונחים כאבן כבד על הלב שכאשר יפתח בעתים מקודשים יפלו הדברים לעומק הלב עכ"ד.

⁴⁶ Buber, “Auf deinem Herzen,” in *MBW*, vol. 18.1, §1159.

Rabbi Mendel von Kozk sprach: »Es heißt: »Und diese Worte, die ich heut dir gebiete, sollen auf deinem Herzen sein.« Es heißt nicht »in deinem Herzen«. Denn das Herz ist zeitenweise verschlossen, die Worte liegen aber auf ihm, und wenn es in heiligen Zeiten sich öffnet, fallen sie in seine Tiefe.«

only substantive alteration is his omission of the words “like a weighty stone (כאבן כבד),” so for Buber’s Kotsker, the words simply lie on the heart (“*die Worte liegen aber auf ihm*”). Perhaps Buber hints here that a teaching only attains solidness, as it were, when it is truly sensed and felt within. In any case, this teaching, in tandem with the previous one, captures what Buber considered to be the dynamics of discursive learning in Hasidic religiosity, which are linked inextricably to his conceptions of theological awareness more broadly.⁴⁷

The theological implications of Buber’s perspectives on study are exceptionally clear in his portrayal of the cognition of “secrets” in Hasidic circles. Let us first consider the following pair of teachings that Rakats lumped together in his *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh*:

I heard from one ḥasid that Rabbi Bunem spoke the following words: “A ‘secret’ (סוד) means that people should say it and everyone should hear it, but not everyone should know it.”⁴⁸ And I also saw [a published teaching] in the name of our holy rabbi, the Great *Kohen* [Hanokh] of Aleksander, that the secrets of Torah (סודות התורה) are concealed in the sense that it is impossible to say anything at all. And this is the difference between the secrets of Torah and the rest of the things that are hidden, which are hidden only for those who do not know, although they can say them. The secrets of Torah are concealed precisely [in the sense of the verse], “The secret of YHWH is for those who fear Him,”⁴⁹ which is the meaning of “[He will show us His secret] that had been said in a whisper.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ For an alternate modern formulation of the Kotsker’s interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:6, see Jack Kornfield, *A Lamp in the Darkness: Illuminating the Path Through Difficult Times* (Boulder: Sounds True, Inc., 2011), 49. Given the widespread and enthusiastic reception of Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim* among American “baby-boomers,” it is likely that Kornfield (b. 1945), a Buddhist teacher of Jewish descent based in the San Francisco Bay Area, encountered this particular teaching by way of Buber, either directly or indirectly.

⁴⁸ This Yiddish dictum contains a wordplay with “זאל” that is hardly possible to translate. While everyone “should (זאל)” say and hear the secrets, “not just anybody (קיינער זאל נישט)” will truly understand them.

⁴⁹ Ps. 25:14. The earlier version of this teaching, in Rabbi Ḥanokh’s own *Hashavah le-Tovah* (Piotrków, 1929), clarifies here that the verse “The secret of YHWH is for those who fear Him” indicates “that they understand the secret (שהם מבינים הסוד).” We shall have more to say about this textual discrepancy below.

⁵⁰ The phrase דאָתמר בלחישא appears in a mystical hymn attributed to Isaac Luria, entitled “I Shall Prepare the Meal (אסדר לסעודתא),” which is commonly recited on Sabbath mornings prior to the blessing of the wine. Given Rabbi Hanokh’s meditation here on ineffable “secrets” that shall be revealed to the ones who fear God, it would seem that he has in mind the whole line from the hymn: “ויחזי לן סתרה, דאָתאמר בלחישא”. For other salient examples of Hasidic citations of this line, see Nathan Sternhartz of Nemirov, *Liqutei Halakhot*, Orah Ḥayyim, Laws of Reciting the Shema, 3:3; Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, *Sefat Emet*, parshat Shelah, s.v. הז"ל דרשו וראיתם אותו. For the classical Rabbinic roots of the phrase “דאָתמר בלחישא”, see, *inter alia*, Bereshit Rabbah 3:4.

Indeed, even those who do say it, it is “in a whisper” and hidden, for it is always concealed.⁵¹

In this complex juxtaposition of teachings, the sages Simḥah Bunem and Ḥanokh of Aleksander reflect on the nature of mystical arcana. In Rakats’s presentation, we encounter two separate genres of “secret,” each with its own laws of comprehensibility and transmissibility. First, Rabbi Bunem suggests that a סוד, or “secret,” is a spiritual truth that can verily be articulated by and for the masses, but only the elite few will actually comprehend the inner meaning of what is said. In the parlance of Hasidic discourse, המבין יבין, “the one who understands will understand.” Then, Rakats indicates that he has also read or “seen” a teaching of Rabbi Bunem’s own student, the tsaddiq Ḥanokh of Aleksander, that bears upon the same theme. Rakats drew this teaching from Rabbi Ḥanokh’s own *Hashavah le-Ṭovah*, published posthumously just two years prior to Rakats’ own citation of it.⁵² Rabbi Ḥanokh explains a separate type of secrets, namely סודות התורה, “the secrets of Torah.” This subset is more unspeakable and ineffable than the general category. It is “impossible to say anything about them,” and they are “always concealed.” To be sure, Rabbi Ḥanokh intimates exegetically that God may reveal “to those who fear him” what has been heretofore only “said in a whisper,” but in Rakats’ version, this is tantamount to an

⁵¹ Rakats, *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh*, vol. 5 (Lodz, 1931), 43. Buber also consulted the version of Rabbi Ḥanokh’s teaching in Ḥanokh Henikh Hakohen Levin, *Hashavah le-Ṭovah*, 7. The latter is the source of the teaching of Rabbi Ḥanokh that Rakats reports to have “seen.” It is almost identical to the version presented in Rakats, except for one change, which we shall discuss below. The original language in Rakats is as follows:

שמעתי מחסיד אחד שאמר בשם הרבי ר' בונם זצ"ל בזה"ל א. סוד הייסט אז מען זאל זאגען אז אלצ זאלין הערין, אין קיינער זאל נישט וויסען. (א"יה) וכן ראיתי בשם כ"ק הה"ק הכהן הגדול מאלכסנדר זצ"ל כי סודות התורה הם נעלמים באופן שאי אפשר להגיד כלל, וזה ההפרש שבין סודות התורה לשאר דבר הסתר, שהוא רק נסתר למי שאינו יודע, אבל יכולין להגיד לו, וסודות התורה הם נעלמים רק סוד ה' ליראיו וזה פי' דאתאמר בלחישא שאף שאומרין אותם, בלחישא והסתר הוא כי נעלמים הם תמיד עכ"ל ה"ק.

⁵² The first printing of *Hashavah le-Ṭovah* was in 1929, although Rabbi Ḥanokh died in 1870. It is certainly plausible that Rakats knew this teaching orally before this publication, but (a) he says explicitly that he read this teaching in a book, and (b) his formulation of the teaching is almost identical, word for word, as the version in *Hashavah le-Ṭovah*. This volume of Rakats’s *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh* was published in 1931.

eschatological vision—mystics should not be overzealous in their searches for understanding. And yet, the one change that Rakats introduced in his rendition of Rabbi Ḥanokh’s teaching is a striking omission: In *Ḥashavah le-Tovah*, the quotation, “The secret of YHWH is for those who fear Him,” is followed immediately by a clarification, “for they understand the secret (שהם מבינים (הסוד)!” This certainly contradicts any sense that “the secrets of Torah” are wholly beyond human understanding in this world. Indeed, perhaps this is why Rakats omitted the words. In any case, despite this ambiguity in Rabbi Ḥanokh’s teaching, we have here nonetheless a presentation of two distinct categories of secrets.

In Buber’s rendition, he transforms this pairing of teachings in ways that grant us great glimpses into his theological sensibilities. Although his version is based primarily upon *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh*, he indicates in both his personal notes and his published source index that he consulted as well with *Ḥashavah le-Ṭovah*. Come and hear:

Rabbi Bunam used to say: “A secret is something you say in such a way that everyone can hear it, and yet no one who is not supposed to know can know it.” But Rabbi Hanokh, his disciple, added: “The secrets of the Teaching are so hidden that one cannot communicate them at all. As it is written: ‘The secret of the Lord is for those who fear him.’ Only in the fear of God can they be grasped, and save through the fear of God they cannot be grasped.”⁵³

There are two major changes here that we must identify. First of all, instead of framing Rabbi Ḥanokh’s teaching about “the secrets of Torah” as merely a subcategory that supplements Rabbi Bunem’s broader definition of “secrets” in general, Buber casts these two positions as somewhat in tension, if not outright contradictory. Indeed, from the very beginning, whereas Rakats

⁵³ Buber, *Tales*, II:313; German: *MBW*, vol. 18, §1266; Hebrew: *OhG*, 462-463.

Rabbi Bunam pflegte zu sagen: »Ein Geheimnis ist, was man so sagt, daß alle es hören und keiner weiß, der nicht wissen soll.«

Sein Schüler, Rabbi Chanoch, aber fügte hinzu: »Die Geheimnisse der Lehre sind so verborgen, daß man sie überhaupt nicht mitteilen kann. Wie geschrieben steht*: »Das Geheimnis des Herrn ist derer, die ihn fürchten.« Nur in der Furcht Gottes können sie gefaßt werden, und außer der Furcht Gottes können sie nicht gefaßt werden.«

transitions into Rabbi Ḥanokh’s teaching with the locution “And also/thus (וְכֵן),” Buber introduces it with the word “but (*aber*).” Furthermore, by rendering the technical phrase, “secrets of Torah (סודות התורה),” in more generic language as “secrets of the Teaching (*Geheimnisse der Lehre*),” Buber lets his readers suppose that Rabbi Ḥanokh is simply speaking about the very same category of religious secrets that Rabbi Bunem had discussed, although from a different perspective—after all, Rabbi Bunem was presumably also referring to secrets that pertain to “teachings.” In fact, the title that Buber appends to this tale, “Secrets (*Die Geheimnisse*),” supports the reader’s sense that both sages mentioned are reflecting on a single theological category. Even more conspicuously, Buber omits completely the original utterance of Rabbi Ḥanokh from the original sources, “And this is the difference between the secrets of Torah and the rest of the things that are hidden...” Clearly, Buber wishes to accentuate a discordance between these two rabbis. But why?

The answer to this question is found most vividly in Buber’s general remarks about Rabbi Bunem and Rabbi Ḥanokh in his introduction to *Die Erzählungen*. For Buber, these two sages represent two different relations to religious teachings and secrets. On one hand,

Wise Bunam was known as ‘the man versed in the mystery (*Geheimniskundige*)’ but he was no longer close to the mystery itself, as the Yehudi like the early zaddikim had been. His profound table talk and crystalline parables bear powerful witness to the religious truth, but he cannot be regarded as the body and voice of the religious spirit (*Leib und Stimme des religiösen Genius*).⁵⁴

For Buber, Rabbi Bunem was a brilliant wordsmith, yet his intellectually stimulating orations lacked the deeper resonances of embodied wisdom and personal spokenness. In this abstract theological matrix, “Prayer... was made subsidiary to teaching (*Lehre*)—a natural result of the supremacy of the school over the congregation (*Gemeinde*).” That is, concrete elements of

⁵⁴ Buber, *Tales*, II:38; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, p. 181.

religious praxis and communal activity were subordinated to cerebral spheres of discourse and doctrine. And, consequently, “under the influence of rootlessness, teaching (*Lehre*) itself ceased to be the transmission of the unutterable (*Unaussagbaren*) and again became mere preoccupation with the study of contents.”⁵⁵ Rabbi Bunem was so enamored with ideas that he lost sight of the essential teaching, which is truly inseparable from lives of sacramental existence and thus essentially unsayable. On the other hand, although Rabbi Ḥanokh was indeed a student of Rabbi Bunem, Buber emphasizes repeatedly that he was “the disciple par excellence of the rabbi of Kotzk,”⁵⁶ whom, in direct contrast to Bunem, Buber paints as painfully dismayed at the detached intellectualism of contemporary Hasidism: he lamented that “the bond between congregation and school [seemed] to be definitely severed”;⁵⁷ “prayer and teaching had finally become two worlds which were related only through knowledge of the goal, but not through the warmth of the heart and enthusiasm of practice (*Praxis*);”⁵⁸ and thus he committed himself “to maintain, internally and externally, what he considered the truth, which was not a content, but a personal quality, something ‘which cannot be imitated.’”⁵⁹ Above all, Buber asserts, the Kotsker taught Rabbi Ḥanokh “that a hasid was a human being who asked for the *meaning* (Sinn),”⁶⁰ that is, the sensible truth in which spiritual ideas and bodily realia converge. In this spirit, Buber casts Rabbi Ḥanokh as the tsaddiq whose “main contribution” sprung from his conviction that “the so-called two worlds, heaven and earth, are in reality one single world which has split apart but will grow whole again if man makes the earth entrusted to him (*ihm anvertraute*) like heaven.”⁶¹ In short,

⁵⁵ Buber, *Tales*, II:38; German: *MBW*, 18:181.

⁵⁶ Buber, *Tales*, II:44. See also: “he was a disciple of the rabbi of Kotsk in the truest sense of the word.” *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Buber, *Tales*, II:39.

⁵⁸ Buber, *Tales*, II:40.

⁵⁹ Buber, *Tales*, II:40.

⁶⁰ Buber, *Tales*, II:44; German: *MBW*, 18:187. Emphasis in the original German.

⁶¹ Buber, *Tales*, II:44; German: *MBW*, 18:187.

while Buber's Bunem had celebrated abstract and absorbing ideas that hovered above the vulgarities of communal-cum-corporeal existence, Rabbi Ḥanokh allowed for no such bifurcation of teaching and life. And it is in this light that we must understand Buber's reformulation of these two sages' views on "secrets." For Rabbi Bunem, "the man versed in the mystery (*Geheimniskundige*)," a religious "secret (*Geheimnis*)" is a verbalization that everyone may say and hear, but whose inner ideational content is comprehensible only to an initiated elite. In contrast, Rabbi Ḥanokh—the tsaddiq who denies dualities between heaven and earth, teaching and prayer, school and community—regards the secret as incommunicable and incomprehensible, yet sensibly graspable from the living center of theological awareness: "in the fear of God can they be grasped (*gefaßt*)."

This leads us to the second major change in Buber's version, where he quite blatantly transforms the end of the teaching. First of all, he omits both references to the Lurianic line, "[He will show us His secret] that had been said in a whisper."⁶² To be sure, Buber does have a tendency to decrease the citational density of Hasidic sources for the sake of his diverse literary audience, but this particular omission has a more positive significance. Indeed, insofar as Buber wants to draw Rabbi Ḥanokh's portrayal of "secrets" away from any hints of verbalizable ideational content, the image of a whispered secret would certainly be misleading. However, Buber's efforts to degnosticize the secret do not necessarily imply an intention to exclude all elements of theological cognition. Indeed, Buber envisions a non-noetic knowing that he sees as deeper than any gnostic knowledge. We noted already that Rakats himself omitted Rabbi Ḥanokh's remark that God-fearers "understand the secret," and this editorial decision may very well reflect Rakats's own religious sensibilities. For obvious reasons, Buber also leaves those

⁶² On the origins of the phrase, see above, note 50.

provocative words out of his rendition, but he nevertheless injects the source with his own distinctive value of theological cognition. Whereas the original versions conclude with Rabbi Ḥanokh's definitive statement that the secrets "are always concealed (נעלמים הם תמיד)," Buber glosses Psalm 25 in a different way: "Only in the fear of God can they be grasped (*gefaßt*), and save through the fear of God they cannot be grasped." For Buber's Rabbi Ḥanokh, there is no content to know, understand, or whisper, and yet there is nevertheless a mystery to be grasped experientially, however fleetingly and unspeakably. The mystery remains hidden from devices of conceptual extraction and philosophical abstraction, but it is immanently perceptible for embodied epistemologies of religious awareness. Thus, if it is accessed in the course of learning Torah, it is not because it lies somehow in the script of the source, or even between the lines; rather, the disclosed secret is itself an event, a reader's moment of illumination in *response* to the text, or *between* student and study partner. There is no secret to whisper, although personal exchanges of whispers may manifest it.

One might consider this matter in light of an earlier Hasidic teaching attributed to Menahem Mendel of Peremyshlyany, who insisted that any truly profound "secret" is irreducible to verbal explanation. The idea that a book or a lecture could simply divulge the mystery in words misses the very meaning of theological hiddenness.

"Hidden (נסתר)" is the name given to a thing that one cannot explain to another person (שאינן אדם יכול להבינו לחבירו). Just as it is always impossible to describe the taste of a food to someone who has never tasted that taste, so it is impossible to articulate in words the *how* and *what*. This thing is called a "secret (סתר)." Such is the nature of love and fear of the Creator, blessed be He. It is impossible to articulate to another person what the love in one's heart is like. This is called "hidden (נסתר)."⁶³

⁶³ Meshullam Feybush Heller, *Yosher Divrei Emet* (Jerusalem, 1974), 14. Cf. Scholem, "Devekut, or Communion with God," in *Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 218; Idel, *Hasidism*, 174-175; idem, *Absorbing Perfections*, 184.

The Simple Beholding of God

Although Buber does showcase Hasidic conceptions of learning and text study, he generally prefers to emphasize “the ‘simple man,’ with whom the hasidic movement is primarily concerned.”⁶⁴ According to Buber’s Neo-Romantic sensibilities, this folksy, uneducated figure—or, in certain cases, even the erudite tsaddiq who in his profound wisdom can empty himself of scholarly excesses—is “the man of direct illumination”⁶⁵ who quite naturally slips into the most immediate modes of theological awareness. Such a populist vision of religiosity animated the core of the whole movement, and thus “hasidism must not be interpreted as an esoteric teaching (*esoterischen Lehre*) but one charged with primitive (*volkstümlichen*) vitality.” Moreover, “it is this very vitality which lends peculiar intensity to the relationship of one hasid toward another.”⁶⁶ Indeed, Buber writes, Hasidism enacted a

complete change of the scale of values. It is no longer the sharp-witted man, versed in religious knowledge, nor is it the secluded ascetic devoted to contemplation, but the pure and unified man who walks with God in the midst of the world, who participates in the life of the people and raises it to God who is now held up as the exemplary man.⁶⁷

The ideal ḥasid is thus more connected to people than to books, more concerned with earthly rumblings than with ethereal realms. For Buber, a prime example of this mentality was Rabbi Yitshak Eisik of Kalev, who hailed from a humble Hungarian village of immense “primitive (*volkstümliche*) vitality,” and whose “songs were said to have been even more sensuous

⁶⁴ Buber, *Tales*, I:4. The “fool” (שוטה) or “simple person” (תמים) is a common motif in Hasidic literature, although this was not without precedent in earlier Jewish sources. See Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, 257–263.

⁶⁵ Buber, „The Foundation Stone,” *OMH*, 69-70; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 280-281.

⁶⁶ Buber, *Tales*, I:10; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 136.

⁶⁷ Buber, “The Foundation Stone,” *OMH*, 69-70; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 280-281. Cf. “But ever again, in sayings, parables, and tales the Baal-Shem and many of his disciples know how to praise the simple ignorant man whose life-forces are united in an original unity and who serves God with just this unity.” Buber, “Replies to My Critics,” 734.

(*sinnlich-stärker*) and enchanting, probably because of the primitive (*volkstümlichen*) elements which entered into them.”⁶⁸

This perspective on the much celebrated “simple man” in Hasidism is surely reminiscent of Buber’s period-piece portrayals of the so-called “primitive” man in his dialogical writings, and it is crucial for our purposes to elucidate the connections.⁶⁹ As we discussed above in chapter one, Buber imagines “primitive” man as primordially fit for the “wholeness of the relation,” for his “life develops in a small sphere of acts that have a strong presence (*Umkreis gegenwartsstarker Akte*).”⁷⁰ In Buber’s nostalgic hindsight, primitive existence is pristinely prior to any modern objectification of, or alienation from, material reality. Indeed, with regard to modern conceptions of spirituality, for example, our very categories of

supra-sensible (*übersinnliche*) and supernatural...do not do justice to those of primitive man. The boundaries of his world are drawn by his bodily experiences (*leibliches Erleben*)... Any assumption that the non-sensible (*Unsinnliches*) exists must strike him as nonsense (*widersinnig*). The appearances to which he attributes a ‘mystical potency’ are all the elementary relational processes—that is, all the processes about which he thinks at all because they stimulate his body (*Leib*) and leave an impression of such stimulation in him.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Buber, *Tales*, II:17; German: *MBW*, vol. 18.1, 165-166; Modern Hebrew: *OhG*, 42. It is not entirely clear why Olga Marx translates the German „volkstümliche” and/or Hebrew “עממי” into English here and elsewhere as “primitive.” A more literal translation might be „folksy” or „populist.” Nevertheless, as we shall discuss below, the myriad images of the “folksy,” “primitive,” and “simple” man are indeed interconnected in Buber’s thought.

⁶⁹ Needless to say, our discussions of Buber’s essentializing portrayals of „primitive” people—or, for that matter, „oriental” people, “modern” people, “Jews,” “Hasidim,” and so on—do not imply any acceptance of, or agreement with these views. Such simplistic and monolithic portrayals of people should of course be strongly questioned and critiqued today. However, as our primary concern here is to understand Buber’s thought, these outdated, orientalist, and Neo-Romantic caricatures are nonetheless important tools for our investigations. It is worth noting, as well, that Buber was far from alone in his romanticization of “primitive” peoples. Indeed, such fantastic accounts of cultural others as a means of critiquing contemporary “Western” culture were extremely common in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anthropological and literary discourse. See George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), especially pp. 111-136.

⁷⁰ *IT*, 69; German: *ID*, 25. On the “primitive” person’s primordial readiness for relation, see also *Ibid.*, 70-75; German: 26-32.

⁷¹ *IT*, 71-72; German: *ID*, 28.

Thus, for Buber, primitive man is maximally in touch with corporeal reality, in ways that stand in direct contrast with the numbed sensibilities of modern society. The quintessential foil for that sensuous worldview is the modern philosopher, who fancies that disembodied consciousness or “mind” is somehow prior to bodily existence. Indeed, Buber asserts, “in the primitive function of cognition one cannot find any *cognosco ergo sum* of even the most naïve kind.”⁷² As far as Buber is concerned, it would never even occur to primitive man to commit the Cartesian error of overlooking “the living, body-soul (*leibseelische*) person” in search of some “abstract and abstractly-produced subject of consciousness.”⁷³ In this vein, Buber suggests that primitive man cognizes the world in a fundamentally bodily, “motoric” mode, as opposed to the objectifying ocular orientation of modern (western) man:

The elementary, spirit-awakening impressions and stimulations of the ‘natural man’ are derived from relational processes—the living sense of a confrontation (*eines Gegenüber*)—and from relational states—living with one who confronts him (*einem Gegenüber*). About the moon which he sees every night he does not think much until it approaches him bodily (*leiblich*), in his sleep or even while he is awake, and casts a spell over him with its gestures or, touching him, does something wicked or sweet to him. What he retains is not the visual representation (*optische Vorstellung*) of the migratory disk of light nor that of a demonic being that somehow belongs to it, but at first only the motoric *image-stimulus* of the moon’s effectivity through his body (*nur das motorische, den Leib durchströmende Erregungsbild jenes Mondwirkens*).⁷⁴

In this striking—and blatantly essentializing—passage, Buber asserts that primitive man processes the world first and foremost through his muscular-motor functions, as a bodily perception of dynamic activity that can hardly be distilled into static, optic images.

⁷² *IT*, 73, German: *ID*, 29-30.

⁷³ Buber, “Religion and Philosophy,” *EG*, 39. Cf. above in chapter 1.

⁷⁴ Buber, *IT*, 70-71; German: *ID*, 26-27. I have emended the final sentence of Kaufmann’s translation according to the German. Emphasis in the original German.

This depiction of primitive peoples bears a striking resemblance to Buber's portrayal of "Oriental" peoples—a class with which he, as a Jew, identifies.⁷⁵

I would define the Oriental type of human being, recognizable in the documents of Asia's antiquity as well as in the Chinese or Indian or Jew of today, as a man of pronounced motor faculties, in contrast to the Occidental type, represented by, say, the Greek or the Periclean period, the Italian of the Trecento, or the contemporary German, whose sensory faculties are greater than his motor.⁷⁶

Buber suggests that this cognitive difference between Oriental and Occidental peoples has profound intellectual implications. Whereas the former "perceives in motions" and thinks through "doing," the latter perceives in "images" and thinks with abstracted forms.⁷⁷ Of course, this is not to say that Oriental people altogether lack sensory faculties and visual experiences. Buber indicates, rather, that their sensations are integrated intrinsically with their whole, active, bodily being. "I said: the motor-type man perceives in motions; he acts, as it were, his perception. It does not grow in him, but strikes through him; it does not nest, in isolation, in his brain, but, linked to all other senses, spreads throughout his stimulated body."⁷⁸ And this clarification of Oriental perception pertains as well to Oriental thought: Of course, they have developed mental faculties and lead stimulating intellectual lives, but their insights are different from those of the Western philosopher: "Knowledge of the nature of the world, on which the Occidental who wants to master it depends, is forever subservient to the knowledge of the *way*. What is said of Buddha may be said of all Oriental teaching: he did not lecture on whether the

⁷⁵ See Buber, "The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism," in *OJ*, 56-78; German: "Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum," *Vom Geist des Judentums* (Münich: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1916), 9-48.

⁷⁶ Buber, "The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism," *OJ*, 57; German: "Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum," *Vom Geist des Judentums*, 11-12.

⁷⁷ Buber, "The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism," *OJ*, 58; German: "Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum," *Vom Geist des Judentums*, 12.

⁷⁸ Buber, "The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism," *OJ*, 58; German: "Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum," *Vom Geist des Judentums*, 12.

world is eternal or temporal; he taught only the way.”⁷⁹ In other words, “To the Orient, the contemplated idea is a project that becomes reality only in the lived idea. This alone, the lived idea, *is*.”⁸⁰

This image of enacted knowing, as opposed to abstract knowledge, certainly applies to Buber’s portrayal of Hasidic religious epistemology. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Buber characterizes Hasidism precisely as an outpouring of the Jewish-Oriental spirit, unparalleled since their ancient expulsion from the Near East.⁸¹ Amidst centuries of exile in the Occident, Jews had succumbed largely to the “detached intellectuality” of their surroundings, severed “from natural life,” and while they did pursue various creative and thoughtful endeavors, they did so without any “truly intuitive-instinctual (*schauend-triebhaft*)” inspiration.⁸² Yet the “subterranean” forces of the people took hold once again in the religious revolution of Hasidism, which “revealed anew the limitless power of Oriental man.”⁸³ To be sure, Buber concedes, the original ethos of that movement could not ultimately survive in the harsh conditions of the Occident, but he affirms that the folkish, Oriental force of those much despised Jews of Eastern Europe remains visible. They are admittedly

poor in the skills of civilization but, despite encroaching corruption and corrosion, rich in the power of an original ethos and a spirit of immediacy. We need only to look at the decadent yet still wonderous Hasid of our days; to watch him as he prays to his God, shaken by his fervor, expressing with his whole body what his lips are saying—a sight both grotesque and sublime; to observe him at the close of the Sabbath as he partakes, with kingly gestures and in concentrated dedication, of the sacred meal to which cling the

⁷⁹ Buber, “The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism,” *OJ*, 61; German: “Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum,” *Vom Geist des Judentums*, 18.

⁸⁰ Buber, “The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism,” *OJ*, 62; German: “Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum,” *Vom Geist des Judentums*, 19.

⁸¹ On the elements of „Orientalism“ in Buber’s Hasidic writings, see Mendes-Flohr, “Fin de Siècle Orientalism,” in idem, *Divided Passions*.

⁸² Buber, “The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism,” *OJ*, 74; German: “Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum,” *Vom Geist des Judentums*, 41.

⁸³ Buber, “The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism,” *OJ*, 75; German: “Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum,” *Vom Geist des Judentums*, 41-42.

mysteries of the world's redemption, and we will feel: here, stunted and distorted yet unmistakable, is Asiatic strength and Asiatic inwardness.⁸⁴

In Buber's eyes, the powerful and primal spirit of ḥasidim is thus manifest most of all in their very physical existence—their peculiar practices, their corporeal quakes and convulsions, even their acts of eating. This striking portrait of the ḥasidim binds together at once Buber's myriad images of "primitive," "folkish," "Oriental," and "simple" people. To be sure, there are differences among those various personae in his writings, and each serves a distinct role for his thought. But there are overwhelming overlaps, and our brief analysis here of their common modes of cognition serves to elucidate what Buber holds to be the dominant type of theological awareness in Hasidism. While textual learning and Torah study may serve central roles in those circles, Hasidic cognition is ultimately bodily and motoric, active and relational, powered by the "truly intuitive-instinctual (*schauend-triebhaft*)" energies of their folkishness.

Rabbi Meshulam Zusha of Annopol (d. 1800) is the paradigmatic "fool" or "simple one" among the early tsaddiqim,⁸⁵ and given the points mentioned above about Buber's romantic representations of "primitive" and "oriental" peoples, it is noteworthy for us that he characterizes Zusha precisely as "a magnificent folksy (*volkstümliche*) figure," and a "fool of God" of a decidedly "East-European type." The great *Ostjude* Zusha thus "stands solitarily over-against the eternal You" with a wholly organic, "undamaged relation of immediacy (*Unmittelbarkeitsbeziehung*) with God, beyond the rules and regulations of society (*Gesellschaft*)."⁸⁶ Zusha's younger brother, Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk (1717-1786/7), was

⁸⁴ Buber, "The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism," *OJ*, 76; German: "Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum," *Vom Geist des Judentums*, 43-44.

⁸⁵ For an incisive essay on Rabbi Zusha, see Tsippi Kauffman, "Hasidic Performance: Establishing a Religious (non)Identity in the Tales about Rabbi Zusha of Annopol," *Journal of Religion* 95.1 (2015): 51-71.

⁸⁶ Buber, *Tales*, I:26-27; German: *MBW* vol. 18, 150.

known to wander around the region with him, but Elimelekh was undoubtedly the scholar between them, and Buber emphasizes this fact in the strongest terms, noting even that “Rabbi Elimelekh must be considered the true successor of the Great Maggid.”⁸⁷ Let us consider one oft told *mayse* about the brothers in their youth, which was published initially in Aharon Walden’s *Qeḥal Ḥasidim* (1870) and rendered nearly five decades later by Buber as his tale “The Parable of the Wood-Cutter.”⁸⁸ The original sources are very long, so I shall provide only a summary here, including a number of direct quotations from *Qeḥal Ḥasidim* that will prove helpful for us later as we identify Buber’s consequential alterations.

The story begins when Zusha had recently ventured off to Mezritsh to join the fellowship of the Great Maggid, but Elimelekh had not yet done so. In contrast to the other studious students and disciplined disciples in Mezritsh, Zusha would regularly

steal away to hidden places and to the woods, where he would offer up songs and praises to God in ecstasy and intense love, in powerful passion, desire and great yearning, until it was said of him, according to the biblical verse, ‘In Her love you will always be ravished’ (Prov. 5:19). For he looked like someone who went around always immersed in meditations and wonder from his immense cleaving to God and his immense yearning to serve Him.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Buber, *Tales*, I:27.

⁸⁸ Buber published his first rendition of this tale in “Rabbi Susja. Sein Leben in Geschichten von Martin Buber,” *Die neue Rundschau*, vol. 1, issue 3 (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1917), 392-397. Buber also included this tale subsequently in *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge* (1922), *Die chassidischen Bücher* (1931), and *Or ha-Ganuz/Die Erzählungen der Chassidim*. See Buber, *Tales*, I:235-236; German: *MBW*, vol. 18, §432; Hebrew: *OhG*, 220-221. According to his unpublished notebook, Buber consulted a variety of versions of this *mayse*: Walden, *Qeḥal Ḥasidim*, 48a-48b; Abraham Ḥayyim Simḥah Bunem Michelson, *Ohel Elimelekh* (Przemysl, 1910), 81; Meshulam Zusya of Hanipoli, *Butsina Qaddisha* (Piotrków, 1912), 13; Kleinman, *Mazkeret Shem ha-Gedolim*, 70. Buber lists all these sources in his personal notes on “Sussja” in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #8, “Das Gleichnis von dem König u. dem Bauer.” However, in his source index to *OhG*, Buber cites only the *Qeḥal Ḥasidim* version, so we shall refer primarily to that one, which is also nearly identical to the version in *Mazkeret Shem ha-Gedolim*.

⁸⁹ Walden, *Qeḥal Ḥasidim*, 48a.

In contrast to his older brother, Elimelekh was more conventionally studious (היה לומד תורה כדרך (הלומדים). He observed Zusha's strange behavior and asked him why he conducted himself in this way, especially when it clearly made him seem bizarre in the eyes of other students. In response, Zusha told Elimelekh a parable: Once there was a "great and wondrously wise king (מלך גדול (וחכם נפלא" whom everyone in the country loved deeply. And in this country, there was "an exceedingly wealthy tradesman who had grown very prosperous from his work (בעל מלאכה אחד (עשיר גדול מופלג אשר נתעשר ממלאכתו מאוד)." It occurred to this man at one point, however, that all of this wealth did not bring him true joy. What he really wanted, he realized, was to "rejoice greatly [before] the face of his king (יתענג מאוד פני מלכו)." Thus, he sold all his property and assets, gave away much of his money, and traveled to the kingdom in hopes of drawing near to the king. After extensive investigations among the deputies and ministers of the palace, and offering them a hefty bribe with his remaining cash, the man finally landed a position as the stoker of the heating stove in the king's house.

The man relished this opportunity to serve the king, however indirectly, and his love burned within him like the flames that he now kindled continually in the stove. He pressed his ear persistently to the walls in order to hear the king's comments about the temperature—whether it was too high or too low, too hot or too cold—and he carefully adjusted his art according to the subtleties of the king's temperament. Meanwhile, the king himself was amazed at the enhanced atmosphere in his home, and eventually he inquired about it. His ministers told him the whole story about the man who had loved the king so intensely that he gave away all his wealth and property in order to serve him. And, the ministers added, since the man "knows neither writing nor eloquence, and does not understand any wisdom or knowledge (איננו יודע לא (כתב ולא לשון ואיננו מבין שום חכמה ודעת)," they offered him this menial service in the palace. When

the king heard this report, he commanded them to bring this man before him so he could “see the face of such a faithful lover as this, who is the way he is despite not being any great intellectual or wise person (לראות את פני אוהב נאמן כמוהו יהיה מה שיהיה אף כי איננו בר שכל גדול וחכם).” When the man finally appeared, the king offered to grant him any wish. The man responded, however, that there was nothing material he wished to receive—after all, he explained, he gave away all his wealth in order to draw near to the king in just this way. All I want, he declared, is “to see the face of my king in every moment (לראות פני מלכי בכל עת).” The king appreciated these loving sentiments, but he could not possibly fulfill this request, “for it would be an abuse to the king to appear in every moment before the eyes of his servant, and it would be especially improper for such a lowly, inferior servant to burst into the kingdom whenever he wishes.” As a compromise, however, the king agreed to provide a small hole in the “upper chamber of the house (בעליית (הבית),” where the man could go secretly and observe the king whenever he felt so moved. Moreover, the hole would contain a special lens (כלי זכוכית) that magnifies everything so that it appears thousands of times larger than it is. The man was euphoric to receive this gift, and from then on, “whenever the man’s heart filled with love of the king, he rushed to the aforementioned place, looked at the face of his king (ויבט משם פני מלכו), and rejoiced.”

Around this time, the king hosted a magnificent banquet, and under the influence of all the festive drinks and delights, the king’s son “spoke before the king and the ministers without knowledge or intelligence (בלי דעת והשכל). And the king, his father, was furious because he had not spoken with knowledge or intelligence before the king and ministers.” Thus, he banished his son from his house for a full year and prohibited him from “any sight whatsoever of the face of his father, his king (ולכל יחזה פני אביו מלכו).” The son was devastated and “greatly missed seeing

the face of his father (היה לו גיעגועים גדולים לראות פני אביו).⁹⁰ He began to notice the fire stoker looking at the king through his hole, and soon thereafter the king's son begged him to let him have a look so that "he could see the face of his father (לראות את פני אביו), whom he loved very much. And if he could do this, then he would be so pleased to see from there the face of his father (ויראה משם את פני המלך)." But the man said to the king's son:

Woe to you (אוי לך!), son of the king, that you were banished from your father's table! I, I am the fool (האיש הסכל) who has no human understanding, wisdom, or intelligence, and I don't know writing or eloquence, and it would be an abuse and humiliation for someone like me to come before the king at all times, and so, in his grace, he ordered this hole to be made for my joy and delight, where I can see the king through a magnifying glass. But you, son of the king, you are wise in the wisdoms and knowledgeable in concepts, and you, always among the guests who sit immediately with the king (היושבים ראשונה במלך), you have this [single] challenge to make sure you speak before the king with intelligence and knowledge, so that you do not say vain or vacuous words that are displeasing in the eyes of the king. Woe to you for this shame and disgrace!⁹¹ ... If only your thoughts and your lips were integrated, then your words would be suitable and pleasing before the king, and then you would sit before the king face to face (פנים אל פנים); your eyes would behold your father, the king, in his beauty.

After Zusha told this parable, he said directly to Elimelekh,

My brother, my brother, you know that I have no Torah, no wisdom, no knowledge, and no understanding, and so I need to perform my service with much labor and self-exertion in order to see Him, etc. But you, an outstanding scholar (תלמיד חכם מופלג), you just need to pay attention well to your speech, your study, and your prayer...and then you will be among those seated first in the kingdom and those who see His face, may His name be blessed, forever and ever.

And thereafter, Elimelekh traveled to Mezritsh and became one of the most prominent students of the Great Maggid.

This *mayse* is packed with layers upon layers of meaning—not only because of the interpenetrations of *mayse* within *mayse*, but also due to the nature of the whole's overarching message. With the parable of the wood-stoker and the king's son in the palace, Zusha conveys to

⁹⁰ This element of the parable seems to be drawing upon BT Berakhot 3a: "Woe to the father who had to banish his children, and woe to the children who had to be banished from the table of their father!"

⁹¹ On this mournful expression, cf. *b. Baba Batra*, 75a.

Elimelekh that different people must walk different spiritual paths according to their personal contexts and constitutions. Like the uneducated tradesman who embraces a hidden labor of love because any direct relationship with the wise king is simply out of the question, Zusha accepts that his own relations with the King of kings will be stronger through solitary stints and spontaneous songs than through any futile attempts at intellectual discourse around the Maggid's table. Meanwhile, the king's son and Elimelekh are equipped to embark on scholarly paths that will grant them great positions of power as well as profound insights into divinity. According to this parable of spiritual pluralism, seekers should serve God and know God with their own God-given tools.

However, we should not overlook the elements of hierarchization in this tale. Ultimately, the wood-stoker's magnifying glass is a barrier between him and the king's face, no matter how magnificent the lens is. While this glass—this *ispaqlareya*, to use the theologically charged Aramaic term—offers degrees of immediacy with the king that were previously unimaginable to him, the pane is still present.⁹² Indeed, no less than Maimonides pointed out that an *ispaqlareya* is a type of “division” or “cover,” and thus even the most perfect prophet, Moses, who apprehended God through only a single *ispaqlareya*, as opposed to the nine of other prophets, could not ultimately ascend to what is called “beholding of the face (ראית פנים).”⁹³ The Hasidic

⁹² The wood-stoker's lens is called “glass (זכוכית),” a term that is often identified traditionally with the Aramaic אספקלריא. For example, the זכוכית in Job 28:17 is rendered in the Targum as אספקלרא. And according to Samuel ibn Tibbon's canonical Hebrew translation of Maimonides's *Peirush ha-Mishnah*, Maimonides notes explicitly that an אספקלריא is made of a transparent material such as crystal or “glass (זכוכית).” See Joseph H. Gorfinkle, ed., *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics (Shemonah Peraḳim)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), 79, including note 4 (in Hebrew pagination: p. 38).

⁹³ For Maimonides's characterization of an אספקלריא as a type of “partition” or “cover” (מחיצה and מכסה in Ibn Tibbon's medieval Hebrew translation), see Gorfinkle, ed., *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides*, 79, including note 4. For his application of this to the case of Moses's apprehension of God, see *ibid.*, 79-84, esp. 82-83. For the midrashic tradition to which Maimonides alludes, see Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai's teaching in *Vayiqra Rabbah* 1:14.

tale at hand also affirms this dominance of transcendence over transparency. Whereas the king's son, erudite and articulate on the inner side of the wall, could behold the king "face to face (פנים אל פנים)," ⁹⁴ the wood-stoker laments that he can only "see the king through a magnifying glass (זכוכית המגדיל)." Unlike most other Hasidic formulations of the so-called "parable of the walls" or "parable of the palace," the barriers surrounding the king in Zusha's vision are not ultimately illusory. ⁹⁵ Here, the partitions remain rock solid. Only those with the requisite intellectual capabilities could possibly ascend to the king's table, and the rest remain walled out, no matter how mystically aflame or dearly beloved they are. Zusha emphasizes this point in the strongest terms to his promising younger brother, and his cautionary tale appears to be effective, for Elimelekh sets out thereafter to bring his textual talents to the Maggid's *tisch*. ⁹⁶

Buber's tale, "The Parable of the Wood-Cutter," is an abridgment that incorporates very revealing alterations:

⁹⁴ Regarding the ability to see the king "face to face" when a barrier is removed, see the classic parable of Rabbi Hanina bar Papa about the screen between the "king" and his interlocutors: "When he spoke with his beloved, he would pull back the screen until he saw him face to face (פנים אל פנים), and spoke with him [directly]. However, for others he did not do this, but rather spoke with them with the barrier of the screen spread out, so they did not see him." *Vayiqrah Rabbah*, 1:13.

⁹⁵ The foundational formulations of this parable in Hasidism are attributed to the Besht and can be found in *Keter Shem Tov* (Lemberg, 1858), vol. I, fol. 7a; Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye, *Ben Porat Yosef* (Lemberg, 1866), fol. 94a. See also Joseph Weiss, "Reshit Tsemihatah shel ha-Derekh ha-Hasidut," *Zion* 16 (1951), 97-99; Moshe Idel, "The Parable of the Son of the King and the Imaginary Walls in Early Hasidism," in *Yahadut: Sugyot, Keta'im, Panim, Zehuyot: Sefer Rivqah*, ed. Haviva Pedaya, Ephraim Meir, and Rebecca Horowitz (Be'er-Sheva: Hotsa'at ha-Sefarim shel Universitat Ben-Gurion, 2007), 97-99; Kauffman, *Be-Khol Derakhekha Da'ehu*, 202-212; Rachel Elijor, *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, 74-75; Iris Brown (Hoizman), "Sheloshah Gilgulim shel 'Mashal ha-Homot.'" *Meḥaqrei Yerushalayim be-Sifrut Ivrit* 23 (2009): 99-132. For Buber's own early reformulation of this parable, see his *Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 24; German: *Legende*, 10-11; cf. Martina Urban, "Mysticism and Sprachkritik: Martin Buber's Rendering of the Mystical Metaphor 'ahizat 'enayim,'" *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 62.2/4 (2006): 535-552.

⁹⁶ From another perspective, the walls may very well be illusory, but Zusha simply does not possess the intellectual faculties necessary to penetrate them. This interpretation of the parable is reminiscent of the palace in Maimonides's own philosophical-mystical parable, according to which full access to the king is reserved for that intellectual elite who attain the very peak of philosophical and metaphysical expertise. See Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (University of Chicago Press, 1963), III:51.

In his youth, Zusya joined the congregation of the Great Maggid, Rabbi Baer of Mezritch. But he did not stay with the other disciples. He wandered through the woods, lay down in hidden places, and sang his praises to God, until the people quoted Solomon's words when they spoke of him: "And in your love of her, you will always err."⁹⁷ But his younger brother Elimelekh, who was still a boy and did not as yet belong to the congregation, studied assiduously in books. He wondered at Zusya and once asked him: "Brother, why do you act so, that everyone in the House of Study says it is strange?" Zusya answered him with a smile: "My brother, I shall tell you a story." And this is the story.

"A poor wood-cutter had a great longing to see the king's face. Therefore, he left his village and walked for many days until he came to the king's city. After a number of vain attempts, he managed to become the stove-stoker in the palace of the king. And now he used all his diligence and understanding for his craft. From the forest he fetched the finest wood, fragrant with resin,⁹⁸ split it into even logs, and—right at the well-calculated time—stacked these expertly in the fireplaces. The king enjoyed the good, living warmth, unlike any that he had ever felt before, and he asked how this came about. When someone told him about the stove-stoker and his work, he sent him a message that he could have a wish. The poor man begged that he might be allowed to see the face of the king sometimes. His wish was granted. In a corridor leading out of the woodshed, a small window was made through which one was able to look into the royal living-room; there the stove-stoker could stand and satisfy his longing.

"Now once, when the king's son was seated at his father's table, he spoke a word that displeased him and was punished by a year's banishment from the king's apartments. For a time he lived in bitter loneliness. Then he began to wander (*irrte*) mournfully through the corridors of the castle. When he came to the little window of the stove-stoker, he was seized with still greater longing to see his father again (*den Vater wiederzusehn*) and begged the man to let him look through. Thus, they entered into conversation.

"My brother," said Zusya to Elimelekh, when he had reached this point in his story, "this is what the stove-stoker told the king's son when he conferred with him. "You are at home in the rooms of the lord and nourish yourself at his table. All you need do is govern your speech with wisdom. But I have neither wisdom nor teaching, and so I must perform my service that I may behold the face of the lord."⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Olga Marx clearly translated this tale directly from Buber's Hebrew quotation of Prov. 5:19 in *OhG*, so her translation of this line appears in Buber's English *Tales* as "With her love be thou ravished always," conforming to the 1917 JPS Tanakh translation of the biblical verse. However, Buber translates the verse into German here quite idiosyncratically as "Und du wirst beständig umirren in der Liebe zu ihr." We shall discuss below the motivations for Buber's phrasing.

⁹⁸ The aroma of the wood is Buber's own addition. In fact, the version in *Qehal Hasidim* notes explicitly that the king was amazed at the *lack* of smell in the heating! Perhaps Buber wishes to make a subtle allusion to the aromas of incense and sacrifices in biblical Israel that offered a "pleasing odor (ריח נוחה)" to God.

⁹⁹ Buber, *Tales*, I:235-236; German: *MBW*, vol. 18, §432; Hebrew: *OhG*, 220-221. I have emended the English translation according to Buber's original German. The German version reads as follows:

In jungen Jahren schloß sich Sussja der Gemeinde des großen Maggids, des Rabbi Bär von Mesritsch, an. Doch saß er nicht bei den andern Schülern, sondern wanderte im Wald, lag in dessen Verstecken und sang Gott seine Loblieder zu, bis die Leute auf ihn das Wort der Sprüche Salomos anwandten: »Und du wirst beständig umirren in der Liebe zu ihr.« Sein jüngerer Bruder

From the very beginning, the alteration that is most striking in Buber's rendition is his demysticization of Zusha. Buber's Zusha may not conform to the studious culture around the Maggid, but he is verily more down-to-earth than ecstatic. Whereas the original sources state that Zusha would "steal away to hidden places and to the woods (אל מחבואות ואל היערים), where he would offer up songs and praises to God in ecstasy (בהתלהבות) and intense love, in powerful passion, desire and great yearning, Buber says simply that he "wandered through the woods, lay down in hidden places, and sang his praises to God." Thus, Buber underscores that the forest, specifically, was Zusha's sanctuary—not simply one site among other secret places—and Buber omits the dramatic list of mystical-affective states. Moreover, in the context of the original source, the citation of Proverbs 5:19 (באהבתה תשגה תמיד) clearly means "in your love of her [i.e.,

aber, der Knabe Elimelech, war der Gemeinde noch fremd und lernte eifrig in den Büchern. Er wunderte sich über Sussja und fragte ihn einst: »Bruder, was ist dein Gebaren doch sonderbar, und alle im Lehrhaus sagen, daß es sonderbar ist!« Darauf antwortete ihm Sussja mit einem Lächeln: »Mein Bruder, ich will dir eine Geschichte erzählen.« Und dies ist die Geschichte: Ein armer Holzhacker hatte ein großes Verlangen, das Angesicht seines Königs zu sehen. Darum verließ er sein Dorf und ging Tag für Tag, bis er in die Königsstadt kam. Nach mancherlei vergeblichen Mühen gelang es ihm, Ofenheizer im Palast des Königs zu werden. Da verwandte er nun allen Fleiß und Verstand auf sein Handwerk, holte selber das schönste harzduftende Holz aus dem Wald, spaltete es in ebenmäßige Scheite und füllte mit ihnen in kundigem Aufbau zu wohlbedachten Stunden die Kamine. Den König erfreute die gute lebendige Wärme, derengleichen er vorher nicht verspürt hatte, und er fragte ihr nach. Als man ihm von dem Ofenheizer und seiner Arbeit berichtete, ließ er ihm sagen, er dürfe sich einen Wunsch ausbitten. Der arme Mann bat, er möchte zuweilen das Angesicht des Königs sehen. Das wurde ihm gewährt; in einen Gang, der aus dem Holzspeicher führte, wurde ein kleines Fenster gebrochen, durch das man in den königlichen Wohnsaal blicken konnte; da durfte der Ofenheizer stehen und sein Verlangen sättigen. Einmal ereignete es sich, daß der Königssohn an der Tafel seines Vaters ein Wort sprach, das diesem mißfiel, und er wurde zur Strafe für die Dauer eines Jahres aus den Gemächern des Königs verwiesen. Eine Zeit verbrachte er in der bitteren Einsamkeit, dann wieder irrte er trübselig in den Gängen des Schlosses umher. Er kam an das Fensterchen des Ofenheizers; da wurde sein Herz noch stärker als zuvor von der Sehnsucht erfaßt, den Vater wiederzusehn, und er bat den Mann, ihn durchblicken zu lassen. So kamen sie ins Gespräch. »Mein Bruder«, sprach Sussja zu Elimelech, als er in seiner Erzählung so weit gediehen war, »dies sagte der Ofenheizer zum Königssohn, als er sich mit ihm unterredete: ›Du bist heimisch in den Gemächern des Herrn und nährst dich an seinem Tisch; dir tut nichts not, als dein Wort in Weisheit zu hüten. Ich aber habe nicht Weisheit noch Lehre, darum muß ich meinen Dienst tun, um das Angesicht des Herrn schauen zu dürfen.««

God] you will always be *ravished*,” and it even glosses the verse as such, “for he looked like someone who went around always immersed in meditations and wonder from his immense cleaving to God and his immense yearning to serve Him.” However, Buber renders the citation as “you will always err (*umirren*),” in the double-sense of going astray and committing errors. Thus, Buber’s Zusha is not stumbling, drunk on *devekut*, but rather straying, literally and figuratively, from the standard propriety and comportment of his fellowship.¹⁰⁰ He is not in another world, so to speak, lost “in meditations and wonder,” but quite the contrary: he walks away from the cerebral subtleties of the study house, into the crisp air of the woods, where he enacts a more concrete service in the sensuous form of song.

This leads us to our next point: Instead of emphasizing the intellectual differences between the stove-stoker and the king’s son, as in the original sources, Buber accentuates their different socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds—and given what we have seen about Buber’s conceptions of the “primitive” and “folksy” mentality, this shift of emphasis is of the utmost phenomenological and theological importance. Indeed, Buber basically bypasses the entire prologue of the parable. Whereas the original sources introduce the protagonist of the parable as an “exceedingly wealthy tradesman who had grown very prosperous from his work (בעל מלאכה אחד עשיר גדול מופלג אשר נתעשר ממלאכתו מאוד),” who then sold all his assets and bribed the royal ministers into hiring him to work in the king’s home, Buber begins the parable with an

¹⁰⁰ Buber affirms this reading of “*umirren*” poetically in the fact that Zusha earned this reputation through “wandering” (*wanderte*) in the woods, and even more so later in the tale when the king’s son “wandered around (*irrte...umher*) mournfully” through the palace after misspeaking before his father. Also, Buber was surely aware that the double-sense of committing an error and going astray applies not only to the German “*irren*” (and English “*err*”) but also to the original biblical Hebrew term “לשגות”. See entry for “שגה” in F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 993. In Buber and Rosenzweig’s Bible translation, the words in question from Proverbs 5:19 are rendered, “In your love [you] will always stagger/reel (*stets taumeln in ihrer Liebe*).” Thus, in the Hasidic tale at hand, Buber was clearly translating the verse contextually.

entirely different image: “A poor wood-cutter (*Ein armer Holzhacker*) had a great longing to see the king’s face.”¹⁰¹ In fact, according to his unpublished notes, Buber even first thought to entitle this tale, “The Parable of the King and the Peasant (*Das Gleichnis von dem König u. dem Bauer*)”!¹⁰² Furthermore, Buber inserts a detail that the man journeyed from his “village” (*Dorf*) to the “king’s city (*Königsstadt*),” emphasizing the rural roots of the former and the urbanity of the latter.¹⁰³ While the king and his court may very well exemplify a sort of urbane cosmopolitanism, Buber underscores that the wood-cutter possesses the practical intelligence and elemental genius of the primitive backcountry. Indeed, when Buber’s stove-stoker first got to work in the kingdom, he “employed all his diligence and understanding (*Fleiß und Verstand*) for his craft,” an expression that Buber plucks from an entirely different context in the *Ohel Elimelekh* source.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Presumably, Buber drew this alternate image from the version in *Ohel Elimelekh*, which begins: “There was a villager who yearned profoundly to see the face of the king (הנה כפרי אחד הי' משתוקק בתשוקה (רבה לראות את פני המלך).” However, this is entirely different from the other three sources that Buber consulted (*Qehal Ḥasidim*, *Mazkeret Shem ha-Gedolim*, and *Butsina Qaddisha*), which Buber followed far more closely and, as mentioned, Buber listed only *Qehal Ḥasidim* for this tale in his source index in *OhG*. We will note two additional places below where Buber seems to cherry-pick from *Ohel Elimelekh* when it suits his sensibilities.

¹⁰² See his personal notes on “Sussja” in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #8, “Das Gleichnis von dem König u. dem Bauer.”

¹⁰³ Again, Buber seems to draw this detail from *Ohel Elimelekh*, which refers to the man throughout the tale as a “villager (כפרי).”

¹⁰⁴ It seems that Buber drew the “Fleiß und Verstand” expression from *Ohel Elimelekh*, where the stove-stoker reasons to himself that while he may very well be employing “his wisdom and diligence (שחכמתו וזהשתדלותו)” in the king’s city, these qualities alone will not grant him access to the king’s face (*Ohel Elimelekh*, p. 81), so he takes steps that lead eventually to him secretly and unilaterally boring a hole in a wall of the king’s house. This is, of course, an entirely different use of the terms from the context in Buber’s version, where the man lovingly and adeptly applied his “understanding and diligence” to his new service for the king! Moreover, these terms “Fleiß und Verstand (*OhG*: הריצות ובינה)” contrast conspicuously with statements from Buber’s principal sources, *Qehal Ḥasidim*, *Mazkeret Shem ha-Gedolim*, and *Butsina Qadisha*, where the stove-stoker said, “I, I am the fool who has no human understanding (בינת אדם),” and where Zusha said, “My brother, my brother, you know that I have no...understanding (תבונה).”

Moreover, Buber goes out of his way repeatedly to resist characterizing the stove-stoker as unintelligent, although this is a central motif in the original sources. For instance, Buber omits the ministers' statement that they offered him this menial position because he "knows neither writing nor eloquence, and does not understand any wisdom or knowledge (איננו יודע לא כתב ולא) (לשון ואיננו מבין שום חכמה ודעת)," and Buber also omits the stove-stoker's statement, "I, I am the fool (האי"ש הסכל) who has no human understanding, wisdom, or intelligence, and I don't know writing or speech, and it would be an abuse and humiliation for someone like me to come before the king at all times." Buber also mitigates the original sources' emphases on the intellectual superiority of the king and his court: He omits the initial portrayal of the king as "great and wondrously wise (גדול והכם נפלא)," and where the original sources indicate that the king's son was banished because he "spoke before the king and the ministers without knowledge or intelligence (בלי דעת והשכל)," as was apparently customary in that sphere, Buber indicates more vaguely that "he spoke a word that displeased" the king. Only at end of tale, when Zusha once again addresses Elimelekh directly, does Buber allow for an allusion to intellectual disparities—after all, it would be incoherent to depict the brothers as coming from different socioeconomic strata or geographic regions! However, he softens and transmutes those distinctions considerably. In the original sources, Zusha says very self-disparagingly, "My brother, my brother, you know that I have no Torah, wisdom, knowledge, or understanding... But you, an exceptional scholar (תלמיד חכם מופלג), you need only to pay attention well to your speech, your study, and your prayer..." In contrast, Buber's Zusha says to his brother, "You are at home in the rooms of the lord and nourish yourself at his table. All you need do is govern your speech with wisdom. But I have neither wisdom nor teaching..."¹⁰⁵ Thus, Buber's Zusha places a greater

¹⁰⁵ I translate *Lehre* here as "instruction" (*OhG*: תורה), as opposed to "learning," as in Marx's English translation, because Buber is clearly rendering the word תורה from the original source.

emphasis on his and Elimelekh's different social standings. Elimelekh has the potential to be truly "at home" at the Maggid's "table," much like the king's son at his father's table—and while this is presumably due to Elimelekh's scholarly tendencies, Buber's Zusha does not even name that explicitly. And while Buber's Zusha does indeed refer to his own lack of "wisdom" or "teaching" (*Ich aber habe nicht Weisheit noch Lehre*) this is less a statement about his intellectual capacity than it is a recognition of his distinctive way of thinking. Indeed, we may appreciate Zusha's words here in light of Buber's own insistence about himself: "I have no teaching (*Ich habe keine Lehre*)."¹⁰⁶

In the end, Buber's Neo-Romantic reevaluation of the so-called simple man's cognition stirs him to subvert the original sources' element of hierarchization, according to which the way of the king's son and Elimelekh was deemed superior to that of the stove-stoker and Zusha. Most significantly, Buber reserves the state of "seeing the king's face" exclusively for Zusha and the stove-stoker. Although this formulation had appeared frequently in the original sources with regard to Elimelekh and the king's son—either as a completed act, a stated yearning, or a future prediction—Buber makes sure to change that language every time. Where the king's son had "greatly missed seeing the face of his father (היה לו געגועים גדולים לראות פני אביו)," Buber writes that he "lived in bitter loneliness"; where the king's son had begged to use the stove-stoker's hole in order to "see the face of his father (לראות את פני אביו)" and "see the face of the king (ויראה (משם את פני המלך)," Buber remarks only that the king's son "was seized with still greater longing to see his father again (*den Vater wiederzusehn*) and begged the man to let him look through"; and where Zusha had told Elimelekh that if he conducts himself properly then he "will be among those seated first in the kingdom and those who see His face, may His name be blessed, forever

¹⁰⁶ Buber, „Replies to My Critics,” 693; German: Schilpp, *Martin Buber*, 593.

and ever (ומרואי פניו ית"ש לעד ולנצח),” Buber’s Zusha says more soberly, “You are at home in the rooms of the lord and nourish yourself at his table. All you need do is govern your speech with wisdom.” In stark contrast, Buber repeatedly preserves the motif of beholding the face in the contexts of Zusha and the stove-stoker: Zusha’s parable begins with the sentence, “A poor woodcutter had a great longing to see the king’s face (*das Angesicht seines Königs zu sehen*)”; when the king later offers to grant him a wish, “The poor man begged that he might be allowed to see the face of the king (*das Angesicht des Königs sehen*);” and the very last line in Buber’s version of the tale is Zusha’s declaration, “I must perform my service that I may behold the face of the lord (*das Angesicht des Herrn schauen*).” Thus, whereas the original sources suggested that the king’s son and Elimelekh attained the most intimate and revelatory face-to-face encounters with transcendence, and the stove-stoker and Zusha had to content themselves with remote glimpses through strained efforts, Buber intimates quite the opposite. In his version of the parable, the eloquent and erudite king’s son may very well have been sitting beside the king among the most illustrious guests, but it is only the simple stove-stoker who truly beholds the king’s face. It follows, then, that this humble man beholds the king not through the hardware of a magnifying glass fixed in a tiny “hole (חור),” as in the original sources, but rather through the unmediated openness of a “small window” (*ein kleines Fenster*). In Buber’s estimation, this faithful beholder does not require any ocular prosthesis; indeed, if anyone in the story would require instruments of magnification in order to notice the grandeur of the king, it would be the king’s myopic son himself!

We may appreciate Buber’s alterations here in the light of another “window” that he invokes in later self-reflections:

I have no teaching. I only point to something. I point to reality, I point to something in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the hand

and lead him to the window (*Fenster*). I open the window and point to what is outside. I have no teaching, but I conduct a conversation (*ich führe ein Gespräch*).¹⁰⁷

Despite his esteemed profile as a public intellectual and prolific writer, Buber, much like his representation of Zusha, has “no teaching,” and yet he does have a “window.” And while this may be a shoddy site for a lecture, it is a luminous place for a *Gespräche*, a “conversation.” Indeed, it is telling that while Buber first published this tale about Zusha and Elimelekh in 1917, he added only in 1922, the year of *Ich und Du*, the dialogical detail that the king’s son and stove-stoker „entered into conversation (*kamen sie ins Gespräch*)“ there beside the window, where the unmindful son’s eyes may have finally opened to the face of his father, as if for the first time. For Buber, while there are indeed many types of service, the primal art of “beholding” has a particular gravity that outweighs any bourgeois skillset or scholarly erudition. And, therefore, whereas the original *mayses* end with Elimelekh setting off for the Maggid of Mezritsh—a hopeful foreshadowing that the younger brother will realize his full spiritual-intellectual potential—Buber’s version concludes with Zusha’s own declaration of religious resolve: “I must perform my service that I may behold (*schauen*) the face of the lord.”

Let us consider one additional example that exhibits Buber’s perspective on the “fool’s” direct beholding of God. Here is a remarkable *mayse* about Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin, and a no less astonishing reworking of that source by Buber. The original tale from Reuven Zak’s *Kenesset Yisrael* is as follows:

Once when [Rabbi Israel] sat down at the table and some rabbis sat before him, he began his holy words suddenly and asked: Why do [people] speak against Maimonides? One rabbi responded to him, saying: In one place [Maimonides says] that Aristotle comprehended until the sphere of heaven more than Ezekiel did, so why not speak against him! Rabbi Israel responded: Because the words of Maimonides are correct. He compared the matter to two people who went to a great kingdom. One was a sage and one was a fool. The sage goes [directly] to behold (לראות) the actual kingdom and does not

¹⁰⁷ Buber, „Replies to My Critics,“ 693; German: Schilpp, *Martin Buber*, 593.

look (מביט) at all to the sides at the majesty, splendor, and preciousness of the king's halls, for nothing [of] jewels and dyes and embroidery will be lacking in the king's house. But when the fool comes to the king's yards and sees (ומסתכל) the beauty of his intoxicating treasures—the sapphire, onyx, and jasper, and every precious stone—he then forgets about the king and gives all his attention to the precious things mentioned.¹⁰⁸

The implications of this tale are striking. In the Ruzhiner's parable to illuminate how Aristotle knew more than Ezekiel did about the sphere of heaven, the “sage” is clearly Aristotle and the “fool” is Ezekiel. The philosopher is unfazed by all the flashy materiality of the kingdom, keeping his mind's eye set on the goal to behold the king himself—that is, to set his intellect upon apprehension of God.¹⁰⁹ Ezekiel, however, gets intoxicated by images that are, it seems, relatively superficial visuals—and the language here is reminiscent of the “sapphire,” “onyx,” and “jasper” of Ezekiel 28:13, as well as the “sapphire stone” of Ezekiel's chariot vision. While scholarly Maimonides penetrates beyond the antechambers to behold heavenly heights, awe-struck Ezekiel just cannot take his eyes off the shiny stuff.¹¹⁰

Buber's version transforms the message of this narrative. His rendition begins similarly to the original, but listen closely to the Ruzhiner's parable as mediated by Buber:

Two people came to a king's palace. One lingered in every hall, contemplated with an expert gaze the splendid fabrics and jewels, and he could not see enough. The other

¹⁰⁸ Reuven ben Zvi David Zak, *Kenesset Yisrael* (Warsaw, 1906), 14.

פ"א בעת ישב על השלחן וישבו לפניו כמה רבנים ופתאום פתח דברות קדשו ושאל למה מדברים על הרמב"ם השיב לו רב אחד שאומר במקום אחד שאריסטו השיג עד גלגל השמים יותר מיחזקאל ולמה לא ידברו. השיב מר"ן כי הצדק כדברי הרמב"ם והמשיל הדבר לשני ב"א שהלכו למלכות גדול א' היה חכם ואחד שוטה. החכם הולך לראות במלכות ממש ואינו מביט כלל לצדדין על הוד הדר יקרת היכלו המלך אשר כלום חסר מבית המלך תכשיטים וצבעים ורקמה אבל השוטה כאשר בא אל חצרות המלך ומסתכל על יפעת אוצרותיו המעולפים ספיר שוהם וישפה וכל אבן יקר שוכח אז בהמלך ונותן כל דעתו על דברים היקרים כנ"ל. כ"ז סיפר בנו הקדוש אדמו"ר מסי"ג זי"ע ועכ"ל.

¹⁰⁹ Regarding the “eyes of the intellect” versus the “eyes of the mind,” see Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, 74-75.

¹¹⁰ Given that the Ruzhiner tells this parable here in the context of Maimonides, it is worthwhile to consider it in terms of Maimonides's own parable of the palace in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:51. Indeed, Maimonides similarly envisions different classes of seekers reaching different parts of the castle's interior, depending on their intellectual capacities. For Maimonides, as for the Ruzhiner, it is scholarly speculation that enables one to progress further into the depths of the palace, closer and closer to the king himself. Interestingly, however, Maimonides identifies the pinnacle of such intellectual apprehension precisely with “the rank of the prophets.” In direct contrast, the Hasidic rebbe of Ruzhin identifies the prophet with the “fool.” See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 618-620.

walked through the halls and knew only: This is the king's house, this is the king's garment, a few more steps and I will behold [the face of]¹¹¹ my lord king.¹¹²

In Buber's retelling of the parable, the two characters are no longer sage and fool but simply two types of people (*Menschen*), both of whom seem respectable enough. The one who lingers in the halls is not drunk on visions, but rather "contemplative" and even scientific, with an "expert gaze (*betrachtete mit kundigem Blick*)."¹¹³ This scholarly figure is, of course, Aristotle, not Ezekiel. In fact, Buber omits the Ezekialian imagery of precious stones from this scene. In his vision, it is the ever-inquisitive philosopher who gets distracted by the niceties of trivialities, studying endless exhibitions of curious objects. Meanwhile, for Buber, the prophet walks energetically with direction and decision to meet the king, declaring, "I will behold (*schauen*)."¹¹⁴ The German verb Buber uses here is, as we have already discussed, a key term in his writings for dialogical clear-sightedness, an utterly concrete, sensuous-cum-spiritual way of seeing.¹¹⁵ The Hebrew term here in the original source (and in Buber's own Modern Hebrew rendition) is לראות—and perhaps this is all the Ezekialian language that Buber needs to identify this character with the prophet.¹¹⁴ Indeed, words related etymologically to לראות appear a staggering twelve times in the last three verses of Ezekiel's chariot vision—and the idiosyncratic translation of those lines in the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible confirms that Buber was well aware of those ocular poetics.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ The additional phrase "the face of" (פני) appears only in Buber's Hebrew rendition.

¹¹² See Buber, *Tales*, II:58; German: *MBW* 18, §636; Hebrew: *OhG*, 278–279. The original German reads as follows:

Zwei Menschen kamen in einen Königspalast. Der eine verweilte in jedem Saal, betrachtete mit kundigem Blick die Prunkstoffe und Kleinodien und konnte sich nicht sattsehn. Der andre ging durch die Säle und wußte nur: Das ist des Königs Haus, das ist des Königs Gewand, noch ein paar Schritte, und ich werde meinen Herrn König schauen.

¹¹³ See discussions above in chapter one and chapter two.

¹¹⁴ In the original Hasidic source, the verb לראות appears only once, namely, in the case of the sage who goes straight to "behold" the king. In Buber's version, too, this is the only appearance of the verb לראות (or *schauen*, in the German).

¹¹⁵ "Oberhalb des Gewölbs aber, das über ihren Häuptern war, anzusehn wie Saphirstein Gestalt eines Stuhls, und auf der Gestalt des Stuhls eine Gestalt anzusehn wie ein Mensch, oben darauf. Ich sah: wie der Anblick des Asem-Erzes, anzusehn wie ein Feuer, das rings ein Gehäus hat, vom Ansehn seiner

Thus, in the eyes of Buber's Ruzhiner, the philosophical theologian may very well possess superior comprehension of celestial mysteries, but such cosmic knowledge is a far cry from real theological knowing, where the face of the moment reveals more than any abstract thought.¹¹⁶

Embodied Presence as Theological Cognition

All of this points unmistakably to the fact that, for Buber, theological cognition in Hasidism is quite simply—although ever elusively—being present with what is present. Everything else is commentary. Indeed, in wrestling for the right words to define the Hebrew term *Hasidut* for his readers, Buber offers the semi-literal translation, “to love the world in God,” but concludes finally: “Its true German name is perhaps: *Gegenwärtigkeit* (presentness).”¹¹⁷ And one can hardly exaggerate how seriously and literally Buber takes that prefix of presentness, “*Gegen-*,” meaning “against” or “towards” in a quite concrete sense. Indeed, he credits Hasidism with no less than the “rediscovery of ‘*Gegenüberstehens* (standing over-against),’ the real *Gegenseitigkeit* (reciprocity)”—and not in the “German” sense of “detachment of feelings,” but in the “Polish Jewish” sense of “the inclusion of the whole world-life.”¹¹⁸ In Buber's estimation,

Hüften aufwärts, und vom *Ansehn* seiner Hüften abwärts *sah* ich: *anzusehn* wie ein Feuer, das flugs einen Glanz hat. *Anzusehn* wie der Bogen, der im Gewölk wird am Regentag, so *anzusehn* rings war der Glanz. Das war das *Ansehn* der Gestalt SEINER Erscheinung. Ich *sah*, ich fiel auf mein Antlitz.” Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift: Zu Verdeutschen Unternommen* (Berlin: Schocken, 1934), Ezek. 1:26–28 (emphasis added). The Buber-Rosenzweig translation diverges sharply in these verses from the Luther translation.

¹¹⁶ Indeed, Buber renders the original גלגל השמים (“sphere of the heavens”) into more kabbalistic terms as ספירות השמים, intimating perhaps that Aristotle pondered theosophical “emanations” of God but not the actual essence of divinity itself. As discussed earlier, for Buber, philosophers and mystics alike err when they ruminate on abstractions that lie beyond or above corporeal existence.

¹¹⁷ Buber, “The Baal-Shem-Tov's Instruction in Intercourse with God,” *HMM*, 179-181; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 101.

¹¹⁸ Buber, “The Baal-Shem-Tov's Instruction in Intercourse with God,” *HMM*, 179-180; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 101.

“presentness” is the most descriptive distillation of such a “realistic and active mysticism” as Hasidism, “a mysticism for which the world is not an illusion (*Scheingebilde*) from which man must turn away in order to reach true being, but the reality between God and him in which reciprocity (*Gegenseitigkeit*) manifests itself.”¹¹⁹ Whereas many mystical traditions tend to envisage the concrete, sensory world as a husk that encases and conceals the immaterial interiority of true being, Buber insists that Hasidism collapsed that dualism and casts the very throbbing wildness of presence, here and now, as the meeting of heaven and earth.¹²⁰ It is surely in this light that he appreciated Rabbi Aharon of Karlin’s meditation on Jacob’s ladder, which Scripture tells us was “positioned on the earth with its top (ראשו, lit. its head) reaching heaven” (Gen. 28:12): “When an Israelite man sets himself so that he is positioned on the earth, then [his head] reaches heaven (כשאיש הישראלי מחזיק את עצמו שהוא מוצב ארצה אזי מגיע השמימה).”¹²¹ Or in Buber’s words: “When the man of Israel holds himself together and stands solidly on the earth, then his head touches upon heaven (*Wenn der Mann von Israel sich zusammenhält und fest auf der Erde steht, dann rührt sein Haupt an den Himmel*).”¹²² Thus, blissful mystics who live aloofly with their heads in the clouds, as it were, miss the real grounds of religious consciousness, while the more relationally attuned, down-to-earth denizens of the world are the ones ready for revelation, for they inhabit that “sense-assured insight of the body (*sinnbewusst*)

¹¹⁹ Buber, “The Baal-Shem-Tov’s Instruction in Intercourse with God,” *HMM*, 180-181; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 101.

¹²⁰ On Buber’s later thought as a form of mysticism, see Koren, *The Mystery of the Earth*.

¹²¹ Israel of Ruzhin, *Irin Qaddishin*, vol. 1 (Warsaw, 1885), 128; Kleinman, *Mazkeret Shem ha-Gedolim*, 9. Israel of Ruzhin was certainly not the first Hasidic master to identify the image of Jacob’s ladder with the human body. See, for example, where Ya‘akov Yosef of Polnoye applies this image to the human being as a “microcosm (עולם קטב)”, in *Toledot Ya‘akov Yosef* (Medzibezh: 1817), 18b. For a medieval kabbalistic identification of Jacob’s ladder with the sefirotic body of God, see *Zohar* 1:149b.

¹²² Buber, “Auf der Erde,” in *MBW*, vol. 18, §355; Hebrew: *OhG*, 184. Buber changed the language from the head “reaching” (*reichen*) heaven to “touching” (*rühren*) heaven in the second edition of *Die Erzählungen*. See “Auf der Erde,” in *Werke*, vol. III, 318.

Leibeseinsicht)” that grants a person the “ability to say You.”¹²³ Buber had thought initially to call this tale “Man as a Ladder to Heaven (*Der Mensch als Himmelsleiter*),” but he opted ultimately for a title that emphasized the primacy of groundedness: “On the Earth (*Auf der Erde*).”¹²⁴

We have already circled around this notion of theological cognition as embodied presence a number of times in this dissertation. It has been necessary for us to consider it from various perspectives, for while the principle is as immediate as sensation itself, closer to consciousness than any concept, and more primordial than any thought, it is hard to pinpoint for precisely those reasons. With regard to Buber’s Hasidic writings, we might consider the nature of embodied theological cognition in the context of Buber’s post-mystical tale “The Language of the Birds (*Die Vogelsprache*).”¹²⁵ In Buber’s earlier tale by that title, in *Die Legende des Baalschem* (1908), the Besht rode in a carriage with a young rabbi and told him to withdraw his senses “from all that exists,” save the sound of his voice, and the Besht whispered into his ear metaphysical mysteries that caused him to perceive “individual words and sentences” from the sounds of the surrounding birds, and even “a great conversation” complete with “a gay, lovely meaning”—until the Besht plucked this newfound skill from the man with just a quick brush of his hand.¹²⁶ Buber omitted this tale from his later Hasidic anthologies in his dialogical years, as its messages no longer resonated for him. Moreover, he presented an alternate “Language of the Birds” tale in his anthologies from 1922 until the end of his life, with a fundamentally different

¹²³ Buber, *IT*, 140; *ID*, 110. In this context, Buber contrasts “our sense-assured body-insight” with the Buddhist attempt to become aware of bodily processes only as an intermediate goal on a path toward escaping from the so-called “deception of forms.”

¹²⁴ For the original title, see notes on Ahron von Karlin, in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #8.

¹²⁵ For a more detailed examination, see Appendix B.

¹²⁶ See Buber, „The Language of the Birds,” *Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 185-194; German: *Die Legende des Baalschem*, 227-239.

takeaway, wherein a young Shneur Zalman declines an offer from the sage Rabbi Pinḥas to teach him a thorough lesson about the language of the birds, for “a person needs only to understand *one* thing”—and then in his old age, Shneur Zalman leans his head out of a carriage to take in the sights and sounds of birds “hopping about and twittering everywhere,” and marvels to his grandson, “One needs only to listen well and grasp (*fassen*) well in order to understand their language.”¹²⁷ In this latter tale, Shneur Zalman of Liady intimates that the mystical meaning of birdsongs is intuitively graspable to anyone who listens closely. In contrast to the earlier tale of the Besht, here there is no code to decipher, no esoteric knowledge to be given or removed, no distinction between physical sounds and spiritual meaning—there is only a decision to listen, a leaning in toward what is present.

Of course, one could protest that this tale does not necessarily affirm that “the language of the birds” is simply homologous with the audible sounds of the birds, or that the tale is not necessarily an affirmation of meaning within sensation itself. Indeed, Shneur Zalman could conceivably possess some innate mystical intuition that enables him to decode the birds’ chirps without any formal training. However, the anthological positioning of this tale confirms our interpretation. In every volume where it appears, Buber places it immediately after a tale entitled “Ascent (*Aufstieg*),”¹²⁸ which offers an unequivocal celebration of a sort of theological cognition that is deeper than any theoretical rumination. Buber’s version reads:

Rabbi Shneur Zalman told: “Before I went to Mezritch, my service was based on contemplation, and from this arose my love and my fear of God. In Mezritch I ascended to (*stieg...auf*) the rung where awareness itself is love and fear.

“When I first heard the holy maggid say: ‘God’s attribute of mercy is our love of God; God’s attribute of power is our fear of God,’ I thought of this as an interpretation.

¹²⁷ See “The Language of the Birds,” *Tales*, I:266-7; German: *MBW*, vol. 18, §501; Hebrew: *OhG*, 243. Cf. *idem*, *Der große Maggid*, 88-89.

¹²⁸ These two tales appear adjacent to one another in all three editions of *Der große Maggid*, including the one included in *Die chassidischen Bücher*; both editions of *Die Erzählungen*; and in all editions of *OhG*.

But then I saw that it is so: The mercy of God is the love of God; the power of God is the fear of God.”¹²⁹

In his revelatory studies with the Maggid, Shneur Zalman learns that the peak of theological understanding is homologous with consciousness itself. Thus, the “ascent” that the title of the tale highlights is precisely a graduation from ruminative “contemplation (*Betrachtung*)” and “interpretation (*Deutung*)” to a concrete cognizance of “awareness itself (*das Bewußtsein selber*).”¹³⁰ In turn, this transition involves a cognitive shift from “I thought of this as... (*da hielt ich für*)” to “I saw that... (*sah ich*).”¹³¹ In his first editions of this tale, Buber included an explanatory endnote that clarifies the meaning of the line “God’s attribute of mercy is (*das ist*) our love of God; God’s attribute of power is (*das ist*) our fear of God”: The locution “*das ist*,” Buber asserts, is the “root of the teaching of encounter, in which the objective is realized in the subjective (*Grundworte der Lehre von der Begegnung, in der das Objektive sich im Subjektiven verwirklicht*).”¹³² In other words, Buber takes Shneur Zalman’s epiphany in Mezritsh to be that while one can verily *objectivize* and study the attributes of God as abstract ideas, or alternatively *subjectivize* and psychologize them as inner feelings, both of these approaches miss the mark. Indeed, the divine attributes—in this case, the *sefirot* of mercy (חסד) and power (גבורה)—are ultimately not just concepts to be considered or passions to be felt, but rather dynamic realities to

¹²⁹ Buber, “Upward,” *Tales*, I:266; German: “Aufstieg,” *MBW*, vol. 18, §500; Hebrew: “עלייה,” *OhG*, 243. The original Hebrew source that Buber consulted was Ḥayyim Meir Heilman, *Beit Rabbi* (Berditshev: 1902), 4 n. 2.

¹³⁰ The original language in *Beit Rabbi* that Buber renders as “*das Bewußtsein selber*” is הידיעה עצמה, which could mean either “knowledge itself” or “awareness itself.” In this particular context, it is clear that the latter definition is intended, given that Shneur Zalman is contrasting ידיעה with “contemplation (התבוננות).” Buber clarifies this in his Modern Hebrew version of the teaching, where he renders הידיעה עצמה as התודעה עצמה, “awareness itself.”

¹³¹ This terminological shift is present as well in the original Hebrew/Yiddish, where first Shneur Zalman “*thought* of this as a subtle interpretation (אין גימיינט אז דאס איז אפשטיל),” but then subsequently “*saw* that it is so that mercy is love and power is fear (ואהר כך ראיתי שכן הדבר שחסד הוא אהבה וגבורה הוא יראה).”

¹³² The original Hebrew term that Buber renders as „*das ist*” is simply “הוא.” This endnote appears in all three versions of *Der große Maggid*, including the one printed in *Die chassidischen Bücher*.

be encountered and “made real” (*verwirklicht*) in the very thickness of one’s life. As Buber contended in 1938, regarding Kierkegaard’s concept of faith, the genuine relation to a so-called “object” of faith is fundamentally “ontic, that is, concerning not merely a man’s subjectivity and life but his objective being,” which is to say that the “realization (*Verwirklichung*) and embodiment (*Verleiblichung*) of faith” is thoroughly concrete, not to be “mirrored in the subjectivity of a religious view and a religious feeling, but bodily fulfilled in the wholeness of human life and ‘become flesh.’”¹³³ For Buber’s Shneur Zalman, then, in order to “ascend” to grasp the highest theological principles, ecstatic seekers must lower their eyes from the heavens to the earth, and pensive scholars must lift their eyes from the page to the person—for the true medium of theological cognition is “awareness itself,” in the very bustle and boredom of the Here and Now.

As the above teaching exemplifies, however, meditations on the meaning of presence slip easily into abstruse images and cryptic sayings. How does one speak directly about embodied awareness itself, when it is no more and no less than the wholeness of presence, the beholding of what is happening at any given moment? Presence is eminently concrete, and thus endlessly elusive. The religious meaning revealed is as voluptuously sensible as *Sinn*, but vanishes at once under floodlights of analysis. If a moment is caught and bottled up, or frozen and framed, it is no longer the *moment*. As Buber’s friend Rosenzweig put it poetically, if one wishes to know the nature of a river and thus fills a bowl with its water for closer inspection, “He gazes at the bowl and not at the river. The river cannot be dammed. It pays no heed to the attempts to dam it; it rushes on.”¹³⁴

¹³³ Buber, “What Is Man?” in *BMM*, 162; German: *Werke*, vol. 1, 358.

¹³⁴ Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God*, trans. Nahum Glatzer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 65.

The contours and textures of religious *Sinn* are most accessible to consciousness within the very living dynamism of actions and events. The most apt genre for representing this meaning in language is therefore neither philosophical treatise nor analytical essay, but descriptive *narrative*. Buber was quite explicit about this benefit of the genre: “This form has enabled me to portray the Hasidic life in such a way that it becomes visible as at once reality and teaching.”¹³⁵ For Buber, it is precisely those “tales of the ḥasidim” that are “at once reality and teaching,” the “verbal expression adequate to an overpowering objective reality,” capturing “events in which...even the mute happening spoke.”¹³⁶ One recalls Buber’s similar characterization of the Hebrew Bible: “biblical theology is narrated theology (*erzählte Theologie*)...a doctrine that is nothing but history, and...a history that is nothing but doctrine.”¹³⁷ Thus, for those who want to grasp the Hasidic modes of theological cognition, Buber points them to the *mayse*s. For outsiders, it is the narratives, not the theoretical sermons, that are most revealing. And yet the virtual realities of narrative imagination are ultimately no substitute for the direct, bodily meaning that is sensed in one’s own life events.

Embodied Theology in Action

¹³⁵ Martin Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM*, 26.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 25-26; German: “Der Chassidismus und der abendländische Mensch,” *MBW*, vol. 17, 305-306.

¹³⁷ Martin Buber, “Abraham the Seer,” in *On the Bible*, edited by Nahum Glatzer (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 26; German: *Werke*, 2:876. Clearly, the “narrative theology” at work in Buber’s writings differs substantially from the more conventional conceptions of that in the works of, say, Paul Ricoeur, Hans Frei, and George Lindbeck, who conceive of narrative theology generally as reflection on religious claims embedded in stories. Indeed, Buber does not present narratives in order to invite reflection on religious claims in any philosophical or theoretical sense. Rather, he embraces narrative as a verbal catalyst to shift one’s attention to the very concreteness of relational existence. It is thus, first and foremost, the *mimetic* capacity of narrative that imbues it with theological potency. For relevant reflections, see Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39.3 (1971).

For Buber, the path to theological cognition is primarily by way of the *via activa*, as opposed to the *via contemplativa*. Studies of metaphysical sources may stir up heat waves of the mind that produce mirages of religious meaning, but, for Buber, those theoretical vistas threaten to sway seekers away from what is effective and real. In the absence of actual deeds, one can overdose even on the narrative literature of Hasidism. “According to the Hasidic view, it is dangerous ‘to know too much Hasidut,’ because one can come thereby to know (*wissen*) more than one does (*tut*).”¹³⁸ Buber refers here to a provocative teaching of Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin, which Buber renders in his anthologies as, “If it were within my power, I should hide all the writings of the zaddikim. For when one knows too much Hasidut, his wisdom (*Weisheit*) easily becomes greater than his deeds (*Taten*).”¹³⁹ For Buber, however, this prioritization of action over contemplation is not merely to suggest that people ought to practice what they preach; it is a more fundamental statement about theological epistemology. Indeed, just before Buber refers to the dangers of knowing “too much Hasidut,” he asserts that “truth in the world of man is not to be found as the content of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*), but only as human existence. One does not reflect upon it, one does not express it (*sagt sie nicht aus*), one does not perceive it, but one lives it and receives it as life.”¹⁴⁰ Ultimately, religious truth is not to be comprehended or explained, but rather lived, done, enacted, performed. Kevin Schilbrack’s recent writings on philosophy and the study of religion are instructive here, as he invites scholars to think beyond what he calls the “dualistic or Cartesian account of belief,” and thereby to regard “religious practices as

¹³⁸ Buber, “The Place of Hasidism in the History of Religion,” *OMH*, 230; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 210.

¹³⁹ Buber, “Books,” in *Tales*, II:161; German: *MBW*, vol. 18, §860; Hebrew: *OhG*, 350. Buber’s original source for this appears to be Ya‘aqov Moshe ben Yosef Kleinbaum, *Shema ‘ Shelomo*, vol. 2, fols. 5-6. His version is faithful to the original, with only stylistic changes. For the classical Talmudic discussion about the relationship between study (תלמוד) and action (מעשה), see *b. Kiddushin* 40b.

¹⁴⁰ Buber, “The Place of Hasidism in the History of Religion,” *OMH*, 229; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 209-210.

thoughtful” in the sense that “practices can be seen not merely as *expressing* religious thoughts (as if what a religious community ‘really’ teaches is articulated only in the texts written by their intellectuals) but also as themselves examples of thinking.”¹⁴¹ We might also consider Theodore W. Jennings’ portrayal of the distinctly “‘incarnate’ character” of what he calls “ritual knowledge,” which is “gained not by detached observation or contemplation but through actions. It is in and through the action (gesture, step, etc.) that ritual knowledge is gained, not in advance of it, nor after it,” for “it is knowledge which is identical with doing or acting, with a bodily doing or acting.”¹⁴² Such embodied religious knowledge is, Jennings proposes, “primarily corporeal rather than cerebral, primarily active rather than contemplative, primarily transformative rather than speculative.”¹⁴³ Much of the same can be said about Buber’s portrayals of theological cognition in action, as long as the categories of religious “practice” and “ritual” are expanded to include the life-encompassing wholeness of sacramental existence.

Buber’s assertion that the theological depths of Hasidic “thought” are coterminous with the coarseness of religious action is certainly not without justification. A particularly illuminating case study to demonstrate such a tidal shift between Hasidism and earlier Jewish thought is the exegetical history of the biblical phrase *נעשה ונשמע* (Exod. 24:7). Although this locution takes on many meanings in classical Rabbinic and medieval Jewish philosophical and mystical thought, the latter term, *נשמע*, is almost always interpreted within the semantic range of hearing, heeding, and hearkening. Due to the order of words, *נעשה ונשמע* comes to be interpreted

¹⁴¹ Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), xiii (emphasis in original); see also *ibid.*, chapter 2. Similar to our present study of Buber, Schilbrack proposes that a paradigm of “embodiment” helps us to grasp the relationship between religious life and religious thought. However, Schilbrack goes further than Buber does to articulate links between bodily action and philosophical meaning. As we have seen, and as we shall continue to show below, Buber maintains a firmer boundary between philosophical and religious epistemologies.

¹⁴² Theodore W. Jennings, “On Ritual Knowledge,” *The Journal of Religion* 62.2 (1982), 115-116.

¹⁴³ Jennings, “On Ritual Knowledge”, 115.

widely as a willingness to “do” whatever God commands, before even “hearing” what is being commanded. Hence, the phrase becomes virtually a shorthand for Israel’s unconditional obedience to God. Although Hasidim certainly continue to use the phrase in this way, certain sages in the movement introduce a radical new perspective, according to which *נשמע* means not only “we shall hear,” but “we shall understand,” in the sense of deep theological comprehension that can only emerge *by means of* religious action.¹⁴⁴

Finally, let us turn now to a profound commentary on *נעשה ונשמע* by Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotsk (1787–1859), which we can be certain had a direct impact on Buber himself.

The original text that Buber consulted is as follows:

On the night of the holy Sabbath, after the blessing of the wine, [the Kotsker rebbe] sat on his chair and his form was almost transfigured through the divestment of corporeality. With all his strength he reached out his hands and washed our hands, and immediately after the blessing of the bread, he said the following: “There are wise people, researchers, and philosophers in the world, and they all research and think about divine knowledge, but how much are they able to comprehend? Not more than their level and their intelligence. However, the people of the Children of Israel are sanctified, and they have a vessel of action, that is, the acts of the commandments, and through this they are able to comprehend far beyond their level, until the level of the ministering angels. And this [is the meaning of the verse] ‘we shall do and we shall hear.’¹⁴⁵ If we have a vessel of action, we shall hear and we shall comprehend everything of the highest heights. Examine these matters well, for they are splendid to those who understand.¹⁴⁶

In this extraordinary narrative, the Kotsker suggests that enactment of the commandments guides practitioners to levels of theological comprehension that exceed the capacities of intellectual speculation. And, in the spirit of some of his Hasidic predecessors, the Kotsker identifies this

¹⁴⁴ For a detailed study of this hermeneutical history of Exod. 24:7, see Appendix C.

¹⁴⁵ Exod. 24:7.

¹⁴⁶ Zev Wolf Landa of Strikov, *Zer Zahav Keter Torah* (Warsaw, 1901), 58. The Hebrew text reads:

בליל ש'ק אחר הקידוש ישב על כסאו ונשתנה צורתו כמעט בהתפשטות הגשמיות, ובכל כחו הושיט ידיו ורחץ את ידינו ומיד אחר המוציא אמר בזה הלשון, יש בעולם חכמים וחוקרים ופילוסופים וכולם חוקרים וחושבים בידיעת אלקית אך כמה יכולים הם להשיג לא יותר ממדרגתם ומשכלם, אבל עם בני ישראל קדושים הם יש להם כלי עשייה, פ' מעשי המצות, ובה יכולים להשיג עוד יותר ויותר ממדרגתם עד מדרגת מלאכי השרת, וזה נעשה ונשמע, אם יהיה לנו כלי עשי' נשמע ונשיג הכל מעלה למעלה, ודו'ק היטב כי נחמדים הם למבין.

enlightening quality of praxis with the ancient verse, *נעשה ונשמע*. In the afterglow of singing *Shalom 'Aleykhem*, the Sabbath evening hymn that welcomes “the ministering angels (מלאכי השרת)” to the festive table, the rebbe recalls the Talmudic teaching of Tractate Shabbat, namely that the phrase *נעשה ונשמע* is “the mystery that the ministering angels use.” The Kotsker suggests that the angels possess a degree of divine understanding that is only attainable for humans through active “doing.” However, the Kotsker’s teaching in this *mayse* does not specify the nature of that comprehension. In fact, the source uses only one verb, *להשיג*, for every case of theological understanding. The scholars and philosophers, the Jews and the angels all apparently “comprehend” God in the same fundamental way, albeit to different extents. It is not certain in this text, therefore, that *נעשה ונשמע* represents a fundamentally different epistemology; it could just indicate a different methodology with a quantitatively higher degree of theological understanding.

Let us turn now to Buber’s version.¹⁴⁷ For the most part, his rendition of the source is quite straightforward, yet he introduces a number of subtle alterations that reveal a great deal. First of all, Buber is clearly troubled by the Hasidic phrase “stripping away of corporeality (התפשטות הגשמיות).” Given the narrative’s bold affirmation of knowing through physical activity,

¹⁴⁷ See Buber, „The Vessel,” *Tales*, II:277-278; German: MBW, vol. 18, §1157; Hebrew: OhG, 434. Buber’s German is as follows:

Ein Schüler des Kozker Rabbis erzählte im Alter, kurz vor dem eigenen Tod: »Ich will euch den ersten Spruch mitteilen, den ich vom Rabbi gehört habe. Viele hörte ich nach diesem von ihm, aber mit dem einen hat er mein Herz für immer entzündet. Es war an einem Sabbatabend nach dem Weihgebet. Der Rabbi saß in seinem hohen Stuhl mit verwandeltem Gesicht, als sei ihm die Seele aus dem Leibe gegangen und schwebe nur noch um ihn. Mit großer Entschiedenheit streckte er die Hände aus, goß uns über die unsern das Wasser zum Segensspruch, sprach den Segen über das Brot und brach es. Dann redete er so: ›Weise, Forscher, Denker gibt’s in der Welt. Alle forschen und denken sie dem Geheimnis Gottes nach. Aber was können sie davon erfahren? Nicht mehr als sie der Stufe der Vernunft nach zu fassen vermögen. Aber das Volk der Söhne Israel, geheiligt sind sie – sie haben ein Gefäß, das ist das gebotene Tun, damit können sie mehr fassen als ihrer Stufe nach, bis zur Stufe der Dienstengel. Das ist jenes Wort am Sinai: ›Wir wollen tun und wollen hören.‹ Mit unserm Tun hören wir.‹«

perhaps Buber reasoned that it would be misleading for his broad readership to imagine the Kotsker's teaching as under the influence of some out-of-body spiritual state. Thus, whereas the original source says that the Kotsker's "form was almost transfigured through the stripping away of corporeality (ונשתנה צורתו כמעט בהתפשטות הגשמיות)," Buber writes that the rebbe sat "with transformed face (*mit verwandeltem Gesicht*), as if his soul went out of his body and hovered about him." Not the Kotsker's physical "form," but only his facial expression changes, and Buber adds the locution "as if"—"*als sei*" in the German, כאילו in the Hebrew—to affirm that the tsaddik's body and soul are, in fact, unified. Furthermore, after the blessing of the wine, when the Kotsker reaches out to pour water over the hands of his ḥasidim, Buber stresses that he does so "with great decision (*mit großer Entschiedenheit*)"—a ubiquitous key-term in Buber's writings for dialogical readiness and response. The Kotsker's teaching about knowing through action then emerges organically out of this attuned act of sacramental presence.

As we might expect, Buber goes on to accentuate the contrast in this narrative between knowledge through thinking and knowing through doing. On the one hand, there are the "wise people, researchers, and"—in Buber's rendition—"thinkers (*Denker*)." With this conspicuous substitution for the original term "philosophers (פילוסופים)," Buber directs the Kotsker's critique pointedly and precisely at that cerebral reflection that is no more than mere "thinking."¹⁴⁸ In the original teaching, the Kotsker questions how much these contemplators can actually "comprehend (להשיג)" God, employing a verb that connotes intellectual comprehension, even the personal "achievement" or "obtainment" of knowledge. But Buber translates להשיג here into

¹⁴⁸ Perhaps Buber reasoned that the Hasidic concept of "philosophy" in nineteenth-century Kotsk was different enough from that of his twentieth-century readers that a literal translation would fail to capture what Buber sensed the Kotsker really meant. Indeed, Buber's own concept of philosophy was influenced early on by Nietzsche's *critiques* of disembodied, abstract rumination, and Buber himself sought to articulate his own robust philosophy of dialogue in a similar light.

German as *erfahren*—to experience, learn, or hear about something—and into Hebrew as לקלוט—to perceive, receive, gather, collect. If השגה is an intellectual comprehension that emerges within one’s mind, *Erfahrung* and קליטה arise through sensory interaction with stimuli beyond oneself. Indeed, in Kantian phenomenology, *Erfahrung* refers to sensory experience.¹⁴⁹ Thus, Buber’s Kotsker concedes that wise ruminators may very well “research and think (*forschen und denken*)” about God, but he questions the extent to which they actually sense or perceive theological meaning. For Buber, there is an abyss between these two epistemologies. Indeed, whereas the original source asks, “*How much* (כמה) are they able to comprehend,” Buber’s Kotsker asks, “*What* (was) can they experience” from mere contemplation? And whereas the original source answers, “Not more than *their* level and *their* intelligence (ממדרגתם ומשכלם),” Buber words the answer even more bleakly: “Not more than one can comprehend at *the level of reason* (der Stufe der Vernunft).”¹⁵⁰ He suggests, therefore, that the researchers and thinkers can only know religion within the bounds of mere reason—and that is no genuine religion.¹⁵¹ Such

¹⁴⁹ Note, however, that Buber categorizes the pursuit of *Erfahrung*, along with the pursuit of *Erlebnis*, as an I-It endeavor in his dialogical writings. Nonetheless, he uses the term quite commonly throughout his writings—and especially in his Hasidic works—to denote embodied, experiential modes of learning and knowing. See, for example: “dies, Aushalten und Austragen des Widersinns, ist der von mir *erfahrbare* Sinn.” Buber, „Sinnbildliche und sakramentale Existenz,“ 364. Cf. Buber’s differentiation between “der gärenden Geistigkeit” of the adult intellect versus “dem natürlichen Schauen und *Erfahren*, das das Kind besaß.” Buber, „Mein Weg zum Chassidismus,“ *MBW*, 17:44.

¹⁵⁰ In his first rendition of this tale, published in the journal *Die Kreatur* in 1927, Buber actually phrased this here as “*their* reason (ihrer *Vernunft*),” but he revised the line in all subsequent publications, and thus his textual alteration is all the more clearly a maneuver of hermeneutical activism. Furthermore, his perspective on this sentence is particularly clear in his Hebrew rendition, for this is the only instance in the entire tale wherein Buber uses the term “comprehend (להשיג)” —and this is especially striking inasmuch as this word does not even appear here in the original source! It is perplexing that Buber uses the verb “*fassen*” here in his German rendition (“*Nicht mehr als sie der Stufe der Vernunft nach zu fassen vermögen*”), for he tends to use that term to denote more dialogical, embodied modes of knowing.

¹⁵¹ Buber’s use of the term “*Vernunft*” in this tale may be an implicit swipe at Kant’s project to confine religion precisely within the bounds of mere reason, and perhaps also at Kant’s denigrations of the religious significance of sensory experience and so-called “ceremonial” actions. See Immanuel Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* (Berlin: Akademie, 2011). Indeed, Buber did not necessarily have to translate שכל as *Vernunft*—he could have rendered it alternatively as *Weisheit*, as he does elsewhere. E.g., compare his use of the term שכל in his Hebrew rendition of the Maggid’s first

intellectuals may cognize a great deal through cerebral whirlwinds of reflection, but their wisdom remains confined in cranial walls and never touches religious truth.

Furthermore, whereas the original source teaches that the People of Israel are graced with a God-given vessel of action, through which “they are able to comprehend (להשיג) far beyond their level,” Buber once again uses a different verb, rendering להשיג into German as *fassen* and into Hebrew as לתפוס, both of which draw upon embodied metaphors of grasping, gripping, taking hold.¹⁵² Again, the pinnacle of theological knowing is fundamentally different from intellectual knowledge. Thus, Buber concludes the Kotsker’s teaching with an extra emphasis on the distinct epistemology of נעשה ונשמע: “This is the saying at Sinai: ‘We will do and we will hear.’ With our doing, we hear (*Mit unserm Tun hören wir*).”

Buber was clearly taken with this tale. From the time he discovered it in the collection *Zer Zahav Keter Torah* and published his own version of it for the first time in the journal *Die Kreatur* (1927), he incorporated this tale into all of his Hasidic anthologies, even adding it retroactively that same year to his new edition of *Das verborgene Licht*¹⁵³ and including it in his selective collection *Hundert chassidische Geschichten* (1933), not to mention his later anthologies *Die Erzählungen* and *Or ha-Ganuz*.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, Buber’s 1929 essay “Religion und

meeting with the Besht (discussed above in chapter 2) in *Or ha-Ganuz*, with his use of the German term *Weisheit* in that narrative in *Die Erzählungen* (the word שכל does not appear in the original Hasidic source).

¹⁵² See, for example: “What the most learned and ingenious combination of concepts denies, the humble and faithful beholding, grasping (*Erfassen*), knowing of any situation bestows.” Buber, “With a Monist,” in *Pointing the Way*, 27; German: *Ereignisse und Begegnungen*, 29. Cf. above in chapter two.

¹⁵³ Although “Das Gefäß” does not appear in the first edition of *Das verborgene Licht* (1924), Buber adds it to the *Das verborgene Licht* section in his compilation volume, *Die chassidischen Bücher* (Berlin: Schocken, 1928), 587-588. Note: Although *Die chassidischen Bücher* was released in 1928, Buber seems to have completed his work on it in late 1927, as he dated the preface as “Fall 1927” (see p. x).

¹⁵⁴ The bibliographical history that I trace here comprises the bulk of the evidence behind my claim that Buber did not encounter this *mayse* until around, or shortly before, 1927. An additional piece of evidence in support of this conclusion is that Buber includes only two other tales from the collection *Zer Zahav Keter Torah* in his *Die Erzählungen*, and neither of those had ever before been published by Buber.

Philosophie” demonstrates that the Kotsker’s commentary on *נעשה ונשמע* continued to reverberate in his mind. In that essay, published just two years after he started to disseminate the Kotsker’s teaching, Buber writes:

That [religious] meaning (*Sinn*) is accessible and attainable right now in lived concreteness does not imply that it can be extracted out of it through some analytic or synthetic research (*Erforschung*), through some contemplation (*Bedenken*) or examination of lived concreteness. Rather, the meaning is experienced (*erfahren*) precisely in lived concreteness, and thus in living action (*Tun*) and the enduring of the event itself, in the unmitigated momentariness of the moment, if only one does not retreat from the experiencing (*Erfahren*) and thereby break the spontaneity of the mystery. One must stand firm with the full force of reality, without reservation or turning away, and respond to it with one’s life.

All religious expression is only indication, pointing toward this mode of experiencing (*Erfahrens*). The reply of the People of Israel at Sinai, “We shall do, we shall hear,”¹⁵⁵ voices it with plain and unparalleled succinctness. Truth-meaning (*Sinnwahrheit*) is found not in reflection (*Besinnung*), but in verifying action (*Bewährung*). It is found where one is so involved and engaged that one’s very self is at stake.¹⁵⁶

In Buber’s use of the biblical phrase here to differentiate between abstract philosophical rumination and concrete theological cognition, one hears definite echoes of his rendition of the Kotsker’s teaching, still warm off the presses. Even the word choices between the two compositions bear noticeable correspondences, where Buber contrasts cerebral “research (*Forschung/Erforschung*)” and “contemplation (*Denken/Bedenken*)” with the concreteness of

¹⁵⁵ Buber’s translation of Exod. 24:7 here as “*Wir tuns, wir hörens*” is the same as the translation of that verse in the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible—and note that they published their translation of Exodus in 1926, just a year before Buber first published his rendition of the Kotsker commentary on Exod. 24:7. It is significant to note that the Buber-Rosenzweig translation of the verse was a divergence from Luther’s translation, which read, “*wir tun und gehorchen*.” Thus, Buber and Rosenzweig took Exod. 24:7 out of the context of “obedience,” and portrayed it rather according to “hearing” through action. See Levinas’s comment: “Martin Buber, in his translation of the Bible, finds an ingenious interpretation. He takes the letter *vav* of the text as a subordinate conjunction, which is a perfectly legitimate usage. ‘We will do *and* we will understand’ becomes ‘We will do *in order* to understand.’” Emmanuel Levinas, “The Temptation of Temptation,” *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 42; French: “Leçon Talmudique,” in *Tentations et actions de la conscience juive: Donnés et débats*, edited by Éliane Amado Lévy-Valensi and Jean Halpérin (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971), 175.

¹⁵⁶ Buber, “Religion und Philosophie,” *Europäische Revue* 5 (1929): 329.

“experience (*Erfahren*)” and “action (*Tun*).” Buber has integrated the Kotsker’s teaching hermeneutically into the very fabric of his own religious thought, while also continuing to sharpen the elements of embodied cognition that had already been emerging for generations in Hasidic interpretations of Exodus 24:7.

Reconsidering the Buber-Scholem Debate

The very notions of embodied theological expression and cognition raise crucial methodological questions for studies in the history of religions, and I shall touch briefly upon these matters now with reference to the much-discussed Buber-Scholem debate. Buber, drawing mostly from Hasidism’s legendary-anecdotal literature, claimed that the movement hallowed bodily life in the everyday, but Scholem pointed exasperatedly to the theoretical-homiletical literature that celebrated mystical practices of “stripping away corporeality (התפשטות הגשמיות),” “annihilating being (ביטול היש),” “contemplation (התבוננות)” of divine nothingness beyond materiality, and so on.¹⁵⁷ Much academic ink has already been spilled over this controversy, so I shall limit my comments here to the methodological and historiographical aspects of their disagreement that bear directly upon our study of Buber’s embodied theology. My intention is certainly not to try to settle the score on whether Scholem or Buber was victorious. It is fair to say at this point that they both got much right and much wrong about Hasidism.¹⁵⁸

It is significant for our purposes that Scholem, in his case against Buber, differentiates sharply between genuine Hasidic “theology” and “theory,” on the one hand, and “popular and

¹⁵⁷ See Gershom Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation of Hasidism,” in *The Messianic Idea*, 228-250; German: “Martin Bubers Deutung des Chassidismus,” in *Judaica* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968), 165-206. Cf. Martin Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism.”

¹⁵⁸ For a discussion of the quite vast secondary literature on this debate, see above in chapter two.

vulgar mood” and “praxis,” on the other.¹⁵⁹ Contra Buber, Scholem suggests that a religious movement’s “legends should by no means seduce us into thinking that they represent the real doctrines,” nor can a selection of such legends facilitate a “real and scholarly understanding” of a movement.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, Scholem advises that if the legendary anecdotes seem to beckon an interpretation of Hasidism that contradicts the very explicit theoretical teachings, then “this interpretation must be false.”¹⁶¹ Only with such a methodology, Scholem argues, can we access the “real phenomenon of Hasidism.”¹⁶² Buber, however, rejects such a bifurcation of phenomena in the history of religions. In his rebuttal against Scholem, he urges him to regard “Hasidism not only as theory but as practice that is interpreted by the teaching.”¹⁶³ Above all, Buber emphasizes his own efforts to “convey the reality of the way of life that was once informed by [Hasidic] teachings, the life of faith that was lived by exemplary individuals and by the communities they founded and led.”¹⁶⁴ The scholar who wishes to grasp the essence of Hasidism must attend to the very interpersonal headwaters of the teachings and the temporal currents that carried them. To put it differently, in terms of a dualism that would surely furrow Buber’s brow: to know the “spirit” or “soul” of a movement, one must absolutely take into account the “body” of that movement. Thus, in direct contrast to Scholem’s methodology, Buber warns, “It is not always good to begin with a central religious content; it may be more fruitful to proceed from life itself,

¹⁵⁹ Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 244.

¹⁶⁰ Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 236.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, 249.

¹⁶² *ibid.*, 248. As much as he railed against the pretensions and presuppositions of nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, such a dichotomy between Jewish lives and Jewish thought sounds much like Graetz’s division of Jewish history into “body” (concrete events) and “soul” (ideas and literature). For Graetz’s view, see Michael A. Meyer, *Ideas of Jewish History* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1987), 235-241. On Scholem’s critique of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, see Scholem, “Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies,” in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time & Other Essays*, 51-71.

¹⁶³ Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” 224.

¹⁶⁴ Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” 218.

from the relation to concrete reality, and only finally to ask concerning the central content”—and it is most fitting that Buber scribed these words for an essay on “The Place of Hasidism in the History of Religion.”¹⁶⁵ For Buber, the boundaries between theory and practice, theology and life are blurred in genuine religiosity, and the historian of religion must appreciate this fact.¹⁶⁶

In part, these historiographical differences between Buber and Scholem stem from their divergent philosophies of language. After all, both of them investigated Hasidism through the medium of texts, and their conceptions of language surely influenced how they read those sources.¹⁶⁷ As David Biale has shown, Scholem seems to have embraced the kabbalistic notion

¹⁶⁵ Buber, *OMH*, 224; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 206.

¹⁶⁶ To be sure, Scholem faults Buber for entertaining a false dichotomy between “teaching” and “life” and for dismissing the content of teachings as superficial while glorifying the forms of life as fundamental. Scholem protests that Hasidism is truly “a historical phenomenon whose teaching is inextricably bound up with the life which it demands.” Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 234. However, in his refutation of Buber’s method, Scholem reinforces that very dichotomy in ways that actually violate Buber’s own sensibilities. This apparent inconsistency in Scholem raises questions about how distant he and Buber actually were from one another in their perspectives on Hasidism. Indeed, Scholem’s remarks elsewhere about the inseparability of Hasidic “doctrine” and Hasidic personalities and experiences are fairly consistent with Buber’s views (see especially Scholem, *Major Trends*, 343-344, 347), and Buber even cites those remarks in his own rebuttal against Scholem—see Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” 221. Furthermore, Scholem suggests quite amicably in his *Major Trends* with regard to the “revival of a new mythology in the world of Hasidism, to which attention has been drawn occasionally, especially by Martin Buber,” that “when all is said and done it is this myth which represents the greatest creative expression of Hasidism. In the place of the theoretical disquisition, or at least side by side with it, you get the Hasidic tale” (349). And with respect to their respective conceptions of Hasidic messianism, Biale comments that “Scholem’s position appears to be much closer to Buber’s than he may be willing to admit.” Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 91. For penetrating insights into why Scholem may have attacked Buber’s conception of Hasidism so aggressively, despite possible agreements between them, see Biale, “Experience vs. Tradition.” In any case, for our present purposes, we must take Scholem seriously when he argues against Buber that the essence of Hasidism lies in its theories and not in its anecdotes.

¹⁶⁷ For recent reflections on the historical study of Hasidic teachings given their original orality, see Arthur Green, “The Hasidic Homily: Mystical Performance and Hermeneutical Process,” in *As a Perennial Spring: A Festschrift Honoring Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm*, edited by Bentsi Cohen (New York: Downhill Publishing LLC, 2013), 237-265; Daniel Reiser and Ariel Evan Mayse, “The Last Sermon of R. Judah Leib Alter of Ger and the Role of Yiddish for the Study of Hasidic Sermons” [Hebrew], *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 30 (2013): 127-160. Gadi Sagiv points out as well that textual representations of Hasidic homilies do not necessarily capture the elements of charismatic communication that were most impressive for listeners, such as the tzaddik’s bodily gestures, vocal manipulations, and periods of silence. Gadi Sagiv, “The Tsaddik as Performer: Hasidic Oral Teachings in Context,” unpublished lecture from the Association for Jewish Studies conference in Baltimore, 2014. I

that language itself is transcendent and divine, and all utterances are permutations of God's ineffable name.¹⁶⁸ Thus, for Scholem, revelation is fundamentally linguistic. Although the primordial, unmediated revelation of God is ultimately unknowable, it gains intelligibility through the language of religious commentary, even in its contradictory expressions throughout historical periods and places. Moreover, since language itself springs from transcendent sources, Scholem does not draw a formal distinction between written and spoken words. In the ceaseless process of verbalizing revelation, "Every act of speaking...is at once an act of writing and every writing is a potential speech."¹⁶⁹ For Buber, on the other hand, it is not language that is divine but *dialogue*, which is to say, concrete encounters in the world that do not even necessarily involve words. Divine revelation is homologous with dialogical meetings. The "word of God,"¹⁷⁰ so to speak, is beyond language, but not necessarily beyond certain modes of listening, living, and beholding. Above all, Buber holds that the gravity and meaning of language (*Sprache*) cannot be divorced from concrete instances of spokenness (*Gesprochenheit*), which he identifies precisely with "the whole speaking human body (*der ganze sprechende Menschenleib*)" and "a bodily attitude and action (*leibhaften Haltung und Handlung*)."¹⁷¹ For Buber, one can access the

thank him for sharing a copy of his paper with me. Cf. idem, *Ha-Shoshelet: Beit Chernobyl u-Meqomo ba-Toledot ha-Hasidut* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Shazar, 2014), 182-191.

¹⁶⁸ See David Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 112-146. In these pages, Biale compares Scholem's philosophy of language with that of Buber. Elsewhere, Biale notes that Walter Benjamin, who was largely responsible for turning Scholem against Buber so acerbically, opposed Buber most sharply on issues revolving around philosophy of language. See Biale, "Experience vs. Tradition," 9.

¹⁶⁹ Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God," *Diogenes* 79 (1972), 167, as quoted in Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 133.

¹⁷⁰ On Buber's use of this phrase, see his letter to Rosenzweig (June 1924), published in Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, ed. N. N. Glatzer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955), 111-112.

¹⁷¹ Buber, "Symbolic and Sacramental Existence," *OMH*, 157-158, 162; German: *MBW*, vol. 17, 163, 165.

inner meaning of an Other's utterance only when one faces her as a whole, spiritual-corporeal You.

These contrasting philosophies of language illuminate some of the reasons why Scholem and Buber read Hasidic texts in such vastly different ways. To paint the matter in broad strokes: Whereas Scholem reads the literature as meaningful statements of Hasidic sensibilities and thus draws conclusions therefrom about the nature of the movement, Buber regards these writings as surface reflections upon the ocean of Hasidic life-thought. Scholem thought that the primary message of Hasidism lay in written compositions; Buber thought that the primary message was enmeshed in flesh-and-blood lives.¹⁷² Scholem turned primarily to the theoretical literature for the most extensive and explicit meditations on doctrine and dogma, but Buber turned primarily to the legendary literature, wherein teachings are bound inextricably to events.¹⁷³

¹⁷² Moshe Idel's critique of Scholem's "textology" and Scholem's underappreciation of phenomenological, experiential, and practical dimensions of Jewish mysticism is well known. See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University, 1988), 17-29. For claims that Idel and other students of Scholem who adopted a "phenomenological method" have not gone far enough to correct the textocentrism of their teacher's studies of Hasidism, see the incisive remarks in Jacobson-Maisels, *The Self and Self-Transformation*, 9-11.

¹⁷³ Cf. Heschel's articulation of the methodological challenge that scholars must appreciate: "Hasidism withers when placed on exhibition. Its substance is not perceptible to the eye. It is not enough to read its written word; one must hear it, one must learn to be perceptive to the voice. Fortunately there are words in many of its records which still ring with the passion and enthusiasm of those who spoke them. The problem is how to hear the voice through the words." Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Preface," in Samuel H. Dresner, *The Zaddik: The Doctrine of the Zaddik According to the Writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 7-8. Toke Elshof's application of Greimasian semiotics to religious narrative is instructive here: "Whilst standard objectal semiotic research limits itself to the analysis of the text as a final product, the subjectal branch regards the text as a result of a process of expression; of a process of enunciation in which a certain intentionality is expressed. It looks at traces in the text which refer to the original expression, primarily where shape is given to content. . . Besides the form of the content, the form of the expression also reveals traces of the original expression: silences, whispering, laughing or crying, the stamping of feet or the wringing of hands are all part and parcel of the meaning receiving its shape, whilst leaving traces in the text." Toke Elshof, "Religious Narrative and the Body," in Reinder Ruard Ganzevoort, Maaik de Haardt, and Michael Scherer-Rath (eds.), *Religious Stories We Live by: Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 158. Buber turns to Hasidic narratives because he senses that the *content* of the movement's teachings is inextricably intertwined with their moments of *expression*.

Of course, while Buber does defend his interpretation of Hasidism at times on historical grounds,¹⁷⁴ he differentiates himself ultimately from the historical scholar. Whereas the historian “takes the former tradition as an object of knowledge” and assumes “the objectivity and detachment that make the scholar what he is,” Buber seeks primarily “to convey to our own time the force of a former life of faith and to help our age renew its ruptured bond with the Absolute.”¹⁷⁵ In his attempt to imagine and portray this “life of faith” vis-à-vis the Absolute, Buber refracts the Hasidic sources through the prism of his own religious intuition—and this hermeneutical-theological endeavor is ultimately the focus of our study.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have sought to elucidate Buber’s notions of embodied theological cognition, as expressed hermeneutically out of the sources of Hasidism. Given their resistance to theoretical formulation, we explored these matters from a variety of perspectives. We considered first of all how Buber portrays the meaning that is “learned” and “taught” in the course of Hasidic studies, and how such non-noetic and embodied wisdom can possibly be grasped. However, we saw that the main modes of theological cognition in Buber’s tales are decidedly meta-intellectual—that is, even while language and discourse may play central roles, one’s awareness is irreducible to those contents. In comparing Buber’s Neo-Romantic depictions of so-called “primitive” and “oriental” peoples with the “simple” people of the Hasidic world, we gained considerable insight into his sense of the phenomenology and epistemology of religious awareness. And while theological meaning is ultimately homologous with embodied presence,

¹⁷⁴ For example, see Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” 220-1.

¹⁷⁵ “Interpreting Hasidism,” 218.

for Buber, this element is conveyed most concretely and intelligibly in the form of actions and events. Indeed, this fact helps to explain why Buber is drawn more to the narrative literature, as opposed to the theoretical literature, of Hasidism. Finally, we saw how attention to Buber's notions of embodied theology shed considerable new light on the much discussed Buber-Scholem controversy, and raise crucial questions for the study of religion more broadly.

We have now concluded our intensive investigations of embodied theological expression (chapter two) and embodied theological cognition (chapter three). Through close hermeneutical studies of Buber's tales vis-à-vis the original Hasidic sources, we gained crucial insights into how Buber understood the nature of religious meaning. However, at this juncture we ought to feel an element of dissatisfaction, for while we conclude with the idea that theology is fundamentally inseparable from life, we are left with only a vague picture of what a theologically revealing life looks like, in Buber's mind, beyond general remarks about "sacramental existence." This is, at bottom, the complex question of *practice* in Buber's thought, and it is to this question that we shall now turn.

CHAPTER 4

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“Sacramental Existence”: Visions of Religious Praxis in Buber’s Hasidic Tales

Introduction

On the first Friday evening of Buber’s visit to New York in 1953, the Jewish Theological Seminary organized a Shabbat dinner in his honor, and at around ten o’clock, it was time for the 75 year-old scholar to return to his hotel. However, a cold rain was falling and the hotel was located some fifty blocks south of the Seminary. The *shomrei Shabbat* dinner guests, some of whom were even sleeping at the Seminary in order to participate in the dinner, were hesitant to hail a cab for Buber, as that would mean encouraging a Jew to ride on the Sabbath. And yet, this appeared to be what the moment demanded, especially given the fact that Buber himself was not halakhically observant. As the Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod recalled:

Since Buber was an elderly man and the weather was bad, we felt that it was all right. But Buber answered, “No, I’ll walk.” And so all of us decided to accompany him. We all walked along Broadway with him for fifty blocks and arrived at the hotel wet. He was wet also, but he had felt that it was not appropriate to ride in a cab.¹

After relating this story, Wyschogrod reflected, “Some people are better in their books than in their lives, and I’ve met such people. But I felt that Buber, the person, was often greater than his books.”²

¹ Haim Gordon, ed., *The Other Martin Buber: Recollections of His Contemporaries*, ed. Haim Gordon (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1988), 114.

² Ibid.

Let us hear now a very different *mayse*, this one from the Galician-Israeli writer and translator Yehuda Ya‘ari, who helped Buber to produce his Hebrew anthology of Hasidic tales, *Or ha-Ganuz*. During that period in the late 1940s, Buber walked over to Ya‘ari’s house in Jerusalem every day in order to work on the project. However, on one such day, Ya‘ari was surprised to see that famed figure appear at his door:

Buber came to me to work on his book on the eve of Yom Kippur. I was astounded and asked him if he didn’t know that today was the eve of Yom Kippur. He answered that he knew and asked me if I kept the fast and the holy day. I nodded yes. Buber got up and said, “If you keep the Mitzvot, then I’ll leave. Keep them.”³

Ya‘ari framed this story as an example of how “Buber’s writings had little to do with his way of life,” and after sharing the anecdote he added, “It was difficult for me to understand that Buber, who wrote about nurturing our relation to our tradition, did not keep the tradition himself.”⁴

Insofar as Buber refused to embrace general rules about religious praxis, insisting that the divine command is perceptible only in the particular events and temporal dynamism of dialogical life, *narrative* is the ideal genre for capturing his views.⁵ However, while the narratives just recounted do shed light on Buber’s approach to religious practice, they also demonstrate the indispensable role that *commentary* plays. In both anecdotes, Buber himself is manifestly uncommitted to Jewish law and yet eager to respect the practices of those around him, but Wyschogrod judges this to be a virtuous embodiment of the messages in Buber’s books, while Ya‘ari sees it as symptomatic of an abyss between Buber’s books and way of life.

³ Gordon, ed., *The Other Martin Buber*, 121.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵ For very insightful reflections on the relationship between narrative and religious normativity in general, and with respect to Hasidism in particular, see Tsippi Kauffman, “The Hasidic Story: A Call for Narrative Religiosity,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 22.2 (2014): 101–26.

For these reasons and more, it is helpful for us to turn to Buber's Hasidic writings in order to clarify his concept of religious praxis. Indeed, the vast majority of his writings on Hasidism were in the form of tales, and Hasidic narratives themselves brim with images and discussions of Jewish ritual life. Moreover, inasmuch as Buber's anthologies reflect his own principle of selection and hermeneutical imprints, we can treat his tales as *interpretations* of Hasidic tales. Indeed, as we have already demonstrated in previous chapters, when Buber re-wrote and re-told Hasidic *mayses*, that process of transmission was fundamentally exegetical. Thus, Buber's tales provide us at once with narrative representations of religious life and Buber's interpretations of those narratives. Nowhere else in Buber's literary corpus are his personal visions of praxis more vivid and textured than in his Hasidic writings.

In fact, the issue of religious practice has already lurked in the background of this entire dissertation. Buber's dialogical phenomenology and his notions of embodied theological expression and cognition are not, at bottom, theoretical concerns—these matters take shape in practice. As we have seen, this is the main reason why Buber prioritized the legendary literature over the theoretical sermons of Hasidism, wherein there “is no separation between faith and works, between truth and verification (*Bewährung*), or, in the language of today, between morality and politics; here all is *one* kingdom, *one* spirit, *one* reality.”⁶ In order to flesh out the actual meaning and implications of our more conceptual investigations, then, it is necessary in this final chapter to turn to the sphere of practice.

Now, given Buber's reputation as someone who “did not keep the tradition himself,” to quote Ya'ari, it might seem surprising to devote an entire chapter to his concept of practice.

⁶ Buber, “My Way to Hasidism,” *Hasidism and Modern Man* (Princeton UP), 17-18; German: “Mein Weg zu Chassidismus,” *MBW*, XVII:43. Emphases in the original German. On Buber's concept of *Bewährung*, see Fishbane, “Justification Through Living,” in Mendes-Flohr, ed., *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*; see also above in chapter one.

Indeed, Buber accepted more or less the designation of “religious anarchist,”⁷ and his perspective on religious law is best characterized as metanomian.⁸ However, we should not overlook the fact that metanomianism itself is a distinct approach to practice—and, indeed, not all metanomianisms are the same.⁹ For Buber, what is key is not necessarily the abandonment of rituals, but rather the beholding of every moment in life as a site of religious practice. If normative structures of religious tradition help one to realize this fundamental principle, then so be it; but if one starts then to treat ritual actions as ends in themselves and thus regard other moments as merely mundane (or worse), then there is an urgent need for religious adjustment.

⁷ See Paul Mendes-Flohr, “The Appeal of an Incurable Idealist: Judah L. Magnes and the Mandarins of Jerusalem,” in *Divided Passions*, 400; idem, “Secular Religiosity: Reflections on Post-Traditional Jewish Spirituality and Community,” in *Approaches to Modern Judaism*, ed. Marc Lee Raphael (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983); Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation of Hasidism,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 245. See also Martin Buber’s March 1954 letter to Maurice Friedman in Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, eds., *Letters of Martin Buber*, 576-577.

⁸ As far as I am aware, Nahum Glatzer was the first to characterize Buber specifically as “metanomian.” See his “The Frankfort Lehrhaus,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 1 (1956), 121. See also Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Buber’s Reception Among Jews,” *Modern Judaism* 6.2 (1986), 115; idem, “Law and Sacrament,” in *Divided Passions*, 349, 351. I prefer the term metanomian to antinomian in the case of Buber because he was not committed necessarily to the breaking of religious laws but rather to the expansion of religious practice beyond laws. In this respect, my definition of antinomianism is narrower than that of Shaul Magid, who defines it broadly as “a term that may refer to any religious movement which claims that fulfillment of the divine will does not need to conform to accepted religious norms or doctrines.” Shaul Magid, “Antinomianism,” in Robert A. Segal and Kocku von Stuckrad, *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*, vol. 1, 102. According to Magid’s definition, Buber was indeed antinomian, but I think it is valuable to characterize his approach to practice with greater precision. Also, it is worth noting that Buber was certainly not what Elliot Wolfson calls “hyper-nomian.” See Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beyond Good and Evil: Hypernomian Transmorality and Delimiting the Limit,” in idem, *Venturing Beyond*, 186-285. While the term “hypernomianism” is very helpful for grasping various figures and trends in the history of mysticisms, it does not apply to Buber inasmuch as he affirmed a sharp opposition between commandment (in the sense of dialogical responsibility) and transgression (in the sense of failure to recognize or act upon that responsibility). In this context, we might note Buber’s aggressive and unequivocal critique of those “Gnostics” who blur boundaries between good and evil. See, for example, Buber’s critique of Jung in his essays “Religion and Modern Thinking” and “Supplement: Reply to C.G. Jung,” in *Eclipse of God*, 78-92, 133-137.

⁹ For related contentions that “not all antinomianisms are the same” and that there is a need “for a more nuanced approach to it,” see Jay Michaelson, “Conceptualizing Jewish Antinomianism in the Teachings of Jacob Frank,” *Modern Judaism* 37.3 (2017): 338-362.

Indeed, as far as Buber was concerned, his intention was not to diminish religious practice but to deepen it. This is evident, for example, in his critique of nineteenth-century “liberal” Judaism:

What was preached here was not reformation, only reform; not transformation, only facilitation (*Erleichterung*); not a renewal of Judaism, but its perpetuation in an easier (*leichterern*), more elegant, Europeanized, more socially acceptable (*salonfähigeren*) form. Truly, I prefer a thousandfold the gauche dullards who, in the simplicity of their hearts, observe day after day and without any shortcuts every detail of what they believe to be the command of their God, of their fathers’ God. How could this feeble program [liberal reform] dare to call itself a revival of prophetic Judaism? The prophets, it is true, spoke of the futility of ceremonies; not, however, in order to facilitate (*erleichtern*) religious life, but rather to make it more difficult (*erschweren*), to make it whole and true, to proclaim the holiness of the deed.¹⁰

What is essential, for Buber, is to open oneself constantly to the commands of God and to respond with the wholeness of one’s life. Whether one does this while remaining committed to ritual practices or while deviating from such norms is quite inconsequential.¹¹

Accordingly, Buber never cast Hasidism as antinomian, or actively in favor of breaking Jewish law. Rather, he contended that the movement promoted such a robust and life-encompassing conception of religious practice that it exceeded the strictures of ritual without necessarily negating them.¹² Hasidism remained lovingly committed to Halakhah, but was nonetheless attuned to the deeper foundations of genuine practice: “In life, as Hasidism understands and proclaims it, there is, accordingly, no essential distinction between sacred and profane spaces, between sacred and profane times, between sacred and profane actions, between

¹⁰ Buber, “Renewal of Judaism,” *OJ*, 38; German: *Drei Reden über das Judentum* (Frankfurt a.M.: Rütten & Loening, 1920), 67. I have emended Glatzer’s English translation according to Buber’s original German. Buber’s precise target in this passage was Moritz Lazarus.

¹¹ For insightful discussions of Buber’s perspective on Jewish law, see Eisen, *Rethinking Modern Judaism*, 190-196; Mendes-Flohr, “Law and Sacrament,” in *Divided Passions*, 341–369.

¹² For example: “Hasidism had no desire to diminish the law; it wanted to restore it to life, to raise it once again from the conditioned to the unconditioned.” Buber, “Jewish Religiosity,” *OJ*, 92. Elsewhere, Buber writes that while Judaism may seem from an outside perspective like a highly dualistic form of piety, it is actually a vast matrix of practices that seek to hallow every stitch of earthly existence, and Hasidism merely drew this primal unity to a higher height. See Martin Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM* (Princeton, 2016), 6-7.

sacred and profane conversations. At each place, in each hour, in each act, in each speech the holy can blossom forth.”¹³ Buber characterized this aspect of Hasidic religiosity as “pansacramentalism” or “sacramental existence,”¹⁴ according to which every time and place is—potentially—a site of sacred action.

Grete Schaeder claimed that Goethe was “the source of Buber’s unusual use of the word ‘sacrament.’”¹⁵ It is certainly possible that Buber was influenced by Goethe’s meditations on “the symbolical or sacramental sense (*sacramentliche Sinn*),” according to which “the inner religion of the heart and that of the external church [are] perfectly one.”¹⁶ However, Buber’s use of the term resonates even more strongly with that of a different German Romantic, Johann Wilhelm Ritter. The following definition of “sacrament” in Ritter’s writings bears a striking resemblance to Buber’s own sensibilities—and, in fact, Buber copied and preserved this very passage in his personal notes:

What is the most religious activity, sacrament, still through this day, other than mere *remembrance, calling to mind* of that which one is doing!—The ordinary is performed *sacra mente* [with the ‘sacred’ in ‘mind’].—The action during the sacraments is to a certain degree an excerpt of all possible activities, and *it itself* is thus hallowed.¹⁷

¹³ Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *OMH* (Princeton, 2018), 8.

¹⁴ See Buber, “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” *OMH*, 165-181. See also Buber’s reference to a “sacramental expression” wherein the Apter rebbe picks up the fallen girdle of a young Hasid, wraps it back around him, and describes this as an act of *gelilah* (dressing the Torah scroll). For Buber, it was precisely the fact that the Apter saw this non-normative act as ritually radiant that made it definitively “sacramental.” Buber, “Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement,” *OMH*, 129.

¹⁵ Schaeder, *Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber*, 322. She cites Goethe, *Autobiography of Goethe: Truth and Poetry Relating to My Life*, book seven.

¹⁶ See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Autobiography of Goethe. Truth and Fiction: Relating to My Life*, trans. John Oxenford (Boston: Cassino, 1882), 240; German: *Aus meinem Leben: Wahrheit und Dichtung* (Berlin: Grote’sche, 1870), 290.

¹⁷ According to his notes, Buber copied the passage directly from J. W. Ritter, *Fragmente aus dem Nachlasse eines jungen Physikers* (Heidelberg: 1810), fragment 614. Emphasis in original. The original German, along with an English translation (which I emended slightly in the passage above), can be found in J. W. Ritter, *Key Texts of Johann Wilhelm Ritter (1776-1810) on the Science and Art of Nature*, trans. Jocelyn Holland (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 448/449. Buber’s handwritten notes on Ritter, which appear to be from 1920, can be found in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 02 39a.

Both Ritter and Goethe, along with many other Romantics of their times, shared a sense that the rationalist tendencies of eighteenth-century Protestantism had eroded the more personal, emotional and, indeed, bodily dimensions of sacramental spirituality. This critique of Enlightenment abstraction continued into the twentieth century, and, in fact, Buber's friend Paul Tillich offered similar critiques of the so-called "death of the sacraments" in contemporary Protestantism.¹⁸ However, Buber was particularly struck by Ritter's claim that the essence of sacraments is their power to remind practitioners of how holy every moment of life is.¹⁹

In clarifying these expansive bounds of religious practice, it is worth emphasizing that questions of practice were not simply peripheral concerns in Buber's thought, but absolutely central for him. Indeed, his philosophy of dialogue, his political thought, his presentations of Hasidism and the Hebrew Bible—all of these were inseparable from his concern with the enactment of religiosity in everyday existence. The fact that Buber was unwilling to systematize or otherwise articulate the details of religious practice has nothing to do with how fundamental the issue was for him. On the contrary, his very consistent refusal to present static formulations reflected the very core of his conception of practice.²⁰ In fact, in the aftermath of the Shoah and

¹⁸ See Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 94-112.

¹⁹ We might appreciate this perspective in light of another teaching, expounded eight decades later by the Hasidic rebbe Yehudah Leib Alter: "Shabbat departed from the general [rules] of time to teach us about all of time. And the same goes for the Tabernacle and the Temple; they teach us about all places." *Sefat Emet* (Piotrków, 1906?), vol. 2, parshat Pekudei (5652), 237. This commentary alludes to the classical Rabbinical concept of particular cases that come to teach about general principles. Note: There are instances when Buber uses the term *Sakrament* differently. In his book *Two Types of Faith*, for example, wherein Buber writes explicitly about Christianity, he tends to oppose "devotio" and "sacrament." Shaul Magid notes that in such cases, "sacrament" is virtually synonymous with institutional "religion." Magid comments that in *Two Types of Faith*, Buber "develops an affinity between Jesus and Buber's interest in devotio (addressing God) versus sacrament (sometimes also called "religion"), an idea that stands at the very center of Buber's work on Hasidism." Shaul Magid, "Defining Christianity and Judaism from the Perspective of Religious Anarchy: Martin Buber on Jesus and the Ba'al Shem Tov," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 25.1 (2017), 43.

²⁰ See, for example, Buber's March 27, 1954 letter to Maurice Friedman, in *Letters of Martin Buber*, 576-577.

his period of exceptional sensitivity to the “eclipse of God” in modern society, Buber suggested that the severance of religiosity from everyday action was “an especially threatening trait of the crisis” facing humanity:

One no longer knows the holy face to face; but one believes that one knows and cherishes its heir, the ‘spiritual,’ without, of course, allowing it the right to determine life in any way. The spirit is hedged in and its claim on personal existence (*Dasein*) is warded off through a comprehensive apparatus; one can now enjoy it without having to fear awkward consequences. One has ideas, one just has them and displays them to one’s own satisfaction and occasionally also to that of others. One seems to take them with grim seriousness; but that must be the end of it. One enthrones them on golden thrones to which their limbs are chained. No false piety has ever attained this concentrated degree of inauthenticity.

Only now has one basically got rid of the holy and the command of hallowing.²¹

The very crisis of modernity, according to Buber, erupts partially from a dangerous misconception that religiosity is merely a mood or mentality, distinct from mundane behavior. Buber wants to salvage the centrality of religious practice—the “command of hallowing,” and all the “awkward consequences” bound up with the devotion of one’s “limbs” to such a grounded, embodied conception of holiness. And even if this recovery of practice leads beyond traditional, legalistic codes, the core postures of Hasidism illuminate a way: “Over against all this behavior of present-day man, Hasidism sets the simple truth that the wretchedness of our world is grounded in its resistance to the entrance of the holy into lived life.”²² For Buber, Hasidism offers a diagnosis of modernity and a path toward healing.

But if he was indeed so concerned with matters of practice and embodiment, then how did Buber justify such a sharp swerve away from the concrete conduct of Hasidism, and how should we even begin to think about his representations of halakhic conduct? How could Buber possibly have developed an adequate understanding of the Hasidic way, if he did not embody the

²¹ Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM* (Princeton, 2016), 13; German: *MBW*, XVII:312-313.

²² Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM* (Princeton, 2016), 13; German: *MBW*, XVII:312-313.

very forms of life that constituted the movement's foundations? As Zalman Schachter-Shalomi noted, Buber's understanding of Hasidism was necessarily limited insofar as he derived it "largely from books and hadn't been involved in *davvenen* and singing Hasidic melodies," and thus could not know Hasidism from the inside, as it were, through the embodied epistemologies of practice.²³ Such a critique of Buber is undeniably correct, and I see no reason to refute it. However, in turning to Buber's depictions of Hasidic practice, it is instructive for us to think with and beyond those dismissals.

In light of Schachter-Shalomi's critique, there are two important points for us to consider. First of all, Buber was ultimately less interested in presenting, let alone propagating, Hasidism, *per se*, than he was invested in a project of Jewish renewal that drew inspiration from Hasidism—and he was quite cognizant of this fact:

To be sure, I knew from the beginning that Hasidism was not a teaching which was realized by its adherents in this or that measure, but a way of life, to which the teaching provided the indispensable commentary. But now it became clear that this life was involved in a mysterious manner in the task that had claimed me.²⁴ I could not become a Hasid. It would have been an impermissible masquerading had I taken on the Hasidic manner of life—I who had a wholly other relation to Jewish tradition, since I must distinguish in my innermost being between what is commanded me and what is not commanded me.²⁵

Thus, Buber was well aware that Hasidism was fundamentally a "way of life," irreducible to abstract teachings and ultimately alien to his own religious practice. However, he goes on nevertheless to claim that this very core of Hasidic praxis—the "kernel of this life," the "hallowing of the everyday," the intention to "overcome the fundamental separation between the

²³ Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame: Teachings and Tales of the Hasidic Masters*, ed. Nataniel M. Miles-Yepez (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), x.

²⁴ Buber refers here to his shift from mysticism to dialogue in the wake of World War One.

²⁵ Buber, "Hasidism and Modern Man," *HMM*, 3.

sacred and the profane”—has the power to nourish a contemporary renewal of Judaism, in a decidedly different mode and a new context:

After the rise and decline of that life in the Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian ghettos, this kernel has entered into a contemporaneity, which is still, to be sure, only reminiscent, only an indication in the spirit, but even so can accomplish something in this manifestation that was basically foreign to the reality of that time.²⁶

Buber envisions a Jewish way of life that will be “only reminiscent” of Hasidism, and yet infused with its most essential vitality. While his perspectives on Hasidic practice were inevitably myopic in some respects, given his personal distance from it, his intention was primarily to draw inspiration from those sources that might irrigate a new flourishing of Jewish religiosity, and this is the frame through which we should approach his writings.

In this vein, it is important to underscore that, as far as Buber was concerned, Hasidism itself was ultimately a failure, slipping into legalistic fetishism and compulsive ritualism. On one hand, he saw this decline as a result of historical factors: The revolutionary insights and primordial religiosity of early Hasidism provoked aggressive antipathy from Mitnagedim, who feared the collapse of traditional order, and from Maskilim, who scoffed at ecstatic effervescence—and the original vitality of Hasidism caved under pressure.²⁷ On the other hand, however, Buber was simply unable to make himself believe that the degeneration of Hasidism was due entirely to historical circumstances. Ultimately, the narrow bridge between “sacramental existence” and halakhic obedience was just too slippery:

it is understandable why Hasidism had no incentive to break loose any stick from the structure of the traditional Law, for according to the Hasidic teaching there could not exist anything that was not to be fulfilled with intention or whose intention could not be discovered. But it is also understandable how *just thereby* the conserving force secretly remained superior to the moving and renewing one and finally conquered it within Hasidism itself.²⁸

²⁶ Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM*, 5.

²⁷ See Buber, “Jewish Religiosity,” *OJ*, 92.

²⁸ Buber, *OMH*, 127; German: *Der Große Maggid*, xxviii. Emphasis added.

The great Hasidic sages may very well have grasped the inner power of rituals as catalysts for sacramental existence, but Buber sensed that unshakeable commitments to fixed rules devolve all too often into rigid short-sightedness and witherings of spirit. He searched the sources for expressions of Hasidic metanomianism and felt licensed to ignore or downplay other elements due to the nature and goals of his own project.

This leads us to our second point in response to Schachter-Shalomi's legitimate critique: Although Buber's familiarity with Hasidism was indeed "largely from books," his engagement with those texts was so penetrating that it ought to raise questions for us about the boundaries of Hasidic discourse. As we have seen already with regard to Buber's portrayals of theological expression and theological cognition in Hasidism, Buber's portrayal of religious practice in Hasidism was at once idiosyncratic and hermeneutically engaged. The fact is, Buber's Hasidic writings amplified an ethos that was genuinely present in Hasidic discourse, even if it was not ultimately enacted by Hasidic people. Indeed, while the many polemical accusations of antinomianism waged against Hasidism from its inception were ultimately unfounded, some of those claims were genuine responses to messages embedded in Hasidic sources. Mystical journeys toward liberation from corporeality can undermine the holiness of bodily practices, Hasidic values of serving and seeking God "in all your ways" can erode the authority of elaborate ceremonial systems, and certain strands of later Hasidic messianism seem to have danced "on the margins" of Jewish law.²⁹ In short, Buber radicalized an already existing

²⁹ See Eisen's astute comment that "Hasidism offered authority, grounding inside the tradition, for the rebellion *against* tradition which Buber sought to foment." Arnold M. Eisen, *Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 191, emphasis in original. See also Arthur Green, "Hasidism: Discovery and Retreat," in Peter Berger, ed., *The Other Side of God: A Polarity in World Religions*, 104-129; Tsippi Kauffman, *Be-Khol Derakhekha Da'ehu*; Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism in Izbica/Radzin Hasidism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003). For elements of antinomianism

radicalness in Hasidism. When he presented Hasidism in a metanomian light, he did no more and no less than isolate and amplify sensibilities that were present in Hasidic sources. Indeed, many of his most strikingly metanomian tales prove to be faithful representations of texts that he plucked directly from mainstream Hasidic sources.

With this perspective in mind, we might complicate Ya‘ari’s intimation that Buber was disingenuous for “nurturing our relation to our tradition” although he “did not keep the tradition himself.” If Jewish “tradition” is synonymous with Halakhah, then Ya‘ari’s claim is undeniable. However, if Jewish tradition encompasses not only legal rulings but also reflections on the meaning of the Law—not to mention the vastness of Aggadah—then Buber’s relation to Jewish tradition was quite robust and should be reconsidered. Buber’s most vivid representations of religious practice are in his Hasidic writings, and, as we will see throughout this chapter, these reflect a most active and intimate immersion in Hasidic sources. While Buber’s portrayals of Hasidic praxis were not wholly accurate from a historical standpoint, he was indeed responding to elements in the sources. Exactly *how* he did that, and *what* emerged from those hermeneutical encounters—these are our primary concerns in this chapter.

Whatever You Are Engaged with at the Moment

In 1924, the Hasidic writer Moshe Ḥayyim Kleinmann published the following *mayse* about his teacher’s teacher, Rabbi Moshe Polier of Kobrin³⁰:

or “hypernomianism” in earlier Jewish mysticism, see Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 186-285. We might also consider Scholem’s statement: “By its very nature mysticism involves the danger of an uncontrolled and uncontrollable deviation from traditional authority.” Gershom Scholem, “Religious Authority and Mysticism,” in *Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 17-18.

³⁰ Kleinmann was originally a hasid of Rabbi Avraham of Slonim, who had been a disciple of Moshe of Kobrin. See Nigal, *Melaqetei ha-Sipur ha-Ḥasidi*, 208-211; Dan *Ha-Sippur ha-Ḥasidi*, 223.

After his death, the wise rabbi from Kotsk, Rabbi Menahem, may the holy tsaddiq's memory be a blessing, asked one of [Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin's] Hasidim, who had been with him in Kobrin and traveled to Kotsk, about his rabbi, may his memory be a blessing. And this was what he asked him: "What thing was essential for him?" And he answered: "Everything that happened was essential for him." And the aforementioned holy rabbi [Rabbi Menahem] said: "It wasn't for nothing that they called him 'Polier (פאליער)'—he weeded (גפאליוועט)³¹ from morning until evening, and about him it says, *Man goes forth to his action (לפעלו) and to his service until evening* [Ps. 104:23].³²

The centerpiece of this tale is the disciple's statement that, for Moshe of Kobrin, every moment was consequential and thus it would be senseless to identify a single principle or practice that was supreme in his eyes. The Kotsker's puns on the rebbe's surname then affirm that the Hasid's answer points to the constancy of Rabbi Moshe's religious practice.

Buber loved this *mayse*, publishing his version of it frequently as soon as he discovered the original.³³ For obvious reasons, he embraced it as a bold formulation of sacramental existence, and yet he also interpreted it according to his own dialogical sensibilities. Most importantly, in response to the question about what was most essential to Moshe of Kobrin, whereas Kleinmann's Hasid responds, "Everything that happened was essential for him (לכל דבר)

³¹ The Yiddish term here seems to be a variant spelling of געפאלעוועט (infinitive: פאלעווען), meaning to weed or hoe. It is conceivable, although unlikely, that the intended word here is געפאליעט (infinitive: פאליען), meaning to be burning hot or to become scorched. Although this latter verb may seem more sensical, given the Hasidic concept of ecstasy as *hitlahavut* (lit. to be aflame), it would be surprising for Kleinmann to add the double-*vav* (ו) in the middle of the word, as this would indicate an entirely different class of verbs. I am grateful to Isaac Bleaman for his consultation on this question.

³² Moshe Ḥayyim Kleinman, *Or Yesharim* (Warsaw, 1924), 55.

הרבי הזקן מקאצק הרר"מ זצוק"ל שאל לאחד מחסידיו שהיה לו בקאברין שנסע לקאצק, על אודות מרן ז"ל אחר הסתלקותו, וזה היה שאלתו, איזה דבר היה העיקר אצלו, והשיב לכל דבר שבא היה אצלו העיקר, ואמר הרה"ק הנ"ל לא לחנם קראו אותו "פאליער" ער האט גפאליוועט מבוקר עד ערב, ועליו נאמר "יצא אדם לפעלו ולעבודתו עדי ערב".

³³ In his very first publication of Hasidic anecdotes following the appearance of Kleinmann's collection, Buber featured it in a series of only sixteen tales: Martin Buber, "Chassidische Geschichten," *Die Kreatur* 2.2 (Fall 1927), 224. The following year, Buber added this tale retroactively to a revised version of *Das verborgene Licht*, printed in his *Die chassidischen Bücher*, and he included it as well a few years later in his selective collection *Hundert chassidische Geschichten*, not to mention Buber's later, more exhaustive anthologies. See *Die chassidischen Bücher*, 579; *Hundert chassidische Geschichten*, __; *MBW*, XVIII: §899. Moreover, Buber cited this tale repeatedly in his essays on Hasidism. See, for example, his essays "Symbolic and Sacramental Existence" and "The Place of Hasidism in the History of Religion," in *OMH*, 177, 228; "Interpreting Hasidism," 223; "Replies to My Critics," 736.

known man” in the history of Hasidism, even among tsaddiqim of the later generations, Buber devotes a quite lengthy section of the anthology to him—forty-eight tales, to be exact—and celebrates him specifically as a master of practice:

He did not enrich the teaching. But in life and word—in the unity of life and word—he lent it once again a wholly personal, refreshingly vital expression. One can reduce what he taught to three of his sayings: “You shall become an altar before God”; “There is nothing in the world without a commandment”; and “Just as God is limitless, so his service is limitless.” But surrounding these sayings there spread an astonishing fullness of image and example—of lived life—which was at times reminiscent of the early Hasidic masters. For the rest, what is told about him in this book requires no elaboration or explanation.³⁷

For Buber, the Kobriner’s greatest contribution to Hasidic wisdom was embodied in his very way of life, a perpetual practice whereby one offers himself wholly to the normative force of each moment. And Buber concludes that it is hardly necessary to add discursive reflections, for the deeds speak for themselves. In fact, one can even detect a sort of reticence in Buber when he quotes those three sayings of the Kobriner, as Buber affirms quickly that what was truly consequential were the forms of life that surrounded those sayings. And yet, in his actual anthological section on the Kobriner, Buber decided to leave out the first and third of those three sayings, evidently because their surrounding contexts did not resonate enough with his own visions of religious life!³⁸ As for the second dictum—“There is nothing in the world without a

³⁷ Buber, *TH*, II:23; German: *MBW*, XVIII:170. I have emended Marx’s English translation according to the original German.

³⁸ As evidenced in Buber’s unpublished notes, he did list those two dicta as possible tales for the anthology. See his unpublished notes on Mosche von Kobryn in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #33, “Ein Altar werden,” and #34, “Der unendliche Dienst.” Evidently, however, he concluded that it would be best to just isolate those single-sentence formulations in his introduction to *Die Erzählungen*, as we saw above. Indeed, in the original source of *Amarot Tehorot*, the first saying, “You shall become an altar before God (איר זאלט קענען זיין אמזבה לפני השי״ת),” was in fact the crescendo of the Kobriner’s teaching about how Jews ought to conduct themselves during holidays, when “You shall bind yourselves to the holiness of the festival, *until the horns of the altar* [Ps. 118:27].” And the third saying, “Just as God is without end, so is his service without end (וכמו שהשי״ת הוא א״ס כך עבודתו הוא א״ס),” was originally in the context of the Kobriner’s assertion that one must strive always to lift his consciousness toward ever more heavenly heights in order to attain increasingly lofty levels of theological comprehension. Clearly, neither of these teachings resonates strongly with the sacramental existence that Buber identifies with the

commandment”—this material does indeed appear in Buber’s tales about the Kobriner, although Buber alters the wording therein and, moreover, adds his own striking formulation to the conclusion of the tale: “Everything is commandment (*Alles ist Gebot*).”³⁹ To be sure, this pansacramental perception of all moments as sites of religious practice is manifest repeatedly in the teachings and tales of the Kobriner. But we may also appreciate nonetheless ways in which Buber accentuated those elements.⁴⁰

Buber’s most forceful anthological spree on pansacramentalism occurs in his chapter on Menahem Mendel of Kotsk. Four consecutive tales in that section bear bold testimony to the Kotsker’s stance that every moment—not only those in ritual contexts—should be honored with religious attention. It is noteworthy that Buber’s renditions of the original sources for this sequence are virtually verbatim. The more illuminating hermeneutical devices to highlight here are, rather, Buber’s principles of selection and anthological ordering. Indeed, it is clear that his bundling of these four tales from three different Hasidic collections was a product of careful thought: In his personal notebook, he recorded 219 tales about the Kotsker from various collections, and the four sources that he would eventually cluster are scattered throughout that

Kobriner: In contrast to the hallowing of each moment in everyday life, one saying over-emphasizes designated times of holiness, and the other appears to equate divine “service” with acosmic meditations. For the original sources of both dicta, see Moshe of Kobrin, *Amarot Tehorot*, 20.

³⁹ See Buber, “The End of the Matter,” *TH*, II:161; German: “Am Ende der Sache,” *MBW*, XVIII: §861; Hebrew: “*Sof Davar*,” *OhG*, 350. Cf. Moshe of Kobrin, *Amarot Tehorot*, 15. Interestingly, in his personal notes Buber entitled this tale “Kein Ding ohne Mizwa,” which is a direct translation of the original dictum that Buber highlights in his introductory words about the Kobriner—and yet, it is a formulation that Buber alters in his own version of the *mayse*.

⁴⁰ For another related example in his section on the Kobriner, see Buber’s tale, “Alles ist Dienst,” in *MBW*, XVIII: §858; Hebrew: “*Ha-Kol ‘Avodah Hu*,” *OhG*, 349 (not in English translation). After a quite faithful representation of the original source’s discussion of a type of eating that is itself a form of divine service (as opposed to just preparation for divine service), Buber adds his own formulation as the concluding crescendo of the tale: “for here, everything is service (*ist alles Dienst*).” Moreover, despite the fact that this locution does not appear in the original source, Buber entitles the tale “Alles ist Dienst,” although he listed the source initially in his unpublished notes as “Essen und Opfer.” See Buber’s notes on Mosche von Kobryn in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #36. For the original source, see Moshe of Kobrin, *Amarot Tehorot*, 23.

list (numbers 18, 90, 180, and 189, to be exact). From this vast array, Buber then listed eighty-seven of his favorites on a loose sheet of paper, which he arranged in a tentative order wherein the four sources remain separate from one another (numbers 7, 48, 50, and 73). Subsequently, Buber filled another loose sheet of paper with an even more reduced list, including eighty-two tales that appear more or less according to their order in *Die Erzählungen*. In this last list, the four tales are finally drawn together as an anthological unit. Through such considerations of Buber's paper trail, there is no doubt that this unification of sources was the result of much thought.

It is worthwhile for us to turn to Buber's sequence here in its entirety:

Great Guilt

Rabbi Mendel said:

“One who learns the Torah and is not troubled by it, who sins and forgives himself, who prays because he prayed yesterday—a very scoundrel is better than he!”⁴¹

The Week and the Sabbath

Once the rabbi of Kotzk said to Rabbi Yitzhak Meir of Ger: “I don't know what they want of me! All week everyone does as he pleases, but come sabbath he puts on his black robe and girds himself with his black belt, and puts on the black fur hat, and he's already chummy with (*du und du mit*) the Sabbath Bride! I say: As a man does during the week, so let him do on the Sabbath.”⁴²

⁴¹ Buber, *TH*, II:281; German: “Große Schuld,” *MBW*, XVIII: §§1173; Hebrew: “*Ashma Gedolah*,” *OhG*, 437. Buber drew this tale from Yehiel Moshe Grinwald, *Nifla'ot Hadašot* (Piotrków, 1897), 97. See his notes on Menachem Mendel von Kozk in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v., #189, “Die grossen Sünde.” With regard to Buber's hermeneutical principle of selection, it is worth noting that the teaching just before this one in *Nifla'ot Hadašot* portrays God's commandments as vehicles for drawing near to God, comparing the multitude of laws to a father who loves his son and thus gives him a great burden. As evidenced in his personal notebook, Buber skipped this teaching and recorded only the more metanomian one.

⁴² Buber, *TH*, II:282; German: “Woche und Sabbat,” *MBW*, XVIII: §§1174; Hebrew: “*Hol ve-Shabbat*,” *OhG*, 438. Buber drew this source primarily from Rakats, *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh*, III:70. According to his notebook, he also consulted a variation in Grinwald, *Nifla'ot Hadašot*, 92. However, Buber's version is

Earnestness

The rabbi of Kotzk called to some of his hasidim: “What is all this blabber about praying earnestly?! What does that mean, to pray earnestly?!”

They did not understand him.

“Is there anything at all that one may do without earnestness?” he said.⁴³

No Break

Rabbi Mendel saw to it that his hasidim wore nothing around the neck while praying, for, he said, there must be no break between the heart and the brain.⁴⁴

Buber drew these four tales together to underscore a central pillar of practice: One must strive to overcome any dualism whatsoever that divides time, space, or self into sacred versus secular spheres. In other words, religious existence must encompass the wholeness of life—and this takes extraordinary effort. This sequence of four tales convey the interconnected messages that: (1) Like all moments, the practices of Torah study, repentance, and prayer must never become habitual matters of course; (2) it would be folly to fancy that the trappings of ritual can simply expunge the trivialities of a thoughtless existence; (3) practitioners ought to take their walks to synagogues no less seriously than their prayers therein; and (4) genuine religious practice demands that the person is wholly here, with heart in mind and mind on heart. Of course, that

clearly based upon that in *Siah Sarfei Qodesh*. See his notes on Menachem Mendel von Kozk in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v., #90, “Werktag und Sabbos.”

⁴³ Buber, TH, II:282; German: “Ernst,” *MBW*, XVIII: §§1175; Hebrew: “*Be-Koved Rosh*,” *OhG*, 437. Buber drew this source from Grinwald, *Nifla’ot Hadashot*, 92, although for some reason he cites it (implicitly) in the source index of *OhG* as from *Siah Sarfei Qodesh*, vol. 1. See Buber’s notes on Menachem Mendel von Kozk in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v., #18, “Alles muss ernst sein.”

⁴⁴ Buber, TH, II:282; German: “Keine Unterbrechung,” *MBW*, XVIII: §§1176; Hebrew: “*Beli Hatsitsah*,” *OhG*, 438. Buber drew this material from a late collection attributed to Menahem Mendel Morgenstern of Kotsk, *Emet ve-Emunah* (Jerusalem, 1940), 134. See Buber’s notes on Menachem Mendel von Kozk in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v., #180, “Zwischen Hirn u. Herz.”

fourth tale could be interpreted in various ways, yet Buber's anthological positioning of it in the afterglow of the previous three casts a particular light upon it—and a light, we should add, that differs from the context in the original collection.⁴⁵ With such hermeneutical acumen, Buber presents sprees of sources that convey a sacramental existence beyond the bounds of any dualistic system.

Ultimately, however, Buber felt that the Kotsker strayed too far in his resistance to religious normativity. In his introductory discourse, Buber indicates that the rebbe's outlook reached a decidedly "antinomian note," and this onset of antinomianism had less to do with the rebbe's deviation from Halakhah, per se, than with his distancing from people. "From that time on," Buber notes, "throughout the remaining twenty years of his life, Rabbi Mendel kept to his room behind two doors which were almost always closed." And on the rare occasions when the Kotsker did interact with others, "He cursed them in choppy words that burst from his lips with such force that they were seized with terror and fled from the house through doors and windows." For Buber, it was precisely this anti-social behavior that was symptomatic of antinomianism. And there was nothing romantic about this phase, signifying no less than the demise of Hasidic religiosity.⁴⁶ According to Buber, the quality of one's interpersonal relationships—certainly more than any compliance with ritual codes—is the ultimate litmus test for the robustness of one's religious practice. As in Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the solitary seeker who says "Now I love God; man I love not" may very well be a "saint," but his practice is meaningless, directed toward a dead God.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See Morgenstern, *Emet ve-Emunah*, 134.

⁴⁶ See Buber, *TH*, II:42-43; German: *MBW*, XVIII:185.

⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1978), 10-12. On Buber's connection to this work from a very young age, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Zarathustra as a Prophet of Jewish Renewal: Nietzsche and the Young Martin Buber," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 57.1 (2001): 103-111.

Buber presents many Hasidic tales that stress how interpersonal relationships are part and parcel of sacramental existence. One particularly illustrative example is his rendition of a *mayse* about Rabbi Ḥayyim of Sanz (1797/9-1876), which Buber drew from the collection *Meqor Ḥayyim*, by Abraham Michelson. According to the original source—and, due to its length, I paraphrase here with some direct quotes⁴⁸—Rabbi Ḥayyim completes his afternoon prayers and then dismisses all his Hasidim. One lingers, however, and requests a favor. Rabbi Ḥayyim gets so angry that the man runs away, and when the man then returns to make his request again, he cannot even get a word in because of the tsaddiq’s anger. Rabbi Ḥayyim’s father-in-law from Tluste⁴⁹ witnessed this interaction, and he asks Rabbi Hayyim why he is angry. Rabbi Hayyim responds with a *mayse* about rabbis Menaḥem Nahum of Chernobil and David of Mykolaiv which demonstrates that the afternoon prayers correspond to the highest reaches of spiritual consciousness, the World of Emanation (תפילתו מנחה הוא נגד עולם אצילות). “If a man comes from

⁴⁸ The entire source from Michelson, *Meqor Ḥayyim*, 45-46, is as follows:

וסיפר החסיד יר"א מ' משה אליעזר שו"ב מק' ווישא אשר פ"א היה אצל הגה"ק בצאנו והי' שם בעת ההוא גם מחותנו הגאון החסיד אבד"ק טלוסט ז"ל ואחר מנחה התחיל הגה"ק מצאנו ליפטר אנשים אשר היו שם בעת ההוא. והג' מטלוסט ישב שם אצל השלחן. וראה אשר איש א' ביקש איזה בקשה מהה"ק ד"ח [דברי חיים] וכעס עליו מאד עד שברח מפניו. ואח"כ בא האיש עוד הפעם לשאול בקשתו ולא הי' יכול בשו"א לדבר מחמת כעס של הד"ח ז"ל. ושאל אותו הרב מטלוסט לאמור: מחותני למה אתם כועסים. והשיב לו הד"ח אשר פ"א בעת תפלת מנחה הזדמן הרה"ק מוהר"ד ממיקאלייב לביהמ"ד של הה"ק ר"נ בעל מאור עינים מטשרנובל. ובאמצע תפילת מנחה הריח הרר"נ כי בא אדם גדול לבית מדרשו. ותיכף כשגמר תפילתו התחיל הה"ק ר"נ לבקש מי הוא. ותכיר בפני הרר"ד אף לא הי' יכול לדבר עמו כי הק' ר"ד הי' מתפלל אז. והמתין שם עד שסיים תפילתו. ושאל אותו הרר"נ. פין ואניד איז א' יוד. והשיבו כי הוא בא מעולם אצילות כי תפילתו מנחה הוא נגד עולם אצילות. וכעת יוכל מחו' להבין באם בא אדם מעולם האצילות וזה בא בדברים שלו היאך לא אכעום. והשיב לו הרב מטלוסט אשר מפי חמיו זקנו בעל תורת חיים ז"ל מקאסיב על הפ' יורד משה מן ההר אל העם ופרש"י מלמד שלא פנה משה לעסקיו אלא מן ההר אל העם. ולכאור' קשה וכי מה עסקים היו למשרע"ה במדבר שלא פנה להם אלא אל העם וכי חנוני או סוחר היה אלא פי' דוודאי משרע"ה בעת אשר ירד מן ההר עוד הי' מדובק בעולמות העליונים ותיקן שם דברים גבוהים וזאת היו עסקיו על משה לדבק עצמו בעולמות העליונים ולהמתיק שם כל הדינים ח"ו. וזה הרבותא של משה בעת פנה מן ההר לא פנה לעסקיו. היינו להיות עוד דבוק שם אלא אל העם לשמוע בקשותיהם וכל מה שבלב ישראל ואח"כ היה מעלה בקשתיהם הגשמיים עם תפילתם הכל למרום. וכששמע זאת בעל ד"ח תיכף נתקרב דעתו וקרא בחזרה להאיש לשמוע בקשתו וכמעט כל הלילה שמע כל מה שבלב אנשים שהיו שם וכולם הציעו לפניו בקשותיהם. וברכו להג' אבד"ק טלוסט עבור זה עכ"ל.

⁴⁹ I have not been able to ascertain who, exactly, this person was. Michelson describes him as Rabbi Ḥayyim’s father-in-law, but Rabbi Hayyim had, in fact, four wives from three different fathers over the course of his life, and I could not confirm which of them, if any, was from Tluste. The tale notes also that the rabbi from Tluste was the son-in-law of Hayyim of Kosov (1795-1854), the author of *Torat Ḥayyim* (see Michelson, *Meqor Ḥayyim*, 45-46). Perhaps Buber himself was also uncertain about the identity of this interlocutor, as he refers to him simply as “a friend” of Rabbi Hayyim’s.

the World of Emanation,” Rabbi Hayyim reasons, “and someone comes to him with his words, how would I not get angry?” In response, the rabbi of Tluste shares Rabbi Hayyim of Kosov’s interpretation of Exodus 19:14—“And Moses descended from the mountain to the people”—in light of Rashi’s comment that “Moses did not turn to his own affairs (לעסקיו), but *from the mountain to the people*.”⁵⁰ It is difficult to fathom what Moses’s “affairs” were atop that mountain, the rabbi of Tluste explains, since there was obviously no business or commerce out there in the desert. But when Moses descended from the mountain, he was still attached to the upper worlds, repairing supernal imbalances and sweetening divine judgements—and these were precisely the affairs to which he had attached himself. And, the rabbi of Tluste concludes,

This was the greatness of Moses at the moment *he turned from the mountain*, not to his affairs. He did not remain attached (דבוק) there, but rather *turned to the people*, to hear their requests and all that was in the hearts of Israel. And after this, he would elevate their corporeal requests along with their prayers—everything to on high.

When he heard this, the rebbe of Sandz’s mind cooled at once, and he called back to the man in order to hear his request. And, for almost the entire night, he listened to all that was in the hearts of the people who were there, and everyone presented their requests to him.

It is obvious why Buber selected this source for his own anthology,⁵¹ and in his own rendition of it he preserves the main elements: After being frustrated with the requests of a man following the afternoon prayers, the Sandzer rebbe encounters the commentary on Exodus 19:14, which teaches that Moses’s greatness was manifest precisely when he turned from his own mystical affairs on the mountain to the social concerns of people down below. To be expected, Buber minimizes the Sandzer’s fury, muffling the fact that Hasidism allowed for such

⁵⁰ See Hayyim of Kosov, *Torat Hayyim* (Kolomyia, 1883), parshat Vayishlahk, 7b. Rashi’s commentary is based on Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, *Ba-hodesh*, 3.

⁵¹ See Buber, “To the People,” *TH*, II:209-210; German: “Zum Volke,” *MBW*, XVIII: §966; Hebrew: “*El ha-‘Am*,” *OhG*, 383-384. See also Buber’s reference to this tale in the introductory remarks to his anthology *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge*. Buber, “Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement,” *OMH*, 139-140; German: “Geleitwort,” *MBW*, XVII:68-69.

cantankerous, short-tempered tsaddiqim.⁵² For our purposes, however, the more significant alterations pertain to Buber's depictions of the boundary between spiritual and social spheres. In Michelson's version, the rebbe of Sandz complains, "If a man comes from the World of Emanation (מעולם אצילות), and someone comes with his words (בא בדברים שלו), how would I not get angry?" That is, mystical consciousness is above language, so it makes complete sense that "words" would rupture that rapture. In contrast, Buber's Sandzer protests, "One who speaks *Mincha* stands over-against the world of primordial separation (*Welt der Ursonderung*); how should he not get angry if he comes from there and is now bombarded with the petty concerns of petty people (*den kleinen Sorgen der kleinen Leute*; ודאגותיהם הקטנות של האנשים הקטנים)?" With these changes, Buber rejects the notion that there is some ontological abyss between religious and interpersonal realms. In fact, he is not even willing to dignify the Sandzer's inner, solitary experience with the Kabbalistic concept of the World of Emanation—Buber associates it, rather, with *Sonderung*, subjectivist separation from others.⁵³ Moreover, in substituting the intrusion of "petty concerns of petty people" for the original problem of "words," the central message of this *mayse* is no longer how the Sandzer learned to navigate the discordance of language and spirituality, but rather how he came to realize that what he had formerly perceived as "petty" was

⁵² Whereas in the original source, the very sight of the man made the rabbi "so angry at him that [the man] ran away from him (וכעס עליו מאד עד שברה מפניו)," Buber notes that the man was characteristically "pushy (*zudringlichen*; טרדן)" and that it was only after "he did not let up (*als er nicht ablassen wollte*; כשלא הרפה (ממנו)" that "the tsaddiq shouted at him (*fuhr ihn der Zaddik an*; בוזף בו הצדיק)."

⁵³ This is the only place in all of Buber's *Erzählungen* that he uses this term. The more standard German translation of מעולם אצילות is "Welt der Emanation." See, for example, Gershom Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Suhrkamp, 1988), 298. On Buber's use of the term *Sonderung* to denote a problematic detachment from things, see his discussion of "der absoluten Sonderung von Ich und Gegenstand," in *Ich und Du*, 38; also his identification of the "true nature" of the It-world with "Versonderung" (*Ich und Du*, 71). We should note that Buber does preserve the term מעולם אצילות in his Hebrew version of the tale. Presumably, much of his Hebrew-speaking audience would have been familiar with the doctrine of the four worlds, and thus it would have been unwise for Buber to avoid the term.

actually of great spiritual gravity. Similarly, whereas the original source suggests that Moses heard all the people's "corporeal requests" (בקשתיהם הגשמיים), Buber says that he heard all "their petty concerns (*kleinen Sorgen*; דאגותיהם הקטנות)." Thus, just as Buber avoided the propagation of ontological binaries between spirituality and language, he does so again here with regard to spirituality and corporeality.⁵⁴

The issue at stake in this *mayse*, for Buber, is therefore not the need to vacillate between spiritual and social spheres, but rather the need to behold spirituality in this relational world. It is not speech or corporeality that are antithetical to religious consciousness, but rather misperceptions of "pettiness." The Sandzer learns this crucial truth that there is no real conflict between religious life and interpersonal encounters. It follows, then, that where the original source teaches that the great Moses "turned" (פנה) from his supernal affairs on the mountain to the vulgar concerns of the people down below, Buber says that Moses "let go (*ließ...ab*; הניח)" of that lofty work and "extricated himself (*machte sich...los*; נחלץ) from the upper worlds." Thus, Buber actually diverges from the language of Exodus 19:14 in order to suggest that the shift from solitary spirituality to relational engagement is not just some generous act of charity, but rather a disentangling of oneself from tempting delusions that one had been clutching. In this tale, at least, the rabbi of Sandz learns a foundational truth of sacramental existence: perceived walls between rituals and relationships are mirages. In his introductory remarks about the Sandzer, Buber suggests that the rebbe never quite managed to embody that insight—ultimately, he lacked "the unity of a figure shaped by the unity of soul"⁵⁵—but through his selection of this tale and,

⁵⁴ The original teaching from *Torat Ḥayyim* that the rabbi of Tluste cites in Michelson's *mayse* stressed even more the opposition between spiritual affairs and matters of corporeality (גשמיות). Ḥayyim of Kosov, *Torat Ḥayyim*, 7b.

⁵⁵ Buber, *TH*, II:30; German: *MBW*, XVIII:175-176.

moreover, his hermeneutical transformation of it, Buber offers a glimpse of that spiritual-social synthesis to his readers.⁵⁶

In other tales, Buber presents sacramental existence in terms of the opposition between bookish detachment and relational readiness. The de-emphasizing of text study was, of course, a distinctive feature of early Hasidism, despite the great intellectual intensity of the movement. While there were a variety of factors that energized this shift—particularly the Hasidic transformation of *devekut* into a constant goal of spiritual life—the lowered status of study was rooted partially in elevated emphases on social interaction.⁵⁷ One exemplary teaching comes from the Besht’s disciple Ya‘akov Yosef of Polnoye: “One need not devote all one’s time to the study of Torah, but one should also become involved with other human beings. In that too he can experience the fear of God and the fulfillment of the commandment of being aware constantly of God’s presence.”⁵⁸ To be expected, Buber amplifies the social reasons for marginalizations of text study in Hasidism. He presents multiple tales, for example, that highlight the symbolic and yet very real boundary between one’s solitary study indoors and the world of human interaction outdoors. Drawing from the homiletical section of *Butsina de-Nehora* (1897), Buber shares Rabbi Barukh of Mezhibizh’s bold interpretation of Pirkei Avot 2:13—“You shall not be evil in your own eyes (ואל תהי רשע בפני עצמך)” —to mean, hyper-literally, you shall not be evil before yourself, through facing only yourself. According to the language of Buber’s rendition:

Every person is called to bring something in this world to perfection. The world needs everyone. But there are people who always sit locked up in their rooms and study and do not step out of the house to converse with others (*die sitzen beständig in ihren Kammern*

⁵⁶ For another tale with a similar message, see Buber, “Permission,” *TH*, I:265-266; German: “Die Erlaubnis,” in *MBW*, XVIII: §498. In this *mayse*, Shneur Zalman of Liadi’s brother gets punished by God for not obtaining permission from his wife to travel to the Maggid of Mezritsh.

⁵⁷ See Weiss, “Torah Study in Early Hasidism,” *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism*, 56-68.

⁵⁸ Ya‘akov Yosef of Polnoye, *Sefer Toledot Ya‘aqov Yosef* (Korets, 1780), 23b, 24d. As quoted in Hundert, *Jews of Poland-Lithuania*, 193; cf. Wilensky, *Hasidim u-Mitnagedim*, 2:145.

eingeschlossen und lernen und treten nicht aus dem Haus, sich mit andern zu unterreden). For this they are called evil. If they conversed with others, they would bring perfection to that which is allotted to them. This is the meaning of “Be not evil before you yourself,” that is, by staying before you yourself and not going out to the people; be not evil through solitude.⁵⁹

This rendition in Buber’s anthology is quite faithful to the version he consulted in *Butsina de-Nehora*,⁶⁰ although Buber accentuates the border between study inside and society outside. To be sure, this spatial distinction is perceptible in the original source, where Rabbi Barukh refers to those “who always sit closed up in many room (שיושב תמיד מסוגר בהדרי הדרים), always studying there and not going outside (ואינו יוצא להויץ) to speak with human beings.” However, Buber picks up on this imagery here and expands it into the end of the tale. Whereas the version in *Butsina de-Nehora* concludes “Be not evil before yourself, that is, be not evil through sitting alone in solitude (וזהו ואל תהי רשע בפני עצמך, פי עם הדבר שאתה יושב לבדך בהתבודדות),” Buber converts the original boundary between private and public into a full-fledged motif: “‘Be not evil before you yourself,’ that is, by staying before you yourself and not going out (*ausgehst*) to the people; be not evil through solitude.” The verb *ausgehen* that Buber employs here is a key term throughout his writings for dialogical self-transcendence, the “going outside” of oneself, as it were, that is necessary for beholding an Other. “Whoever goes forth (*ausgeht*) in truth to the world, goes forth (*geht...aus*) to God. Concentration and going forth (*Ausgehn*), both in truth, the one-and-the-other which is the One, are what is needful.”⁶¹ Returning to the *mayse* at hand, therefore, Buber’s

⁵⁹ Buber, “Vor dir selber,” *MBW*, XVIII: §103; Hebrew: “*Bi-fnei ‘Atsmekha*,” *OhG*, 101; English: “With Yourself,” *TH*, I:89-90. Cf. Buber’s similar telling of this tale in his introduction to *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge*: Buber, “Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement,” *OMH*, 140-141; German: “Geleitwort,” *MBW*, XVII:69.

⁶⁰ Barukh of Mezhbizh, *Butsina de-Nehora* (Piotrków, 1885/6), 12. HaCohen’s bibliographical citation in *MBW* XVIII differs from that in Buber’s private notes. See Buber’s notes on Baruch von Miedzybors in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #7, “Sich nicht absondern.”

⁶¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 143; German: *Ich und Du*, 113. See also: “Whoever goes forth (*ausgeht*) to his You with his whole being and carries to it all the being of the world, finds him whom one cannot seek.” *I and Thou*, 127; German: *Ich und Du*, 95. In their translation of the Hebrew Bible, Buber and Rosenzweig

Rabbi Barukh intimates that people who remain closed up indoors commit a transgression by not crossing a boundary.⁶²

This is the task, then: to continually “go out” from inward intellectualism and spiritual interiority to open spaces of interaction. Buber himself wrestled throughout his life with this aspect of practice. In fact, in a brief essay entitled “Books and Men,” which he penned when he was nearly seventy years old, he acknowledged, “I have not, indeed, cleaved to life in the world as I might have; in my relations with it I fail it again and again; again and again I remain guilty toward it for falling short of what it expects of me.”⁶³ And yet, Buber allows himself this: “I do, indeed, close my door at times and surrender myself to a book, but only because I can open the door again and see a human being looking at me.”⁶⁴

In Rabbinic Judaism, of course, Torah study is more than just an aesthetic or intellectual activity; it is ritual action. Thus, we should not overlook the normative significance of Hasidic *mayses* about turning from texts to people. To be sure, we might locate precedents in classical Rabbinic thought, such as in Reish Lakish’s well-known teaching: “There are times when the nullification of Torah is its foundation, as it is written, *that you smashed* (Deut. 12:2). The Holy

render the famous phrase of Genesis 12:1, לך לך, as “Go forth (*Geh du aus*),” whereas in the context of Buber’s critique of Kierkegaard’s individualism, Buber translates the latter’s reading of לך לך as “Go before thee (*Geh vor dich hin*)” and points out that such an interpretation promotes a “power to free oneself of all bonds.” Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift. Zu verdeutschen unternommen von Martin Buber gemeinsam mit Franz Rosenzweig*, Vol. 1 (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1934), Gen. 12:1; Buber, “Die Frage an den Einzelnen,” *Werke*, I:220. Buber, at least in his post-mystical years, would likely have disapproved of the Zohar’s hyper-literal rendering of לך לך as “go to yourself” (Zohar 1:78a), as this would suggest that Abraham was commanded to seek God by means of an inward turn.

⁶² For additional tales wherein Buber accentuates the boundary between indoor studying and outdoor relations, see his “Die Störung” and “Die Lehrbeflissenen,” in *MBW*, XVIII: §§694 and 52. Buber drew those tales, respectively, from Dov Baer Ehrman, *Devarim ‘Arevim*, I:31a; Rakats, *Siftei Qodesh*, 85. On the latter tale, see below.

⁶³ Martin Buber, “Books and Men,” in *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 3; German: “Büchern und Menschen,” in idem, *Hinweise: gesammelte Essays* (Zürich: Manesse Verlag, 1953), 7-8.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

One, blessed be He, said to Moses: Congratulations that you smashed!”⁶⁵ One could argue that this dictum reflects a certain antinomian impulse, as Reish Lakish seems to celebrate the destructive act of smashing.⁶⁶ According to Rashi’s standard interpretation, however, Reish Lakish implies specifically that one ought to interrupt Torah study when confronted with opportunities “such as burying the dead and greeting a bride”—ethical actions that are both inherently situational, demanded by particular moments of relational life. This latter position is, in fact, more consonant with Buber’s sensibilities than the maximalist, antinomian reading of Reish Lakish’s teaching. To continue studying in the face of situations that demand interpersonal responsiveness would be to violate the very core of sacramental existence, which demands steadfast readiness. Indeed, allowing for “interruptions” in Torah study for the sake of dialogical attunement is itself a refusal to interrupt religious practice! As the Besht himself put it, according to one *mayse*, “What am I to do? I have no time to study because I have to serve my Maker.” The Besht’s bookish grandson was so moved by those words that he turned immediately to the Hasidic way—and Buber adds in his own rendition that this event take place “outside the city,” beyond the confines of closed doors.⁶⁷ For Buber, transgressing the boundary between pious solitude and responsive relationality is a great fulfillment of religious practice.

Laws and Commands

⁶⁵ BT Menahot 99a-b.

⁶⁶ See Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 238n180: “The issue seems to me a more fundamental abrogation of the law, which is tellingly captured in the violent act of smashing the tablets.”

⁶⁷ Buber, “The Scholars,” *TH*, I:65; German: “Die Lehrbeflissenen,” *MBW* XVIII: §52; Hebrew: “*Ha-Matmid*,” *OhG*, 84. Buber drew this source from Rakats, *Siftei Qodesh*, 85. See his notes on der Baalschem in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #229, “Der Matmid.”

It is worth stressing, once again, that Buber's position on practice is not antinomian, but metanomian. Regarding our previous discussion, for example, the ritual of Torah study can most certainly be sacred—as long as one remains receptive and responsive to what is happening here and now, which might call upon the learner at times to redirect action. In Buber's vision of religious praxis, what is most important is to be attentive to the commands (*Gebote*) of God, which is to say, the unique tasks that issue forth from every moment—if only one listens. These may very well coincide with the laws (*Gesetze*) of religious tradition, but not necessarily.⁶⁸ Indeed, there are times when fixations on fixed laws threaten to drown out the still, small voice of commandment.

If this danger of religious law does not yet make sense to Buber's readers, we might turn to Soloveitchik's "Halakhic man" for clarification. Although Soloveitchik himself celebrates this man as a hero of religious existence, his phenomenological description serves to elucidate the very hazard that concerns Buber: "There is no phenomenon, entity, or object in this concrete world which the a priori Halakhah does not approach with its ideal standard," Soloveitchik writes. "When halakhic man comes across a spring bubbling quietly, he already possesses a fixed, a priori relationship with this real phenomenon," and "he is not particularly concerned with cognizing the spring as it is in itself."⁶⁹ This captures precisely what is potentially problematic about law, according to Buber: the person no longer sees the stream or even the flow of time itself, and thus she remains numb to concrete existence and divine presence. Fackenheim wrote with understanding when he suggested that, for Buber, "to obey a system of laws—

⁶⁸ On this distinction between *Gesetz* and *Gebot* in Buber's writings, particularly in the context of post-Kantian Jewish thought, see Mendes-Flohr, "Law and Sacrament," in *Divided Passions*, 341-369.

⁶⁹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 20.

independent in its validity of the Giver and of the hour for which He gives it—is not to respond to revelation but on the contrary to flee from it.”⁷⁰

We can already begin to see here how Buber’s opposed normativities of *Gesetz* (law) and *Gebot* (commandment) correspond to divergent temporalities: the minutes of religion versus the moments of religiosity. In Buber’s Hasidic tales, he integrates a terminological distinction between calculable time (*Zeit*) and the immeasurable hour (*Stunde*).⁷¹ Whereas laws pertain to particular times, commands come at every moment. Consider, for example, his rendition of a tale about Rabbi Ḥanokh of Aleksander from Rakats’s *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh*. In the original version, a man asks Rabbi Ḥanokh why the Hasidim begin their prayers late. In response, the rebbe compares the matter to military conduct: “They are trained to do such-and-such at this time (שבזמן זה) and such-and-such at that time (ובזמן זה). But at the time (בזמן) of actual battle, they don’t think at all about the propriety that they learned; they just do what they understand to be good for the battle and for the victory.”⁷² In Buber’s rendition, however, Rabbi Ḥanokh employs different terms to delineate distinct temporalities: “As long as soldiers are in training...there is a set time (*Zeit*; זמן) for every activity, and they must keep to it. But when they go into battle, they

⁷⁰ Fackenheim, “Martin Buber’s Concept of Revelation,” in Schilpp and Friedman, eds., *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 285. Fackenheim’s comment resonates with Buber’s own admission to Rosenzweig in his letter of June 1924: “I cannot admit the law transformed by man into the realm of my will, if I am to hold myself ready as well for the unmediated word of God directed to a specific hour of life.” As printed in Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955), 111. Although Glatzer’s well-known translation of this sentence is conceptually accurate, it is also quite loose and involves an insertion of Buber’s dichotomy of *Gesetz* and *Gebot*. The original German reads: “Ich kann nicht zugleich diese Tatsache [i.e., the legislation (*Gesetzgebung*) of human religion] in meinen *Willen* aufnehmen und aber des Spruchs und seiner Stunde gewärtig sein.” Buber, *MBB*, 2:196. Emphasis in original.

⁷¹ For this distinction in Buber’s phenomenology of dialogue, see above in chapter one.

⁷² Rakats, *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh*, III:74. See Buber’s unpublished notes on Chanoch von Alexander, in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #16, “Grund der Gebetsverzögerung (Gleichnis von d. Soldaten).”

forget what was imposed on them and they fight as the hour (*Stunde*; שעה) demands.”⁷³ With proper training and incentives, anyone can adhere to the rhythms of ritual time, but such mastery does not necessarily sensitize one to the subtleties of lived moments. According to Buber, Hasidism appreciated this distinction, and they renewed ritual life in that light.⁷⁴

In Buber’s Hasidic writings, the analogical correspondence of *Gesetz* and *Gebot* with *Zeit* and *Stunde* relates as well to a dichotomy of atonement (*Buße*) and return (*Umkehr*). In our efforts to clarify Buber’s concept of practice, it is worthwhile to examine this additional binary. It is well known that throughout his dialogical, Biblical, and Hasidic writings alike, Buber stresses the power of *Umkehr*, drawing upon the classical Hebrew term for repentance, תשובה, which means literally a “return” to God. Hasidic sages spoke extensively about this spiritual turning toward divinity, toward *devekut*, toward the Hasidic way of life, and Buber picked up on this. However, he alternates in his tales between translating the term תשובה as *Umkehr* and *Buße*, depending on the context, and we learn much from examining the patterns of this oscillation. One observes readily that the latter term, *Buße*, denotes a formal atonement for one’s sins and thus a sort of ritualistic repentance which may or may not have anything to do with sacramental existence, *Umkehr* implies precisely a re-turning of religious attention toward the here and now. For example, let us consider a tale from the collection *Meqor Hayyim*, wherein Rabbi Hayyim of Sandz laments to his new in-law, Rabbi Eliezer of Dzikov, following the wedding of their

⁷³ Buber, “The Fight,” *TH*, II:317; German: “Kämpf,” *MBW*, XVIII: §1281; Hebrew: “Lohemim,” *OhG*, 465. I have emended Marx’s English translation according to Buber’s original German. Note: The terminological distinction applies as well to Buber’s Hebrew version, where Buber renders the first reference to time as זמן and the second as שעה.

⁷⁴ For other prime examples of Buber’s use of the term *Stunde* as the temporality of divine commandment, see “Verschiedener Brauch” and “Adams Sünde,” in *MBW*, XVIII: §§1192, 1208. The sources for these, respectively, were Rakats, *Siah Sarfei Qodesh*, II:19; Grinwald, *Nifla’ot Hadashot*, 14. For Buber’s source citations, see his unpublished notes on Menachem Mendel von Kozk, s.v. #68, “Kozker und Tschernobiler,” and on Jizchak von Worki, s.v. #23, “Was die Schlange sagte.” Both are accessible in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1.

children, “Look at me, my hair is gray, my beard is white, and I still have not done repentance (תשובה),” and the Dzikover replies, “You’ve had only yourself in mind. Forget yourself, it’s better to have the world in mind!”⁷⁵ In this case, since the Sandzer’s concept of repentance was apparently antithetical to everyday hallowing, Buber translated תשובה here, of course, as *Buße*.⁷⁶

However, let us turn now to a tale in which Buber integrates both terms, *Buße* and *Umkehr*, in a way that exhibits their different meanings for him. In the original sources, both scribed by Grinwald,⁷⁷ Rabbi Simḥah Bunem reflects on the nature of repentance in the following words:

Why is the episode of the [golden] calf forgiven, although we find no mention of them performing repentance (תשובה) for this, whereas the sin of the spies was not forgiven, although it is written that the people mourned very much and hence performed repentance (תשובה)?⁷⁸ Isn’t it [taught] that nothing can stand in the face of repentance (תשובה)?⁷⁹ And [Rabbi Bunem] continued: Because the essence of repentance (תשובה) is when a person knows that he has no hope and that he is like a broken clay vessel—for, in truth, what could repair the damage that he has done—and yet, nevertheless, he wants to serve God from now on according to what He commands. This is repentance (תשובה). And this was the case with the sin of the calf because it was the first sin, and they had no knowledge whatsoever that repentance (תשובה) helps, and thus [their repentance] was

⁷⁵ The original language from Michelson, *Meqor Hayyim*, 24, is as follows:

כאשר השיא את בנו הה"צ ר' מאיר נתן עם בת הה"ק ר' אליעזר ז"ל מדזיקוב ביום השני אחר החתונה נכנס הרה"ק אל הרה"ק מדזיקוב ואמר לו. מחותן. הביטו נא וראו כי שערות ראשי וזקני הלבנינו ועדיין לא עשיתי תשובה. ויאמר לו הה"ק מדזיקוב. איהר האט נאר אייך אין זינען. פערגעסט אין אייך האט בעסער דיא וועלט אין זינען :

⁷⁶ See Buber, “Der Rat,” *MBW*, XVIII: §977; English: “A Piece of Advice,” *TH*, II:214. Buber uses the same term, *Buße*, in his rendition of this tale to open the section “Not to Be Preoccupied with Oneself,” in “The Way of Man, According to the Teachings of Hasidism,” *HMM*, 162; German: *MBW*, 17:245.

⁷⁷ Grinwald, *Nifla'ot Hadashot*, 42. According to his unpublished notes, Buber also consulted another version of the teaching in idem, *Liqqutim Hadashim* (Warsaw, 1899), 93. See Buber’s notes on Simcha Bunam in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #53, “Die Sünde des Goldkalbs.” Strangely, there appear to be two different versions of *Liqqutim Hadashim* that were both published in Warsaw in 1899. In his bibliographical annotations, Ran HaCohen seems to have consulted the versions accessible online through the databases of *HebrewBooks.org* and/or *Otzar HaHochma*, as these have a different pagination than the one Buber recorded in his notes (hence, HaCohen cites this tale as on folio 44b). The version that Buber consulted, however, is accessible online through the website of the National Library of Israel. In any case, the two versions of the tale in *Liqqutim Hadashim* are identical.

⁷⁸ See Exodus 32; Numbers 13-14.

⁷⁹ See Jerusalem Talmud, Pe’ah 5a and Sanhedrin 49b. However, Rabbi Bunem’s phrasing (as mediated by Grinwald)—אין לך דבר שעומד בפני התשובה—is closer to wordings in later citations, such as in Maimonides’s *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhoh Teshuvah, 3:14) or, more significantly, in early Hasidic sources such as *No’am Elimelekh* (Lvov, 1788), parshat Metsora; *Shivhei ha-Besht* (Kopyst, 1815), 3b.

with a whole heart. But with the sin of the spies, they knew that repentance (תשובה) helps, and they figured that they would perform repentance (תשובה) and return to their prior condition. Thus, it did not help them, since they did not do it with a whole heart.⁸⁰

In this teaching, Rabbi Bunem points to two seemingly contradictory stories of sin in the Bible in order to make a larger point about repentance. Ultimately, he claims that repentance is only truly genuine and effective when it is wholehearted, that is, when it comes from a sense of utter brokenness without any expectation of salvation, combined with a strong thirst to serve God through obedience to His commandments. In contrast, attempts to secure divine forgiveness by means of tested techniques will prove futile, for they miss the essence of repentance itself.

In Buber's rendition of this teaching, he stresses the difference between these two acts of repentance, casting them not only as effective and ineffective, but rather, as the title he gives to the tale suggests, as "true and false" types.⁸¹ Buber begins his own version:

One asked Rabbi Bunam: "Why was the sin of the golden calf forgiven, although we do not find in Scripture that the people performed return (*Umkehr*) and made atonement (*Buße*), yet the sin of the scouts was not forgiven, although the people, as we read, mourned very much on account of them.

To the careful reader, the initial question here diverges significantly from Grinwald's versions.

First of all, whereas the original sources state that Bunem himself posed the hermeneutical conundrum that he then answers, Buber places the question in the mouth of an anonymous inquirer. Admittedly, Buber does this quite often in his tales, usually as a literary device to convert homiletical monologues into dialogical exchanges. However, in this particular case, the

⁸⁰ The original Hebrew in *Nifla'ot Hadashot* is as follows:

שמעתי בשם הרה"ק ר' שמחה בונים מפרשיסחא זצ"ל מפני מה מעשה העגל נמחל להם ולא מצינו שעשו תשובה על זה ועל חטא המרגלים כתיב ויתאבל העם מאד א"כ עשו תשובה ואעפ"כ לא נמחל להם הלא אין לך דבר שעומד מפני התשובה ואמר כי עיקר התשובה הוא באם אדם יודע שאין לו תקוה והוא ככלי חרס הנשבר כי באמת מה יועיל לפגם שעשה ואעפ"כ רוצה לעבוד את ה' מכאן ולהבא ועושה כאשר צוה ה' ואז הוא התשובה. וזה גם בחטא העגל כי היה החטא הראשון ולא היו יודעים כלל שיועיל תשובה ע"כ היה בלב שלם. אבל בחטא המרגלים היו יודעים שיועיל תשובה והיו סוברים שעשו תשובה ויחזרו כבראשונה ע"כ לא הועיל להם מחמת שלא עשו בלב שלם.

⁸¹ See Buber, "True and False Turning," *TH*, II:262; German: "Rechte und falsche Umkehr," *MBW*, XVIII: §1104; Hebrew: "*Iqar ha-Teshuvah*," *OhG*, 421-422.

unnamed interlocutor serves a more substantial role: With regard to the golden calf episode, whereas the original source notes simply that “we find no mention of them performing repentance for this (ולא מצינו שעשו תשובה על זה),” Buber’s inquirer says that “we do not find in Scripture that the people performed return and made atonement (*wir in der Schrift nicht finden, daß das Volk die Umkehr vollzogen und Buße getan hätte*).” Thus, whereas Grinwald used only one word, תשובה, in all references to repentance, Buber introduces two separate terms from the beginning of his version. Moreover, in placing them in the mouth of the anonymous inquirer, Buber uses this added character to commit a fundamental error, where he conflates returning (*Umkehr*) and atonement (*Buße*).

Therefore, in Buber’s version, the rest of Rabbi Bunem’s teaching becomes a way to differentiate between *Umkehr* and *Buße* as two distinct modes of religious action. As Buber’s Bunem goes on to clarify the “true” meaning of repentance, then, he uses only the term *Umkehr*—until he addresses the story of the spies once again at the end of the tale. “They knew then what returning (*Umkehr*) can accomplish, and they thought that they would perform atonement (*Buße*) and return immediately to their previous state.” The spies make the same erroneous conflation here as the inquirer did at the beginning of Buber’s tale. Both parties imagine misguidedly that *Umkehr* and *Buße* are synonymous, but this proves to be a fatal oversight. For Buber, those who regard repentance as *Buße*, as a performative process to be completed, will remain broken. *Umkehr*, in contrast, is no ritual.

In this vein, we should highlight one additional alteration that Buber makes: Whereas the original source identified “the essence of repentance” with one who has no hope for salvation and yet “wants to serve God from now on according to what He commands (לעבוד את ה' מכאן ועד עולם),” Buber identifies it with one who “wants to serve God from now on and

does it (*will er von nun an Gott dienen und tut's*).” Thus, while he affirms that *Umkehr* is fundamentally “service,” Buber is unwilling to define its core according to any legalistic obedience. *Umkehr* is a response to commandments, not laws. There is no designated time for its performance, only the omnipresent moment that beckons its fulfillment. As Rabbi Bunem taught elsewhere, according to Buber’s formulation: “The great crime of man is that he can do the return (*Umkehr*) in every moment and does not do it.”⁸²

False Piety

A crucial concept in Buber’s writings, which further elucidates the dichotomies above, as well as Buber’s visions of religious practice more generally, is his notion of false piety (*falsche Frömmigkeit*, or *Frömmertum*). On one hand, false piety occurs when individuals fancy that their various subjective experiences or spiritual states crown them as profoundly religious or pious people, despite the fact that they have dispensed with any real sense of religious responsibility. According to Buber, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, he sees this as a major crisis in his own era, where many secular seekers celebrate religion’s “heir, the ‘spiritual,’ without, of course, allowing it the right to determine life in any way.” Amidst such psychologized and self-absorbed images of religiosity, Buber declares, “No false piety (*Frömmertum*) has ever attained this concentrated degree of inauthenticity.”⁸³ On the other hand, as we shall see, Buber suggests that excessive emphasis on the minutiae of religious law

⁸² Buber, “The Great Crime,” *TH*, II:257; German: “Die große Schuld,” *MBW*, XVIII: §1089. Buber drew this teaching from Berger, *Simhat Yisrael*, 47; Rakats, *Siah Sarfei Qodesh*, I:52. See Buber’s notes on Simcha Bunam in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #39, “Sünde und Umkehr.” The terms in the original sources that Buber translates here as *Umkehr* and *Augenblick* are, respectively, תשובה and רגע.

⁸³ Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM* (Princeton, 2016), 13; German: *MBW*, XVII:312-313.

without due attention toward the theological foundations of divine commandments is also a form of false piety. At bottom, then, we may define Buber's concept of false piety as: entertaining or projecting an image of oneself as religiously adept—either by virtue of inner experiences or traditionalist obedience—while being inattentive and unresponsive to the ongoing commands of God. Or in the language of Buber's rendition of the Kotsker rebbe's aphoristic formulation: "The falsely pious one (*Der Frömmler*)...converts the main issue of piety (*Frömmigkeit*) into a side issue, and a side issue into the main issue."⁸⁴ Both secular spiritualists and traditional legalists alike may marginalize the main issue of divine commandments and maximize marginal issues such as euphoric feelings or halakhic compliance. For Buber, avoiding this problematic pitfall of religious life is terribly consequential. In reference to the "superficial emotionalism" of contemporary spirituality, Buber warned a group of Jewish youth, "Religiosity may possibly penetrate the evaders but never the pretenders."⁸⁵ And with respect to traditionalists who lose sleep over punishable sins, Buber anthologized Rabbi Pinḥas of Korets's statement that while these "are taken lightly" by the divine judge, "false piety (*falsche Frömmigkeit*)—that is punished severely."⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Buber, "Infirmity," *TH*, II:281; German: "Das Gebrechen," *MBW*, XVIII: §1169. Buber draws this source from Rakats, *Siah Sarfei Qodesh*, I:75. See his notes on Menachem Mendel von Kozk, in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #65, "Was ein Frömmler ist." Buber's German play-on-words here between *Frömmler* (hypocrite) and *Frömmner* (pious person) does not appear in the original source, of course, which uses only the Yiddish term פרימער. As we shall see below, however, this term does indeed have negative connotations at times in Hasidic parlance.

⁸⁵ Buber, "Herut: On Youth and Religion," *OJ*, 154; German: *Cheruth: Eine Rede über Jugend und Religion* (Wien: R. Löwit Verlag, 1919), 7.

⁸⁶ Buber, "What Is Punishable," *TH*, I:133; German: "Das Strafwürdige," *MBW*, vol. 18, §211. I have emended Marx's English translation according to Buber's original German. Buber drew this tale from Israel Friedman of Ruzhin, *Pe'er li-Yesharim*, 22b. See Buber's notes on Pinchas von Korez in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #86, "Das Strafwürdige." We should note, given our previous discussion about repentance in Buber's thought, that Buber translates תשובה here as "Buße," inasmuch as Rabbi Pinḥas is differentiating between the trivialities of legal observance and the grave concerns of authentic existence. The original source is as follows:

ס' שצדיק אחד בא אל הרז"ל אחר פטירתו ושאל לו איך נהג אתו אודות הטאת נעורים והשיב שזה אינה חמור ביותר שהרהר בתשובה ע"ז רק על חסידות של שקר אויף פאלשין חסיד מענישין שם מאד.

To further illuminate Buber's concept of false piety, let us to turn to his engagement with a *mayse* about Rabbi Ḥayyim Me'ir Yehi'el Shapiro, also known as the Seraph of Mogelnits's critique of those who strive to be *frum* (פרום, or ostentatiously "pious," a Yiddish term related to the German *fromm*). Buber drew the tale from Israel Bromberg's collection *Toledot ha-Nifla'ot*,⁸⁷ and the original is as follows:

During the reading of the scroll [of Esther on Purim], which the Seraph himself read, a devout and God-fearing yeshiva student stood next to him, looking at his scroll. After the reading, the yeshiva student said, "I fear that I might not have heard well and thus skipped a word that I did not hear." The Seraph said, "This is *frum*. One who is *frum* just wants to comply with the commandment, so he fears for example that he did not complete the eighteen benedictions. But the essential intention is to fulfill the will of God, so his will yearns for the will of God that is within the commandment, and man must cleave so much to the will of God within the commandment that he will be able to err (שישגה) a bit sometimes in the content of the commandment. As it is written: *In His love, you will always err* (באהבתו תשגה תמיד)."

The prooftext that the Seraph cites here is Proverbs 5:19, and in that context it is actually an exhortation to be satisfied with one's own wife: "Let her be like the loving doe and graceful roe; let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and be ravished always in her love (באהבתה תשגה תמיד)." The Seraph, according to the extant source, changed the gender of the biblical phrase from "her love" to "his love (באהבתו)," referring of course to God's love, and the Seraph reads תשגה not so much as "be ravished," but as "err," make mistakes.⁸⁸ The *frum* yeshiva student is so anxious that he will transgress the law in some way that he misses the essence of the commandment. If he graduated from fastidious fear of God to intoxicated love of God, then he would inevitably mess up sometimes with legal technicalities, and this would in fact signal the strength of his attunement to the divine will.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Israel Moshe ben Yehudah Bromberg, *Toledot ha-Nifla'ot* (Warsaw: 1899), 8.

⁸⁸ Rendering תשגה as "err" in this way has a prehistory in Jewish mysticism. See, *inter alia*, Zohar 3:85b; Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt, *Ohev Yisrael* (Zhitomir, 1863), parshat Tetsaveh, p. 105.

⁸⁹ On antinomian implications of unity with the divine will in Hasidism, see Magid, *Hasidism on the Margins*, passim. The notion that the divine will may not correspond simply to the Halakhah emerged

One can imagine why Buber was attracted to this *mayse*, given his own conviction that zealous legalism can thwart genuine service. However, in turning now to Buber's rendition,⁹⁰ we can see nonetheless how he fashioned Bromberg's source in his own image, granting us even clearer glimpses into his personal views on praxis and especially false piety. First of all, whereas in the original text the Seraph launches immediately—in front of everyone there, it seems—into his critique of *frumkeit*, Buber adds that the Seraph turned “afterwards to his confidant (*danach zu seinen Vertrauten*)” to share his thoughts. With this change, Buber's Seraph does not rebuke the anxious yeshiva *bokher*, let alone embarrass him in front of the crowd. For Buber, such callous conduct would contradict the very message of this *mayse*, namely that genuine religious praxis reflects above all a sort of dialogical attunement in the world. It follows, then, that Buber restores the biblical proof-text to its original femininity: “In your love of her (*zu ihr*) you will always err.” Buber thus accentuates the relational textures of the text, refusing to reduce human love to a mere symbol of divine love, refusing to regard those earthly commitments and commands as separable from the transcendent will of God.

In this same spirit, where Bromberg's Seraph declared that “the essential intention (עיקר הכונה) is to fulfill the will of God, so his will yearns for the will of God that is within the commandment, and man must cleave so much to the will of God within the commandment that he will be able to err (שישגה) a bit sometimes in the content of the commandment,” Buber's Seraph formulates the matter differently: “One whose soul is directed toward fulfilling the will of God within the commandment, and cleaves wholly to God's will, may miss something from the

among the medieval Hasidei Ashkenaz, although in that context it was about *expanding* the domain of Law in new, even more stringent and zealous ways. See Haym Soloveitchik, “Three Themes in the *Sefer Hasidim*,” *AJS Review* 1 (1976): 311-358. For Buber, however—and for the Seraph as well, it seems—attachment to the will of God may lead to a *loosening* of the normative force of commandments.

⁹⁰ See Buber, “Against Pious Thoughts,” *TH*, II:180-181; German: “Gegen die Frömmeler,” *MBW*, XVIII:180.

commandments, but it does not bother him.” Thus, first of all, Buber dispenses with the language of העיקר, or what is “essential,” for while Buber would certainly agree that it is preferable for halakhic practitioners to align themselves with the divine will within the commandments, such normative action is certainly not necessary. Rather, what is “essential” to Buber is receptivity and responsibility before whatever is happening—in this case, the spiritually and socially vibrant festival of Purim. For Buber, to imagine otherwise would be to conflate commandment and law, and to fall thereby into the trap of false piety. Indeed, where Bromberg’s Seraph derided the man for being *frum*, Buber could have simply called him a *Frömmer* (which is, in fact, the term he used in his personal notes for this tale!⁹¹), but he chose instead to label him a *Frömmeler*, employing his key term for false piety.

Buber went so far as to entitle this entire tale, “Against the *Frömmeler*,” a blaring warning to his readers. The message here, however, is not that one should simply avoid ritual practices or break traditional laws as a matter of principle. Such clear-cut paradigms remain within the confines of false piety. Indeed, antinomianism is just another “-ism,” chained to the illusion that a particular set of actions (or inactions) should dictate the shapes of religious existence, which thus still threatens to distract one from the dynamism of the here and now, where evanescent commands arise eternally. For Buber, the opposite of legalism is not antinomianism, but rather sacramental existence, where every moment is a site of practice, the details of which emerge dialogically within the moment itself.

The Kavanot in Hasidism, from the Besht to Buber

⁹¹ In his unpublished notes on Chajim Meir Jechiel von Mogielnica, Buber entitled this tale “Gegen einen ‘Frommer’.” See in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v., #13.

There was another illuminating alteration that Buber made in the tale above, which we did not mention. Confronting Bromberg's phrase "essential intention (עיקר הכונה)," Buber not only omitted the word "essence," he also tinkered with the second term, "intention (כונה, *kavanah*)." In his reworded reference to "one who directs (*gerichtet*) his soul to the will of God," Buber preserves the etymology of *kavanah*—literally to aim or "direct"—yet avoids any overt use of the term.⁹² Why? After all, in the original source, the term *kavanah* seems to signify a rather Buberian focus on the inner meaning or divine source of Jewish practices, as opposed to just their outer trappings or codified elements.

Particularly in his later writings, Buber sought to cast Hasidism as a decisive break from medieval Kabbalah, and in this effort, he underscored Hasidic innovations in the realm of *kavanot*. In sixteenth-century Tsfat, Lurianic Kabbalists had developed highly elaborate systems of *kavanot* that were thought to endow Jewish practices with immense theurgical potencies. Given the great complexity and quantity of these intentions, the performance of rituals—particularly prayer—required intense focus and extensive training. One groundbreaking move of early Hasidism was its transformation of these elements. And yet, of course, the language of *kavanot* lingered strongly in the Hasidic lexicon. Thus, in his attempt to accentuate the chasm between Kabbalah and Hasidism, Buber often omitted or otherwise altered the term in his hermeneutical engagement with Hasidic sources, reflecting his preference for spontaneous religious action and unconditioned consciousness over anything that struck him as fixed or pre-

⁹² Similarly, in his Hebrew rendition, Buber refers here simply to "one who directs (שמכוון) his soul." Buber, "Ke-neged Qafdanut ha-Mithasdim," *OhG*, 362-363. Cf. Buber, "Die ursprüngliche Bedeutung," *MBW*, XVIII: §875; idem, "Geleitwort [zu 'Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge'," in *MBW*, XVII:67. In general, when Buber refers specifically to the Kabbalistic concept of *kavanah*, he tends to either render the term as *Intention* or simply transliterate it as *Kawwana*.

scribed.⁹³ Moreover, even in relation to those tales and teachings where Hasidic sages did indeed push back against Lurianic kavanot, we can nonetheless perceive Buber's own innovations. As we shall now see, this is a prime case study for how Buber identified radical shifts in Hasidism and yet radicalized them even further through his own hermeneutical frames.

The evolution of perspectives on the kavanot of prayer in Hasidism reflects, broadly speaking, a gradual shift from elaborate metaphysical systems toward increasingly subjective, personal modes of mystical practice. We might view this trend, in its broad strokes, as a “downward” trajectory (in the Neo-Platonic sense) from supernal mysteries toward more psychological and even sensory aspects of practice. “The main movement in the Hasidic theory of prayer is a turning from mental, interiorized performance to a much simpler and vocally oriented version of prayer,” Idel suggests, “one that minimalizes the mental quality of prayer and restores the glory of the prayer as production of sounds.”⁹⁴ Weiss went so far as to surmise that as late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mystics became less inclined to catalog content behind the veil of existence, as it were, their approaches to prayer became more grounded: “With the fading of the ‘gnostic’ aspect of the Sefirotic universe from the mind and heart of the Cabbalist, the original *Kavvanoth* became meaningless and their disintegration was inevitable.”⁹⁵ However, we should not overlook the fact that such heightened emphases on embodied prayer were still directed heavily toward metaphysical transcendence. Indeed, early Hasidic sages continued to

⁹³ In addition to the tale above, see also, for example, the concluding line of his “Verschiedener Brauch” (*MBW*, XVIII: §1192), where Buber changed the original locution in Rakats’s *Siaḥ Sarfei Qodesh* (II:19), “with intention (בכוונה),” to “as the hour demands (*wie’s die Stunde erheischt*).” See also, *inter alia*, Buber’s “Schlecht und recht” (*MBW*, XVIII: §864) compared to Moshe of Kobrin’s *Amarot Tehorot*, 29; and “Gegen die Kasteiung” (*MBW*, XVIII: §30) compared to Baruch of Mezhbizh’s *Bustina de-Nehora ha-Shalem*, 64.

⁹⁴ Idel, *Hasidism*, 147.

⁹⁵ Weiss, “The Kavvanoth of Prayer in Early Hasidism,” *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism*, 108.

portray the spoken words themselves as having great theurgical and even magical potency, if performed with proper kavanah or mystical awareness. It was merely the method that changed. Indeed, according to Idel, the transformation of kavanot in Hasidism was effectively “a return from prayer to spells.”⁹⁶

In his own portrayals of these aspects of Hasidism, however, Buber further extended that downward trajectory from sefirotic subtleties toward flushness with physical practice. In our efforts to clarify his own visions of praxis, it is instructive to see how he did so. Let us turn first to a tale about the Besht, which Buber drew from Kleinmann’s *‘Or Yesharim*.⁹⁷ The original *mayse* is as follows:

Once the Besht commanded Rabbi Ze’ev [Volf] Kitses to study the kavanot for the order of the shofar blasts, so that he would announce before him the order of the blasts on Rosh Hashanah. He studied the kavanot and wrote them down on papers so that he could look at them while announcing the order. And he put them in his bosom, but [unbeknownst to him] the Besht made him drop them. When he came to announce the order of the shofar blasts, he started searching for them. Where? Where? Nowhere. He did not know the kavanot, which distressed him and pained him very much. And from the depths of his broken heart, he cried bitterly the simple order of the shofar blasts, without any kavanot. Afterwards, the Besht said to him, “Behold, in the palace of the king there are many rooms and halls, and different keys for every door. But an axe is equivalent to all of the keys, for one can open with it all of the locks of all the doors. So, too, with the kavanot: They are keys to every particular kavanah-gate, but a broken heart is equivalent to them all. When a person breaks his heart before God, he can truly open all the gates in the halls of the king, the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.”⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Idel, *Hasidism*, 147.

⁹⁷ Kleinmann, *‘Or Yesharim*, 104-105. See Buber’s notes on the Baalschem in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #254, “Er hiesst Wolf Kizes Kawwanot aufschreiben.”

⁹⁸ The original language of *‘Or Yesharim* reads:

פ"א צוה הבעש"ט ז"ל להרב הר"י זאב קוצעס ז"ל שילמוד הכוונות מסדור התקיעות, שיהיה הוא המסדר תקיעות בר"ה לפניו, וילמוד את הכוונות ויכתבם על נייר להביט בתוכם בעת הסדור, וישמם בחיקו, והבעש"ט ז"ל צדד שישמם, ובבואו לסדר התקיעות, והתחיל לחפשם אנה ואנה ואינם, ולא ידע מה לכוון, וירע לו מאד, ויתמרמר מאד, ויבך בכי תמרורים מעמקא דלבא בלב נשבר, וסדר התקיעות פשוט בלי שום כוונות, ואח"כ אמר לו הבעש"ט הנה בהיכל המלך נמצאו חדרים והיכלות הרבה, ומפתחות שונות בכל פתח ופתח, אך הכולל מכל המפתחות הוא הגרון, אשר אתו באפשרי לפתוח כל המנעלים מהפתחים כולם, כן הכוונות המה מפתחות לכל שער כוונה אחרת, והכולל הוא לב נשבר, כאשר ישבר אדם לבו לפני השי"ת באמת יכול לכנוס בכל השערים בהיכלות של המלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה.

This parable of the single “axe” or kavanah that substitutes for the many “keys” or kavanot derives, in fact, from the Besht’s most influential student, the Maggid of Mezritch, and it was then attributed retroactively to the Besht himself.⁹⁹ The earliest extant versions vary considerably, but they share the central point that a broken heart can break through barriers that are otherwise penetrable only through proper kavanot. It is important to note that in those early versions, and in that of Kleinmann, the axe is never portrayed as superior. In fact, the Maggid evidently compared the one who breaks locks to a “thief”¹⁰⁰ and, moreover, he suggested that the axe method reflects a sorry state of decline, for whereas the sages of yore employed “the appropriate kavanah for everything, now we do not have any kavanah, only the broken heart.”¹⁰¹ In Kleinmann’s *mayse* above, the Besht himself speaks this parable to his student in order to convey consolingly that his simple brokenheartedness is just as effective as any proper performance of kavanot.

For Buber, however, the shift from refined kavanot to raw kavanah in Hasidic prayer was far more significant than a mere substitution, let alone a degradation—it was revolutionary renewal. In his own version, then, Buber alters the message of this *mayse*.¹⁰² We see this most conspicuously at the end. Whereas Kleinmann’s Besht declared that “an axe is equivalent to all of the keys (הכולל מכל המפתחות הוא הגרזן)” and “a broken heart is equivalent (והכולל הוא לב נשבר)” as well, Buber’s Besht makes a far bolder statement: “the axe is stronger than all of them (*das Beil ist stärker als sie alle*; הזק מכל אלה), and no bolt can withstand it.” And where Kleinmann’s

⁹⁹ See Weiss, “The Kavvanot of Prayer in Early Hasidism,” *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism*, 106.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, *Liqqutim Yeqarim* (Lvov, 1792), 37b; Aaron of Apta, *Keter Shem Tov* (Zolkiew, 1794), 27b; Dov Ber of Mezritch, *Or ha-Emet* (Zhitomir, 1900) 14a.

¹⁰¹ Dov Ber of Mezritch, *Or ha-Emet*, 14a.

¹⁰² Buber, “The Axe,” *TH*, I:64; German: “Das Beil,” *MBW*, XVIII: §48; Hebrew: “*Ha-Garzan*,” *OhG*, 83.

Besht reassures his student, “When a person breaks his heart before God, he can truly open all the gates in the halls of the king,” Buber’s Besht cries out, “What are all the kavanot compared to one really grieving heart!” Thus, in contrast to the original source’s affirmation that the spontaneous kavanah of brokenheartedness is strong enough to stand in for all the technical kavanot, Buber suggests that the single kavanah is superior to the former system!¹⁰³

But why, exactly, does Buber’s Besht regard Lurianic kavanot as inferior? This becomes clear through two other hermeneutical alterations in Buber’s version of the *mayse*. First, we get a hint where Buber renders the Besht’s reference to the “different keys (מפתחות שונות)” that open every door as the “elaborate keys (*kunstvolle Schlüssel*).” This emphasis on the highly technical nature of the kavanot begins already to pave the way toward Buber’s subversive ending. Indeed, throughout his tales, Buber uses terms like *kunstvolle* and *kunstreiche* to denote a sort of intellectual or aesthetic finesse that prevents genuine religiosity.¹⁰⁴ Second, we gain even more insight into why Buber cast the kavanot as inferior through an alteration near the very beginning of the tale: Whereas the original source explains that Volf Kitses wrote down the kavanot in order to “look at them while announcing the order (להביט בתוכם בעת הסדור),” Buber indicates that he wrote them down “for greater security (*um sicherzugehn*).” This change, in particular, should

¹⁰³ Buber made a similar change in another key tale, which he drew from Rakats’s *Siah Sarfei Qodesh* (IV:46) and rendered as “Blas!” (*MBW*, XVIII: §1070). In the original source, we are told that Rabbi Bunem instructed the shofar blower to skip kavanot because—according to a certain reading of BT Rosh Hashanah 16a—there are no particular kavanot for shofar blasts beyond the one essential kavanah to fulfill the commandment itself. Buber omits this ending, so Bunem’s demand to skip kavanot appears simply as Bunem’s own personal impatience with such those obstructive technicalities.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Buber’s tales “Der Kantor des Baalschemtow,” “Der Narr und der Kluge,” and “Der Zaddik und die Menschen,” in *MBW*, XVIII: §§46, 1085, 634. See also Buber’s comment already in *Daniel* (1913): “What the most learned and ingenious (*kundigste und kunstreichste*) combination of concepts denies, the humble and faithful beholding (*Erschauen, Erfassen, Erkennen*), grasping, knowing of any situation bestows.” Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 27; German: *Ereignisse und Begegnungen*, 29. For non-German speakers, it is also worth pointing out that the related term *künstliche* means artificial, synthetic, or forced.

give us pause, as the path from security (*Sicherheit*) to insecurity (*Unsicherheit*) is a motif throughout Buber's philosophical and Hasidic writings for the surrender of control that accompanies dialogical encounter. Indeed, according to his view, the Hasidic break from Kabbalah occurred precisely in those terms:

The whole systematic structure of the Kabbala is determined by the principle of a security (*Sicherheit*) that almost never pauses, almost never trembles, almost never prostrates itself. In contrast, it is precisely in pausing, in letting itself be shaken, in deep knowledge of the frailty of all informational knowledge and the incongruence of all possessed truth, in the "holy insecurity (*heiligen Unsicherheit*)," that Hasidic piety has its true life.¹⁰⁵

For Buber, the abandonment of Kabbalistic kavanot is not merely symptomatic of a new metaphysics or a new desire to convert esoteric techniques into popular practice. It is, rather, a courageous dropping of inner defenses, a willingness to face the wildness of ever-unprecedented presence. To let go of *kunstvolle* kavanot is to let oneself be sacredly insecure. "What matters is not what can be learned," Buber writes with regard to this Hasidic innovation, "what matters is giving oneself to the unknown."¹⁰⁶

We are now in a better position to grasp Buber's place in the downward trajectory from the supernal to the sensory, from Lurianic kavanot through various phases of Hasidic revision. In truth, despite legendary claims to the contrary, it is likely that the Besht himself preserved earlier kavanot traditions, thus continuing to gaze beyond the letters of liturgy into sefirotic depths, and evidently praying from a Lurianic siddur.¹⁰⁷ But after the Besht, according to Weiss's scholarly

¹⁰⁵ Buber, "Symbolic and Sacramental Existence," *OMH*, 179; German: *MBW*, XVII:175. In context, this statement pertains specifically to the Hasidic transformation of Kabbalistic kavanot.

¹⁰⁶ Buber, "Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement," *OMH*, 137. Buber comments here on a well-known teaching of Dov Ber of Mezritch. See *Tsava 'at ha-RIBaSH* (Zolkiew, 1793), 24; *Liqqutim Yeqarim* (Lvov, 1792), 17b; *Pillar of Prayer* ('*Amud ha-Tefilah*), ed. Menachem Kallus (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), 16. Cf. Weiss, "The Kavvanoth of Prayer in Early Hasidism," *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism*, 106-107; Idel, *Hasidism*, 152.

¹⁰⁷ In fact, Buber himself did not shy away in his pre-dialogical writings on Hasidism from highlighting that the Besht prayed with "the great prayerbook of Master Luria"! See Buber, "The Prayer-Book," *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 92; German: "Das Gebetbuch," *Die Legende des Baalschem* (Frankfurt a.M.:

account, Hasidic masters transformed the practice in ways that grounded kavanot increasingly in more concrete, personal modes. The Maggid of Mezritch (1704-1772) affirmed the potency of a single kavanah, although it seems that this remained little more than “a vague emotional state of the worshiper.”¹⁰⁸ Subsequent sages, such as Ze’ev Volf of Zhitomir (d. 1800) and an anonymous disciple of Elimelekh of Lizhensk, portrayed kavanot somewhat more vividly as emotional experiences anchored to the actual words of prayer—“The worshiper may no longer indulge in emotional excesses independent of the text on his lips,” as Weiss put it.¹⁰⁹ And Meshulam Fayvush of Zbarezh (1742-1794) characterized kavanah as a contemplative focus upon the meaning of liturgical language.¹¹⁰ Kalonymos Kalman Epstein of Krakow (1754-1823) then proceeded to cast *kavanah* in prayer as inseparable from the very breaths of liturgical speech.¹¹¹ These are, of course, only snapshots from the winding streams of early Hasidic thought, but they map a general direction. And we might now extend this view with the additional snapshots of Kleinmann’s *mayse* (1924) and Buber’s reworking of it (1946) from our discussion above, which draw Hasidic conceptions of kavanah even lower, toward levels of existence even more solid than emotion, text, or breath.

Rütten und Loening, 1908), 102. In his later Hasidic writings, Buber makes no mention of the Besht’s use of a Lurianic prayerbook. Instead, he showcases a tale in which Rabbi Pinchas of Korets’s rejection of that very prayerbook, where he insists to his disciples that if you “put all the strength and purposefulness of your thinking into the kavanot of the holy names, and the combinations of the letters,” then you “have deviated from the essential: to make your hearts whole and dedicate them to God.” Buber, “The Prayerbook,” *TH*, I:125; German: “Das Gebetbuch,” *MBW*, XVIII: §190. Buber drew this tale from Jacob Margoliot, *Qevutsat Ya’aqov* (Przemysl, 1897), 46b. See Buber’s notes on Pinchas of Korez in Martin Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 04 1, s.v. #27, “Der Siddur des Ari.” On the Besht’s approach to kavanot and how it differed from later portrayals, see Weiss, “The Kavvanoth of Prayer in Early Hasidism,” *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism*, 99-109.

¹⁰⁸ Weiss, “The Kavvanoth of Prayer in Early Hasidism,” *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism*, 112.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 111-116.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

“With the floor and with the bench.” This was the single line about prayer that Buber cited more than any other in his Hasidic writings.¹¹² It was Rabbi Shneur Zalman’s shockingly literal response to the question, “With what do you pray?,” according to Heilman’s 1902 biography.¹¹³ The question seemed to invite an answer in the form of a profound verse or image that elevates one’s prayer—an inner point of focus, a *kavanah* that endows words with wings. But Shneur Zalman surprises, prompting us to sense the surfaces beneath our bodies. And Buber comments: “This is no metaphor; the word ‘with’ is here meant quite directly: in praying the rabbi joins himself to the floor on which he stands and the bench on which he sits.” And while Buber acknowledges that this involves an effort to “elevate” these materials through prayer, he insists that “this ‘elevation’ is by no means to be understood as removing the worldly character of things or spiritualizing the world.”¹¹⁴ To pray is to be flush with presence. With the following words, Buber concluded his essay on “sacramental existence” in Hasidism:

“With the floor and with the bench” shall one pray; they want to come to us, everything wants to come to us, everything wants to come to God through us. What concern of ours, if they exist, are the upper worlds! Our concern is “in this lower world, the world of corporeality, to let the hidden life of God shine forth.”¹¹⁵

Conclusion

We began this chapter with two *mayses* about Buber’s own approach to religious practice. And while these shed some light, they also demonstrated the indispensability of

¹¹² See Buber, “The Beginnings,” *OMH*, 52; “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” *OMH*, 181; “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM*, 9-10. Buber also included this in all editions of his *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge*, as well as later more comprehensive anthologies. See *MBW*, XVIII: §509.

¹¹³ Hayyim Meir Heilman, *Beit Rabbi* (Berdychiv: 1902), 4-5.

¹¹⁴ Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM*, 10.

¹¹⁵ Buber, “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” *OMH*, 181; German: *MBW*, XVII:177. In earlier versions of this essay, there was an additional paragraph after this, but Buber omitted it in the final two versions that he published, as evidenced in Friedman’s English translation. See *MBW*, XVII: 453.

interpretation. In Buber's acts of halakhic disobedience, some onlookers may see hallowing while others smell hypocrisy. In this respect, the combination of narrative and interpretation that constitute storytelling can convey at least as much about the storytellers themselves as about the related events. And given all the rich imagery of religious life in Hasidic literature, the *mayses* of that movement are especially revealing about the storytellers' perspectives on practice. It was with these matters in mind that we turned to Buber's tales. His hermeneutical reformulations of Hasidic sources offer enormous windows into his own visions of praxis.

Religious anarchism, metanomianism—such terminological classifications of Buber's practice may be accurate, but they are helpful only to a limited degree. Indeed, a grave challenge that these very terms point to is an essential resistance to any clear-cut programs, a rejection of fixed forms or ideal types of practice. Hence, Buber's response when Maurice Friedman pressed him on the details of his position on ritual:

The main difficulty is that I cannot see such a question independently from personal existence. For one, I know that I try to do what I experience [that] I am ordered to do; but how can I make this into a general rule about ritual being right or wrong and so on? I open my heart to the Law to such an extent that if I feel a commandment being addressed to me, I feel myself bound to do it as far as I am addressed—for instance, I cannot live on Sabbath as on other days. My spiritual and physical attitude is changed, but I have no impulse at all to observe the minutiae of the *halakhah* about what work is allowed and what not. At certain moments, some of them rather regular, some others just occurring, I am in need of prayer and then I pray, alone of course, and say what I want to say, sometimes without words at all, and sometimes a remembered verse helps me in an extraordinary situation; but there have been days when I felt myself compelled to enter into the prayer of a community, and so I did it. This is my way of life, and one may call it religious anarchy if he likes. Now how could I make it into a general rule, valid for instance for you! I cannot say anything but: Put yourself in relation as you can and when you can; do your best to persevere in relation, and do not be afraid!¹¹⁶

In this light, the impossibility of reducing Buber's concept of practice to clear-cut categories is not simply indicative of a flimsy concept of practice; rather, it is indicative of a solid principle

¹¹⁶ Martin Buber letter to Maurice Friedman from March 27, 1954, in *Letters of Martin Buber*, 576-577; German: *MBB*, III:368.

thereof. It is significant that Buber concludes this letter with an allusion to Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav's teaching about living courageously on the "narrow bridge" of existence.¹¹⁷ Indeed, Buber portrays the early generations of Hasidism as a pinnacle of practice in Judaism. Thus, in turning to Buber's narrative representations of those lives, we learn a great deal. By tracing his principle of selection, hermeneutical alterations, and anthological ordering, our intertextual readings of his tales divulge more than any discursive summary possibly could.

In the process, we clarified Buber's notion of sacramental existence, whose foundational principle is not only that every moment is religiously consequential, but that the spiritual significance of those moments lies primarily in the quality of relational attention that one devotes to them. For instance, those who regard other people as disruptive of spiritual practice are totally unclear on the concept. In fact, for Buber, the depth of one's interpersonal relations may be the most important indicator of the health of one's religious practice—certainly more so than any levels of inner emotion or legal obedience. For Buber, of course, rituals are not necessarily antithetical to pansacramental awareness, but excessive preoccupation with them can indeed distract one from the fact that presence itself, here and now, is the ultimate source and site of religious normativity. With this in mind, we clarified Buber's dichotomy of law (*Gesetz*) and command (*Gebot*), and showed as well how that corresponded analogically to his distinctions between measurable time (*Zeit*) and immeasurable moment (*Stunde*), along with ritualized repentance (*Buße*) and wholehearted return (*Umkehr*). We demonstrated also how Buber's concept of "false piety" (*Frömmertum*) offers a negative frame that helps to identify the positive contours of his vision of praxis. According to Buber, we stumble into false piety when we entertain images of ourselves as religiously upright—by virtue of, say, inner experiences or ritual

¹¹⁷ Nahman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei Moharan*, II:48.

proficiency—while being inattentive and unresponsive to the divine commands issuing forth anew at every hour. For Buber, both secular spiritualists and traditional legalists alike can stumble into this pitfall.

Finally, in considering Buber’s representations of kavanah in Hasidism, we gained an even more lucid sense of how he envisions moments of religious practice. Departing from the elaborate permutations of letters and names in Lurianic kavanot, Hasidic sages came to affirm that certain emotional or psychological states could be no less effective for the metaphysical potency of prayer. However, through close readings of Buber’s tales, we saw how he pulled the Hasidic innovation to even more radical degree. For Buber, proper kavanah is no more and no less than a unification of spiritual consciousness and physical practice, awareness and action, mind and body. When the mental eye is flush with material happening, so that the very floor and bench beneath the person are holy grounds for whatever one is currently called to do—then one is truly *observant* in the strongest sense of that word. Then one stands in sacramental existence.

Buber’s refusal to equate religious practice with Halakhah has led some critics to accuse him of severing the bond between law and spirit. For example, when asked in an interview at the University of Notre Dame about Buber’s perspective on “organized religion,” Abraham Joshua Heschel responded:

We must neither disparage the body nor sacrifice the spirit. The body is the discipline, the pattern, the law; the spirit is inner devotion, spontaneity, freedom. The body without the spirit is a corpse; the spirit without the body is a ghost. Thus, a *mitzvah* is both a discipline and an inspiration, an act of obedience and an experience of joy, a yoke and a prerogative. Our task is to learn how to maintain a harmony between the demands of *halacha* and the spirit of *agada*.

The weakness of Buber’s conception is in his stressing one aspect to the exclusion of the other.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Heschel, “Interview at Notre Dame,” in *Moral Grandeur*, 385. Steven T. Katz also implies that Buber’s departure from traditional Jewish ritual is rooted in what Katz considers to be the decidedly disembodied nature of Buber’s thought. Indeed, just after suggesting that Buber’s concept of I-Thou relation is so “ghostlike” that it is hard to understand how one would even distinguish between one’s own

I trust that we are now in a position to see such claims as reductionist, at best. To be sure, they overlook the fact that bodily-spiritual unity lay at the very heart of Buber's philosophical and religious writings for the last four decades of his life. But even more importantly, they fail to acknowledge Buber's deep concern with matters of religious practice. It is not law and spirit that Buber sought to extricate from one another, but law and commandment. And it was precisely for the sake of praxis that he worked to differentiate between those elements. He was deeply critical of traditionalists and secularists alike who equated law and commandment and therefore imagined that theological questions and practical concerns should occupy separate domains. "We reject this dialectic completely," Buber declared. "In the image of man to which we aspire, conviction and volition, personality and performance, are one and indivisible."¹¹⁹ If one's understanding of religious practice is limited to that of the *Shulḥan 'Arukh*, then yes, Buber had nothing legitimate to teach in that realm—then we can shake our heads and say that he entertained foolish dichotomies of aggadah and halakhah, spirit and law. However, if we expand our definition of religious practice to include how one attempts to relate to God in all moments of life, then Buber has much to say. And I hope that the methods and findings in this chapter have helped him to be heard.

wife and one's neighbor's husband, Katz highlights the fact that "Buber does not set much store by prayer or ritual while traditional Judaism does, and again, the biblical God is understood by the tradition primarily as a lawgiver, while for Buber this is something he cannot be." Katz, *Historicism, the Holocaust, and Zionism*, 31. For a very recent claim about Buber's "juxtaposition of law and spirit," see Ariel Mayse and Maoz Kahana, "Hasidic Halakhah: Reappraising the Interface of Spirit and Law," *AJS Review* (2017): 378-379.

¹¹⁹ Buber, "Herut," *OJ*, 166.

CONCLUSION

A *mayse*, as told by Schalom Ben-Chorin, about Buber's final days in Germany before escaping to Palestine:

Moving from that spacious, cultivated house on Bergstraße in Heppenheim posed a not so simple technical problem, as Buber presided over an expansive library of more than 20,000 volumes, which now had to be packed carefully into boxes. The authorities of the Third Reich mistrustfully sent a Gestapo officer to supervise the packing of the library (and the rest of the household).

Buber described vividly how this officer, clearly not one of the malicious ones, stood idly and bored in the book-chaos, and finally turned to the head of the household with a request to pick out a volume for him to read. Buber told the uninvited guest to select any book, whereupon the Gestapo man responded: "Herr Professor, I would very much like to read one of your works."

Buber hesitated a bit, as it was not entirely clear to him which of his books would be suitable now for the Gestapo, and finally he handed to this officer of the Secret State Police the thin-paper edition of the *Chassidischen Bücher*.¹ Within three days, the fascinated Nazi read through the more than 700-page work in its entirety, and what happened now was least expected. The Nazi police officer asked Buber: "May I keep this book as a souvenir?" and when Buber said yes to this, the Gestapo man requested a personal dedication.

When Martin Buber narrated this to me, he added with laughter: "I could not very well write: 'My dear Gestapo man –.'" Buber solved the dilemma by simply signing the volume.²

One question that remains unanswered in this surreal and striking story is, why did Buber choose to hand over *Die chassidischen Bücher*? We are told that he made this decision only after some deliberation, but nothing more. Buber had published this volume a decade earlier in 1927, and it contained all of his Hasidic anthologies to date—*Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (1906), *Die Legende des Baalschem* (1908), *Der Grosse Maggid und seine Nachfolge* (1922), and *Das*

¹ Ben-Chorin refers here to Martin Buber's *Die chassidischen Bücher* (Berlin: Schocken, 1927). The description of this as a "thin-paper edition (*Dünndruckausgabe*)" serves to emphasize the sheer length of the book, as its 717 pages required very lightweight paper, such as that used for Bibles and dictionaries.

² Schalom Ben-Chorin, *Zwiesprache mit Martin Buber: Ein Erinnerungsbuch* (Munich: List Verlag, 1966), 29-30.

verborgene Licht (1924)—along with a “Geleitwort zur Gesamtausgabe” (reprinted years later as the essay “Spinoza, Sabbatai Zwi und der Baalschem”) and his autobiographical essay “Mein Weg zum Chassidismus.” Why did Buber choose this book to give to the Nazi, when he had so many other options? Why Hasidic tales?

To be sure, there are fairly banal answers we could give. For example, since it would take Buber many days to pack up his library, perhaps he chose an especially long book in order to occupy the officer for as long as possible. Or maybe Buber sensed that this Nazi was not terribly educated, and he reasoned that his Hasidic tales would be more accessible than, say, his philosophical writings. However, Buber’s choice may also reflect a certain political calculation that he made in the presence of this Nazi occupying his home. On one hand, perhaps Buber regarded his Hasidic tales as a safe option. One could see them as so-called “spiritual” writings, lacking the more overtly political thrust of, say, his *Königtum Gottes* (1932), let alone his Zionist writings in *Reden über das Judentum* (1923) and *Kampf um Israel* (1933). Indeed, for all four of his Hasidic anthologies (and especially the earliest two), which were included in *Die chassidischen Bücher*, Buber had selected and rendered sources specifically for a broad and diverse German-speaking readership. On the other hand, however, we know that Buber rejected such bifurcations of spirituality and politics, and perhaps he selected this book for the Gestapo officer because it had a certain subversive quality. Indeed, every one of the hundreds of tales in *Die chassidischen Bücher* featured in glowing and seemingly unapologetic terms the most foreign and denigrated of all Jews, from a German perspective.³ We must remember that for generations of Europeans, the opposition between “western” assimilated and “eastern” traditional

³ On perceptions of Buber’s Hasidic writings “as serving to correct the negative image of the Jew,” see Mendes-Flohr, “Fin-de-Siècle Orientalism,” in *Divided Passions*, 97ff.

Jews was a matter of grave sociopolitical significance. The very question of Jewish emancipation teetered on this distinction, as parties debated whether Jews were—or could ever be—worthy of citizenship. For many Jews and non-Jews alike, Hasidim looked like the very antithesis of “Enlightenment,” undermining all claims that Jews could be groomed for modernity. Those disheveled mystics back east embodied everything that western, assimilated Jews had sought to jettison for generations. Even Buber’s father Carl, a liberal Jew with decidedly bourgeois sensibilities, had implored Buber just before the release of his first Hasidic book to “free” himself from those mystical matters, “since they can only have a mind-destroying and evil influence” and are so “useless to yourself and the world.”⁴ Thus, just as Buber’s Hasidic writings had always represented a resistance to such apologetic postures, perhaps it was now especially audacious for him to hand this tome *Die chassidischen Bücher* to the Gestapo officer. Without shame or embarrassment, Buber volunteered this blatant display of difference—and those exotic tales must certainly have accented his air of alienness in the Nazi’s eyes, as Buber paced back and forth before him in this “book-chaos,” boxing volumes and stroking his beard. Moreover, we for a fact that Buber came to see Hasidism as a potent corrective to Nazism. Just three years after the Shoah, he would write from Jerusalem, “I consider hasidic truth vitally important for Jews, Christians and others; and at this particular hour more important than ever before. For now is the hour when we are in danger of forgetting for what purpose we are on earth, and I know of no other teaching that reminds us of this so forcibly.”⁵ Even more explicitly, Buber presented the movement as a radical hallowing of corporeal reality and thus in direct opposition to the Gnosticism which he identified with Nazism. Finally, as we have seen, Buber’s Hasidic tales are replete with stories of the transformative power of interpersonal encounter, even to the point of

⁴ See the letter of February 6, 1908 in Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, eds., *The Letters of Martin Buber*, 114.

⁵ Buber, “Foreword,” in idem, *Hasidism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 4.

disrupting deep-seated values and worldviews. Perhaps Buber sensed that such messages could nudge this Nazi awake to the absurdity of his mission, to a different source of commandedness beyond the Third Reich.⁶

We cannot know what passed through Buber's mind on his way to picking *Die chassidischen Bücher* off the shelf. I suspect, however, that both sides of the political calculation were at work, that Buber saw his Hasidic writings as simultaneously safe and subversive, palatable and powerful. His representations of the movement had been composed as much for German Neo-Romantics as for Zionist youth, as much to stimulate popular interests as to wage a resistance. And yet these tensions highlight the very rich hermeneutical and theological dynamics at work in those writings.

When Buber was nearly eighty years old, he reflected on this distinctive aspect of his relation to Hasidic sources in an essay entitled “Der Chassidismus und der abendländische Mensch.”⁷ At one point therein, he casts himself as a living link in the chain of the movement's tradition: “My transmitting of the Hasidic message (*Botschaft*) is...one that has entered into the lived life of seven generations, as whose late-born interpreter (*Dolmetsch*) I function.”⁸ And yet in the very next paragraph, Buber goes on to orient his hermeneutical role in terms of an audience that is far broader—geographically, culturally, and religiously—than any that Hasidic communities themselves thought to address:

In this form I have sought, in a lifelong work, to introduce the Hasidic life-teaching (*Lebenslehre*) to present-day Western man. It has often been suggested to me that I should liberate this teaching from its ‘confessional limitations,’ as people like to put it, and proclaim it as an unbound teaching of humankind. Taking such a ‘universal’ path

⁶ Indeed, Ben-Chorin himself interpreted this anecdote as a testament to the “power of personality that radiated from Buber” and effected even his “professional enemies.” If that is indeed what took place between Buber and the Nazi, then we might suppose that the content of *Die chassidischen Bücher* played a role in this. See Ben-Chorin, *Zwiesprache mit Martin Buber*, 30.

⁷ This was published later in English as “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM*, 21-43.

⁸ Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM*, 41; German: *MBW*, 17:313-14.

would have been for me pure arbitrariness. In order to speak in the world what I have heard, I am not obligated to step into the street. I may remain standing in the doorway of my ancestral house: here too the word that is spoken does not go astray.⁹

This image of the doorway offers an implicit but unmistakable rebuke of the Maskilic call to “be a man in the streets and a Jew at home.”¹⁰ As a cultural Zionist, especially, Buber regards that nineteenth-century paradigm as one of bifurcation—not only of private and public spheres, but of religiosity and citizenship, traditional language and worldly existence. Buber rejects such compartmentalizations of identity, and his scare-quotes around the words “confessional limitations” and “universal” emphasize his sensitivity to ways in which such humanistic categories can function as particularistic effacements of certain peoples’ particularities. Buber seeks a greater integration amidst the various facets of his identity. And his Hasidic writings represent an attempt to do just that: to stand firmly in his own skin, so to speak, yet a skin that is open to the elements.

To stand in the doorway between ancestral home and cosmopolitan streets is to inhabit liminality, to live with various tensions inside and outside of the self. It is therefore to interpret and to translate—for others and also for oneself. Far afield from the echo chambers of hermetic studies, standing in the doorway is a self-consciously hermeneutical position. Here, both the tradition inside and the world outside, along with the hermeneut in between, change. Indeed, in the earliest extant handwritten draft of “Der Chassidismus und der abendländische Mensch,”

⁹ Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM*, 41-42; German: *MBW*, 17:314.

¹⁰ This line derives from the penultimate verse of Yehudah Leib Gordon’s poem “*Haqitsah ‘Ami*” (Awaken, My People, 1863): “היה אדם בצאתך ויהודי באהלך”. See *Kol Shirei Yehudah Leib Gordon*, vol. 1 (Warsaw: Ha-Tsefirah, 1905), 43. The phrase became a watchword of the Russian Haskalah, calling upon Jews to embrace Russian and European culture while also remaining committed Jews. However, it was widely misinterpreted as an assimilationist call to keep displays of Jewishness behind closed doors, as it were, and therefore the phrase became a popular foil for Zionist discourse, despite Gordon’s own vision of a new intellectually awakened Judaism. See Michael Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil?: Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 49-52.

Buber thought to portray this position as a window: “The opening of a window in my ancestral home is enough.”¹¹ But Buber revised this metaphor, opting ultimately for the image of the doorway, which is not merely a way to see and be seen, but the unlocked opening where outsiders may enter and where inhabitants venture out. More than a window, the door captures the risk and the reward of hermeneutics.

For similar reasons, standing in the doorway is also an image of dialogue. It is a coming out of one’s shell, so to speak, a vulnerability, an insecurity. One may behold another’s interiority but one does not gain possession over it. Selfhood does not dissolve in the doorway, yet it is penetrable there. It is no coincidence that Buber’s shift from I-transcending mysticism to I-and-You dialogue involved a hermeneutical shift in his approach to Hasidic sources.¹² He himself suggests that his earlier approach was insufficiently dialogical: “I did not yet know how to hold in check my inner inclination to transform poetically the narrative material,” and “I did not listen attentively enough to the crude and ungainly but living folk-tone which could be heard from this material.”¹³ And Buber notes that this imposition of himself onto the sources was rooted partially in his own apologetic impulse “to point out the purity and loftiness of Hasidism” against those who saw it as backward or superstitious.¹⁴ To be sure, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, Buber continued to shape Hasidic *mayases* in his own image by means of his principle of selection, his hermeneutical alterations, and his anthological ordering, but it is undeniable that his later Hasidic writings—that is, the vast majority of his tales and essays, inaugurated with his 1922 anthology *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge*—reflected a far more dialogical hermeneutics than his earlier tales. After Buber improved his capacity to “listen

¹¹ See this handwritten draft in the Martin Buber Archives, Ms. 350 04 23.

¹² For a detailed discussion of this shift in Buber’s Hasidic writings, see Appendix B.

¹³ Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM*, 22-23; German: *MBW*, 17:304.

¹⁴ Buber, “Hasidism and Modern Man,” *HMM*, 23; German: *MBW*, 17:304-05.

attentively” to the tales, he was more willing to let the Hasidim be heard in their own distinctive tones, less eager to speak over their voices.

When the Gestapo agent showed up at Buber’s door, there was obviously no option but to let him in. Buber had already been silenced publicly for years with a *Redeverbot*, and this invasion of space was remote from the conditions of dialogue. However, when pressed to offer him one of his books, Buber handed him a volume that displayed—however indirectly—some semblance of selfhood and wholeness, while also ensuring some degree of safety, as the moment demanded. In this sense, Buber showed the Nazi the door, although he could not actually ask him to leave.

In this dissertation, I have sought to show what took place in Buber’s doorway. It was here that Buber expressed himself in the bubbling confluence of Germanism and Judaism, universalism and particularism, assimilation and Zionism, text and life. When it comes to Buber’s Hasidic writings, the only way to truly witness—or at least to begin to reconstruct—those dynamics in the doorway is to conduct an intertextual-hermeneutical investigation. If we were only to peruse Buber’s published tales and essays, then we would attain little more than views from the street, as it were. To gain admittance into deeper insights, we must step into Buber’s home, study the Hasidic volumes on his shelves, consult his notebooks—we must observe all the fingerprints we can find on the paper trail leading from his private study toward the open light of day. And what we find is an incredibly rich relationship that Buber had with the sources, dwarfing any simplistic summation of his Hasidic writings as accurate or inaccurate, faithful or unfaithful, subjective or objective. We behold a myriad of crisscrossing intersubjectivities—not only between Buber and the Hasidic sages, writers, and editors themselves, but also between Buber and his variegated readership whom he sought to address in

his personal renditions and anthologies. In fact, it is precisely this element of address, *Ansprache*, that keeps Buber's tales within the religious realm of spokenness. It is just this that transports his Hasidic writings from the closed study to the open door, where "the word that is spoken (*das gesprochene Wort*) does not go astray." After all, for Buber, the only genuine theological expression is that which is spoken—in the fullest dialogical sense of that term—that which is directed to particular people and calibrated according to the encounter.

Without that sense of spokenness, which naturally impacts how Buber renders Hasidic *mayses*, his anthologies would cease to be genuinely religious, as far as he is concerned. Thus, monological monographs about Hasidism may elucidate crucial historical points or philological patterns, but they will never illuminate the core message, according to Buber. One cannot look that meaning up in a book. Indeed, Buber writes, "Real faith—if I may so term presenting ourselves and listening—begins right there where you stop looking things up, where that fades away."¹⁵ What is key, for Buber, is to be ready for relation. In one's solitary study, beneath mountains of books and a sparkling firmament of ideas, one must not forget to listen for the person at the door, the bodily other who is knocking.

¹⁵ Buber, "Dialogue," *BMM*, 12; German: *DP*, 155. Smith translates Buber's original German here, "*wo das Nachschlagen aufhört, wo es einem vergeht*," quite loosely as "when the dictionary is put down, when you are done with it."

Appendix A: Buber's Way to Hasidism¹

Martin Buber (1878-1965) was born in Vienna, but his parents' separation three years later sent the little boy eastward to live with his grandparents in Lemberg, Galicia. Buber recalled later that his grandparents were "disinclined to talk over the affairs of their own existence"—they never spoke about what happened between his parents, they never mentioned that his mother would not return. Buber learned only a year later from a neighborhood girl that his mother "will never come back." That moment of utter rupture, according to Buber, set in motion his lifelong yearning to know the meaning of genuine "meeting"—spiritual, interpersonal, and eventually the inseparability of the two.²

Buber continued to live with his grandparents throughout his youth, spending only summers on his father's estate starting at the age of nine. His grandfather Salomon Buber was a prodigious and prolific scholar of Midrash. And despite the fact that he was a "westernized" intellectual of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment), Buber recalls, "he used to take me with him into his *klaus* [Hasidic prayer room], where he, the *maskil* [proponent of the Jewish Enlightenment], prayed exclusively among Hasidim—from a prayerbook full of *kavvanot* [mystical intentions]."³ Salomon's erudition, studiousness, and religiosity had a profound impact on Buber, yet it seems that the grandson was somewhat skeptical about his grandfather's solitary

¹ An earlier version of this appendix appears as the introductory essay for the chapter on Martin Buber in *A New Hasidism: Roots*, edited by Arthur Green and Ariel Mayse (Jewish Publication Society/University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming 2019).

² Martin Buber, *Meetings*, ed. Maurice Friedman (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1973), 17-19.

³ See Buber's comments to Franz Rosenzweig in *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life of Dialogue*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer and Paul Mendes-Flohr (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 288, 290.

bookishness. He preferred the intellect of his grandmother, Adele, who taught him “what it means really to express something.” Although Salomon was the renowned scholar, Buber appreciated Adele’s more relational mode of thinking: “My grandfather was a true philologist, a ‘lover of the word,’ but my grandmother’s love for the genuine word affected me even more strongly than his: because this love was so direct and so devoted.”⁴ Raised in Sasov, a small Galician town only a few miles from the city of Zolochev, both of which housed significant Hasidic communities where girls were prohibited from reading anything but “edifying popular books,” Adele devoured philosophical and literary works in secrecy, and she later instilled in her sons and grandson a “respect for the authentic word that cannot be paraphrased.”⁵

It is evident from his scattered autobiographical reflections and anecdotes that Buber’s life transformed quite radically when he was fourteen years old. The most concrete change was that he left his grandparents’ home to live full-time with his father Carl, now remarried and a very successful agriculturalist. Buber ceased his traditional Jewish observance that very same year,⁶ and it is hard to imagine that this timing was merely coincidental. Given the adolescent’s traumatic memories of abandonment in his first home, perhaps he was especially quick to ditch his Hasidic-inflected practices for fear of disappointing his father. Indeed, Carl himself had diverged sharply from Salomon’s ways, and Buber still recounted nearly thirty years later how he had caused “offense” at his father’s bourgeois liberal “temple” when he embodied the pietistic postures he had picked up in his grandfather’s *klaus*.⁷

⁴ Buber, *Meetings*, 20.

⁵ Buber, *Meetings*, 19-20. For Buber’s representations of the Hasidic rebbes of Sasov and Zolochev, see his *The Tales of the Hasidim*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken, 1991), I:138-157, II:81-95.

⁶ See Buber’s letter to Rosenzweig, in Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, *Letters of Martin Buber*, 290.

⁷ See Buber’s letters to Rosenzweig in Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, *Letters of Martin Buber*, 288, 290.

However, Buber's detachment from Jewish observance was also bound up with a precocious philosophical crisis and awakening. When he was "about fourteen years of age," Buber recalls that he was maddeningly overwhelmed—nearly to the point of suicide—with his inability to visualize the infinities of space and time.⁸ Following this wunderkind's anxiety-ridden efforts to wrap his mind around these supposedly foundational dimensions of existence, he found "salvation" the following year in Kant's declaration that space and time are not properties inherent to nature but rather categories inherent to human perception that facilitate cognition of nature. Buber himself supposes that this philosophical revelation eroded the earnestness that had animated his youthful religiosity. After describing to his friend Franz Rosenzweig an intensely powerful Yom Kippur from when he was thirteen, Buber reflected, "And do you think I was a 'child' then? Less so than now, perhaps, in a crucial sense; in those days I took space and time seriously, and did not just dismiss them from my mind, as I do now."⁹ Moreover, Buber suggests specifically that his early intellectualism desensitized him to the spiritual vitality of Hasidism. Although he had previously glimpsed true community and leadership in the movement—"as a child realizes such things, not as thought, but as image and feeling"¹⁰—he later lost touch, as it were, with such primordial intuitions. "I looked down on [Hasidism] from the heights of a rational man. I now saw nothing more of its life, even when I passed quite close to it—because I did not want to see anything."¹¹ In any case, when fourteen year-old Buber left his grandfather Salomon's house, his reality transformed: "So long as I lived

⁸ See Martin Buber, "What Is Man?" *BMM*, 136.

⁹ See Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, *Letters of Martin Buber*, 290. Regarding the influence of Kant on Buber and his contemporaries' views of religious praxis, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Law and Sacrament: Ritual Observance in Twentieth-Century Jewish Thought," in Arthur Green, ed., *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 317-345.

¹⁰ Martin Buber, "My Way to Hasidism," in idem., *Hasidism and Modern Man*, trans. Maurice Friedman, with a new introduction by David Biale (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 19.

¹¹ Buber, "My Way to Hasidism," 21.

with him, my roots were firm, although many questions and doubts also jogged about in me. Soon after I left his house, the whirl of the age took me in.”¹²

Another profound year of change for Buber took place when he was twenty-one, as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth. After semesters of studying philosophy, literature, and art history at the Universities of Vienna and Leipzig, Buber spent the summer of 1899 at the University of Zurich. He met a woman there named Paula Winkler. She had come to Zurich after living in an Alpine “colony” revolving around Omar al-Raschid Bey (né Friedrich Arndt-Kürnberg), a long-bearded and colorfully cloaked mystic who expounded an orientalist blend of Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu wisdoms after converting from Judaism to Islam years earlier in Constantinople. Paula had been one of al-Raschid’s most gifted disciples, and apparently the guru himself brought her to Zurich to study eastern languages before she struck off on her own.¹³ A Bavarian Catholic by birth and a year older than Buber, Paula matched him intellectually yet humbled him at that time spiritually and interpersonally. They fell in love that summer—Buber’s first love, it seems—and they interlaced their lives almost immediately. Within the next two years they had two children, and seven years later they were legally married following Paula’s conversion to Judaism (Buber was a citizen of Austria, where Catholics and Jews were not permitted to marry).¹⁴

In the fall of 1899, the very first semester after meeting Paula, Buber immersed himself in the study of mysticism, and the chronology suggests that this new phase of his spiritual

¹² Buber, “My Way to Hasidism,” 22.

¹³ See Theodor Lessing, *Einmal und nie Wieder: Lebenserrinerungen* (Prague: H. Mercy Sohn, 1935), 291-296. Cf. Grete Schaeder, “Martin Buber: A Biographical Sketch,” in Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, *Letters of Martin Buber*, 9; cf. Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Fin de Siècle Orientalism, the *Ostjuden*, and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation,” in idem, *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 77, 93, 121.

¹⁴ See Buber and Paula’s granddaughter Judith Agassi-Buber’s comments in Haim Gordon, ed., *The Other Martin Buber: Recollections of His Contemporaries* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988), 21-22.

development was a direct result of their relationship.¹⁵ Moreover, while Buber's mind had been intellectually and philosophically aflame for years, Paula inspired him to see that the world of ideas is only truly alive if it is embedded and embodied in personal relations. He would write to her three years later from the "prison cell" of his grandparents' estate in Lemberg:

In general, one must tie the whole riddle of the universe to a single person, otherwise one is in a bad way. In the Talmud it says: 'He who meditates upon four things, for him it would have been better had he not come into the world; these four are what is above, what is below, what was before, and what will be after.'¹⁶ I would prefer to say: Meditate upon all mysteries, but in one person who is yours, and you lie upon the heart of the universe. For everything is in everyone and only love can extract it.¹⁷

With all these elements and more in motion, Buber confessed to Paula in 1902, "Not until you came to me did I find my soul."¹⁸

Also within months of meeting Paula, Buber started to participate in the *Neue Gemeinschaft* (New Community), a group of young bohemians in Berlin who celebrated mystical experience as a way to resist and transcend what they deemed the alienation, hyper-rationalism, and spiritual barrenness of modernity.¹⁹ It was there that Buber connected with the captivating revolutionary, philosopher, and "prophet" Gustav Landauer (1870-1919), who became one of the most important and influential friends of his life.²⁰ It was surely this

¹⁵ See Mendes-Flohr, "Fin de Siècle Orientalism," 93.

¹⁶ Mishnah Hagigah 2:1.

¹⁷ Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, *Letters of Martin Buber*, 84-85.

¹⁸ Translated in Grete Schaeder, "Martin Buber: A Biographical Sketch," in Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, *Letters of Martin Buber*, 10-11.

¹⁹ On the *Neue Gemeinschaft*, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber's Transformation of German Social Thought* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 50, 54-57.

²⁰ On Landauer as "prophet," see his friend Felix Stierner's words shortly after Landauer was beaten to death by soldiers in May 1919: "Gustav Landauer was a prophet, the last great prophet in the style of our time. A man around whom the atmosphere glowed, who was himself 'atmosphere' and who brought this atmosphere to believers and nonbelievers." Felix Stierner, "Gustav Landauer," *Die Bücherkiste* 1, no. 8/9/10 (December 1919), 99. See also Hanns Ludwig Katz's oil paint portrait of Landauer entitled "Der Prophet" (1919/1920), housed in the Jewish Museum Berlin.

effervescent confluence of the *Neue Gemeinschaft*, Landauer, and Paula that inspired Buber to go on to write his doctoral thesis on the Christian mystics Nicholas of Cusa and Jacob Böhme.

Remarkably, it was also in 1899 that Buber first emerged as a prominent Zionist activist. He became enamored with the movement only a year earlier—through reading, of course—but already delivered an address in August 1899 at the Third Zionist Congress in Basel. Buber’s words and visions resonated powerfully for many in the room. Paula, already an impassioned supporter of the cultural movement, was there and described how the speech touched her personally: “This was no longer an individual human being; with primordial violence the tremendous longing, wishes, and will of a whole people poured over me like a raging torrent.”²¹ A less biased audience member, Theodor Herzl, invited Buber just two years later to be editor of *Die Welt*, the official newspaper of Zionism.

If Buber’s closeness with Paula nourished for him a new nexus of spirit and relation, his involvement with Zionism solidified that bond at the level of community. Like so many others of his generation, Buber’s personal (re)turn to Judaism was coterminous with his turn to Zionism, and the significance of the movement was for him never so much about the establishment of a Jewish nation-state in Palestine as it was a revolution of Jewish spiritual-cultural renewal.²² Before then, Buber says, his head swarmed with thoughts and his “spirit was in steady and multiple movement,” but all this hovered aimlessly, “carried off into the upper atmosphere by the

²¹ Paula Winkler Buber, “Reflections of a Philo-Zionist,” *Die Welt* (1901), as quoted in Grete Schaeder, “Martin Buber: A Biographical Sketch,” 10. For Paula’s reflections on Zionism during the summer of the Third Congress (and the summer she met Buber), see her most fascinating letter to Buber in Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, *Letters of Martin Buber*, 67-69.

²² For Buber’s views on Zionism and Jewish-Arab relations, see Martin Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); cf. Brody, *Martin Buber’s Theopolitics*.

intellect.” Zionism was the beginning of his “liberation,” fostering for him “the restoration of the connection, the renewed taking root in the community.”²³

Yet Buber realized quickly that even this communal connection remained ungrounded. “I professed Judaism before I really knew it,” he confessed years later.²⁴ Never satisfied with petty chauvinism or knee-jerk nationalism, Buber turned to texts. He relearned the Hebrew that his grandfather had taught him in his youth, but meditated anew on the roots, sounds, and significance of that sacred tongue. Hebrew language proved to be his gateway.

Until one day I opened a little book entitled the *Tsava 'at ha-Ribash*—that is the testament of Rabbi Israel Baal-Shem—and the words flashed toward me, ‘He takes unto himself the quality of fervor. He arises from sleep with fervor, for he is hallowed and become another man and is worthy to create and is become like the Holy One, blessed be He, when He created His world.’ It was then that, overpowered in an instant, I experienced the Hasidic soul. The primally Jewish opened to me, flowering to newly conscious expression in the darkness of exile: man’s being created in the image of God I grasped as deed, as becoming, as task. And this primally Jewish reality was a primal human reality, the content of human religiosity. Judaism as religiosity, as ‘piety,’ as *Hasidut* opened to me there.²⁵

This encounter with Hasidic sources changed Buber’s life forever. It is significant that the line from *Tsava 'at ha-Ribash* that astonished him was all about renewal—renewal of self, renewal of community, renewal of world.²⁶ Buber conceives of renewal here as readiness to “create” new modes of being out of the very primal depths of what it means to be human and, in his case, Jewish. And the “primally Jewish” (*Urjüdisches*) here is most certainly not, for Buber, the institutional and systematic structures of Jewish “religion,” but the spontaneous and dynamic

²³ Buber, “My Way to Hasidism,” 22-23.

²⁴ Buber, “My Way to Hasidism,” 23.

²⁵ Buber, “My Way to Hasidism,” 24. I have emended Friedman’s translation slightly according to Buber’s original German.

²⁶ Interestingly, the Hebrew word from the original source that Buber rendered here as “hallowed (*geheiligt*)” was actually “*nithadesh*,” renewed! See “*Tsava 'at ha-Ribash*,” in *Shivhey ha-Besht* (Tel Aviv: 1961), 317.

impulses of Jewish “religiosity.” Whereas religion seeks power and preservation, according to Buber, religiosity seeks truth and holiness, and it is therefore the latter that fuels real renewal.²⁷

For Buber, the whole history of Judaism is a dialectic of prophets and priests, religiosity and religion. Although the latter appear to dominate consistently, the former always rumble beneath the surface and erupt at times in explosions of mythic imagination and daring reinterpretation. Buber suggests that traces of primal, “underground” Judaism are perceptible in the Hebrew Bible, Midrash, and Kabbalah—and Hasidism is the most recent and one of the most stirring eruptions of all.²⁸ This is not to say that Buber wanted to become a Hasid. As far as he was concerned, the movement was already in steep decline, smothered by the dead weight of religion that always follows great religious awakenings. But he wanted to fan the still glowing coals and kindle a new blaze. “The Hasidic teaching is the proclamation of rebirth,” Buber declares. “No renewal of Judaism is possible that does not bear in itself the elements of Hasidism.”²⁹

With such intention and direction, Buber retreated from all other work at the age of twenty-six to immerse himself in Hasidic sources for the next five years. “I am now in the first real work period of my life,” he wrote during this time.³⁰ He was drawn primarily to the legendary literature (*mayses*), as opposed to the theoretical sermons (*derashot*), and during these early years of study he published his first two books, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* (1906) and *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* (1908). Buber’s discovery of Hasidism ignited a fire in him that

²⁷ See Buber’s essays “Renewal of Judaism” and “Jewish Religiosity,” in Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 34-55, 79-94.

²⁸ See Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, trans. Maurice Friedman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 11-12.

²⁹ Buber, *Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 12-13.

³⁰ See Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber’s Life and Work: The Early Years 1878-1923* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981), 102.

never died. To be sure, he had encountered the movement in his youth, but now it was his own. The textual traces of Hasidism's original stirrings seduced him, and he romanticized them in turn.

It is difficult to exaggerate the extent to which Buber's early honeymoon with Hasidism was a shared experience with Paula. She was always a careful editor of his writings (indeed, German was not the mother tongue of that great "German-Jewish" philosopher, and Paula herself became an accomplished author under the pseudonym Georg Munk), but more importantly, she even wrote drafts of some of the tales for Buber's early Hasidic anthologies.³¹ The fact of her involvement in the work sheds light on a nostalgic poem that Buber penned decades later in her copy of his *Tales of the Hasidim* (1946)³²:

Remember how in youth we set our sails
Together on the ocean of these tales?
We saw fantastic sights, grand and awry,
And we beheld each other, you and I.
How image fitted image in our hearts!
Each kindling each, with each one adding parts
To new descriptions, a new entity
Came into being between you and me.³³

Paula, with her own background in mystical exploration, her own passion for the written word, and her own interests in Jewish culture, seems to have welcomed this opportunity to "discover" Hasidic literature with Buber, although her utter invisibility in the published books ought to

³¹ See Schaeder, "Martin Buber: A Biographical Sketch," 12-13; Mendes-Flohr, "Fin de Siècle Orientalism," in *Divided Passions*, 92-93; Gordon, *The Other Martin Buber*, 22.

³² Due to the Second World War, Buber published this anthology originally in Hebrew translation as *Or ha-Ganuz* (2 volumes, 1946-1947), then in English translation as *The Tales of the Hasidim* (2 volumes, 1947-1948), and only thereafter in his original German as *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim* (1949).

³³ Translated in Schaeder, "Martin Buber: A Biographical Sketch," 12.

disturb us today.³⁴ For her husband, in any case, the experience was clearly one of profound personal integration.

Buber's embrace of Hasidism was radical in the full sense of the word, bearing both roots and revolution. In some ways, his plunge into Hasidic sources linked him back to his upbringing. Not only did he used to pray beside his grandfather in the Lemberg *klaus*, but Salomon's own life work was steeped in Jewish legendary literature. When Buber describes in his essay "My Way to Hasidism" how Salomon "edited text after text of Midrash, those books of Bible interpretation, comparable to no other literature, abounding in legends, sayings, and noble parables," he obviously foreshadowed his own work with Hasidic tales.³⁵ Moreover, Salomon was quite encouraging of his grandson's project on Hasidism. He (along with Carl) supported Buber financially during those years of textual immersion, and he sent him books from Lemberg, which was the publishing epicenter of Hasidic tales during the so-called "Lemberg period" of 1864-1912.³⁶ However, even before Buber's work on Hasidism, the grandson detected dissonance between his Zionist activism and his grandfather's historical-philological labor. "You have mined and refined treasures from the culture of the Jewish past," Buber wrote to Salomon in 1900, but "I, who am young and still long more for action than for knowledge, want to help forge the Jewish future."³⁷ This dynamic of warm admiration and determined differentiation is manifest on the dedication page of Buber's first Hasidic book: "To my grandfather, Salomon

³⁴ For an important critique of Paula's unrecognized contributions to her husband's career, see Barbara Hahn, *The Jewess Pallas Athena: This Too a Theory of Modernity*, trans. James McFarland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 66.

³⁵ Buber, "My Way to Hasidism," 22.

³⁶ See, for example, Salomon's letter to Buber in Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, *Letters of Martin Buber*, 113. On the "Lemberg period," see Gedalyah Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, trans. Edward Levin (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008), 18-31; Glenn Dynner, "The Hasidic Tale as a Historical Source: Historiography and Methodology," *Religion Compass* 3.4 (2009), 656-9.

³⁷ Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, *Letters of Martin Buber*, 70.

Buber, the last of the great scholars in the old-style Haskalah, I offer this work of Hasidut with reverence and love.”³⁸

There were much deeper complexities surrounding Buber’s turn to Hasidism in relation to his father. True, he seems to have recognized in Carl’s down-to-earth, unpretentious simplicity some of the sensibilities and values that he loved so much in Hasidic tales. “The influence of my father on my intellectual development was of a different kind from that of my grandparents. It did not derive at all from the mind,” Buber reflected. “Accompanying him thus on his way at times, the growing boy learned something that he had not learned from any of the many authors that he read.”³⁹ Although his father was a wealthy agriculturalist, Buber characterizes him romantically here in ways reminiscent of the simple farmers or peasants (*Bauern*) in his Hasidic tales! Moreover, Buber described his father as “an elemental storyteller” in a purely oral, conversational sense—an image that Buber associated strongly with Hasidic culture.⁴⁰ However, while Carl took Buber as a child to behold the Hasidic community in the “dirty village of Sadagora,”⁴¹ Buber’s active celebration of Hasidic spirituality clashed strongly with Carl’s own liberal Judaism and bourgeois sensibilities. “I would be happy if you would free yourself from these Hasidic and Zohar [Kabbalah] matters,” Carl implored Buber on his thirtieth birthday, just before the release of his first Hasidic book, “since they can only have a mind-destroying and evil

³⁸ Martin Buber, *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (Frankfurt a.M.: Rütten & Loening, 1906), dedication page.

³⁹ Buber, *Meetings*, 22.

⁴⁰ Buber, *Meetings*, 22. Cf. Buber’s discussion of orality and Hasidic stories in his essay “Interpreting Hasidism,” 220-221.

⁴¹ See Buber, “My Way to Hasidism,” *HMM*, 20. Maurice Friedman relates erroneously that Buber took this trip with his grandfather Salomon Buber, the great scholar of Midrash who was more traditionally religious than his descendents. As life goes, the true stories are often more complicated. See Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber’s Life and Work: The Early Years*, 95. Friedman corrected this error in his later publications. See Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 16.

influence, and it is a pity to waste your abilities on such a sterile subject and consume so much labor and time, useless to yourself and the world.”⁴² One must recall that for generations of Europeans, the opposition between western “progressive” and eastern “traditional” Jews was a matter of grave sociopolitical significance. The European Jewish struggle for emancipation in their home countries continued well into Carl’s adulthood and, in some cases, even into Buber’s. For many Jews and non-Jews alike, those disheveled mystics back east looked like the very antithesis of “Enlightenment,” undermining all claims that Jews were worthy of integration into the modern world. The Hasidim embodied everything that western, assimilated Jews had sought to jettison for generations.

Such conformist aspirations and apologetic postures were, however, repulsive to Buber and many others of his generation. In contrast to their parents who had placed great faith in nineteenth-century visions of “progress” through the promises of universal reason, assimilation, and material comfort, a new generation sensed that modern industrialization, urbanization, and rationalist abandonment of “superstitious” folk traditions brought little more than spiritual impoverishment, alienation from the natural world, and the withering of inner vitality. Seekers of all stripes—philosophers, poets, musicians, and activists—looked longingly to epochs and regions that they saw as untouched by the modern malaise. They regarded those cultures as “primitive” in the sense of primal and pristine. Whereas previous generations may have looked down on the “east” as unenlightened and uncivilized, many young Europeans at the turn of the century now glorified “oriental” wisdom and folklore as primordial expressions of pre-modern authenticity.⁴³ The *Neue Gemeinschaft* in Berlin was a classic incarnation of such “Neo-

⁴² See the letter of February 6, 1908 in Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, *The Letters of Martin Buber*, 114.

⁴³ Of course, this reevaluation of the monolithic “east” said more about Europeans’ own identity-constructions than it did about the actual cultures they exoticized, and the discourse remained bound up

Romantic” fervor, and it was also in this zeitgeist that Zionists imagined a Jewish renaissance in Palestine. To the discomfort of his father and the titillation of his contemporaries, Buber scribed his enchanting tales of the Hasidim, and he became thereafter a sort of spiritual representative of Judaism in Germany, complete with the growing, graying beard.⁴⁴ To be sure, Buber himself remained personally distant from the singing, dancing, and ecstatic expression, let alone the ritual observance, that were so definitive of Hasidic spirituality, yet his literary representations of the movement energized countless readers. Even decades later, English translations of his Hasidic books were taken up by American Protestant theologians and Jewish hippies of the 1960s,⁴⁵ and one contemporary scholar demonstrates that Hebrew translations of Buber’s tales have even commanded a “covert reception” among Orthodox Jews.⁴⁶ There is literally no one in history who has done more than Martin Buber did to introduce non-Hasidim to Hasidism. In order to draw such broad and diverse readerships, however, he did not simply translate Hasidic tales word for word or portray the movement in purely historical terms. According to his own outlooks and spiritual sensibilities over the course of more than four decades, Buber presented Hasidism anew.

with a history of colonialism and imperialism. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). See also Mendes-Flohr, “Fin de Siècle Orientalism,” in *Divided Passions*, 77-132.

⁴⁴ On the reception of Buber’s early Hasidic writings, see Mendes-Flohr, “Fin de Siècle Orientalism,” 96-109.

⁴⁵ For reflections on American Protestant interests in Buber, see W. Clark Gilpin, “‘Companionable Being:’ American Theologians Engage Martin Buber,” *Martin Buber: His Intellectual and Scholarly Legacy*, edited by Sam Berin Shonkoff (Boston: Brill, 2018).

⁴⁶ Ran HaCohen, “Einleitung,” in *MBW*, 18:27-28.

Appendix B:

Embodiment in Buber's Early versus Late Hasidic Writings

This dissertation focuses specifically on Buber's later Hasidic writings—that is, those tales and essays that Buber published in his post-mystical, dialogical years, inaugurated with his *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge* (1922). These works constitute the vast majority of Buber's Hasidic writings, and they differ significantly from Buber's earlier anthologies.¹ Inasmuch as Buber was engaged with Hasidic sources over nearly seven decades, they offer a lucid glimpse into how his own religious mind changed over time. Indeed, as the Hasidic sources in his library remained stable while Buber's own perspectives on them changed, we may think of their interrelation as a sort of control and variable, or independent axis and dependent axis, for detecting transformations in Buber's thought more generally.²

As a young mystic, Buber was a significant contributor to the mystical discourse of German New Romanticism, and like many of his contemporaries, Buber celebrated the spiritual potency and truth-value of “inner experience” (*Erlebnis*). In such moments of mystical illumination, the person perceives that materiality—that is, the dualistic or “individuated” world—is in fact only the husk of a deeper reality where boundaries between “I” and world, self and other dissolve in absolute oneness. Although these mystical experiences might be quickened through walks in the woods, contemplation of nature, or other intoxicating immersions in bodily

¹ I disagree, therefore, with Koren's claim that “Buber's fundamental perception of the Hasidic message did not undergo any substantive change throughout the course of his life.” Koren, *Mystery of the Earth*, 205. See also Schaefer's assertion that Buber's early and late writings on Hasidism reflect “only a changed emphasis.” Schaefer, *Hebrew Humanism*, 304. As we shall see, attention to themes of embodiment underscore the significant changes in Buber's views on Hasidism over time.

² For a similar point with regard to Buber's sustained interest in Taoism, spanning his so-called mystical and dialogical phases, see Irene Eber, “Martin Buber and Taoism,” *Monumenta Serica* 42 (1994): 445-464.

activity, the physical world of the senses was ultimately no more than a gateway to transcendent truth. For Buber, therefore, mystical ec-stasy was, as it were, an out-of-body experience.

Of course, one's perspectives on the world and on texts are interrelated, and thus we might read Buber's early Hasidic tales in light of his emphases in that period on ecstatic transcendence.³ In this particular case, if physical events in life are seen as the outer crusts of an inner truth, then all the more so, the plotlines of Hasidic narratives may trace the rumblings of a concealed core. And if the depths of self and world are one, as Buber believed that they were in his mystical years, then inner truth is fundamentally *inward* truth, and the meaning of texts is bound up with the contemplative reader-source encounter. For Buber in his mystical years, therefore, the art of retelling required personal plunges into the marrow of sources, especially in the case of *mayses* that he thought to be poorly written or otherwise pale versions of the "originals." For instance, regarding one text that Buber sent his wife Paula to adapt for his *Legend of the Baal-Shem* anthology, Buber instructed her to "really *renew* it," to "illuminate, elevate, [and] pour your own nature out over the narrow-hearted material."⁴ Thus, according to Buber's mystical hermeneutics of *Erlebnis*, the contemporary narrator must penetrate Hasidic texts to their spiritual core, which is not necessarily manifest in the concrete words of the sources.

Buber's early hermeneutical approach to Hasidic sources was also, of course, buttressed by the profound influence of his teacher Wilhelm Dilthey.⁵ Dilthey identified the hermeneutical

³ For profound meditations on the interdependence between texts and life in Jewish theology, see Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*; idem., *Jewish Hermeneutical Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

⁴ Buber's December 1906 letter to Paula Winkler-Buber in *MBB*, 1:250.

⁵ Regarding Dilthey's influence on Buber's Hasidic writings, see Paul Mendes-Flohr and Ze'ev Gries, "Introduction," in Buber, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, xvi-xviii. For Dilthey's influence on Buber's hermeneutics more generally, see Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue*, chapter 1; cf. Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 6-18.

task as one of “inner experience” (*Erlebnis*) and “understanding” (*Verstehen*), that is, a process by which the adept interpreter comes to understand the essential experience underlying the literary expression. For our purposes, it is significant that Dilthey grasped this endeavor, in part, in terms of a dualism between inner meaning and outer expression. Indeed, this very fact poses one of the greatest challenges and opportunities of the “human sciences” (as compared to the “natural sciences”), whose “object is not sensory appearance as such, no mere reflection of reality within consciousness, but is rather first and foremost an inner reality, a nexus experienced from within.” Thus, according to Dilthey’s epistemological orientation, the human sciences involve greater immediacy than the natural sciences do—and yet, “the very way in which this reality is given in inner experience raises great difficulties for its objective apprehension.”

Indeed, Dilthey explains, “the existence of other people is given us at first only from the outside, in facts available to sense, that is, in gestures, sounds, and actions. Only through a process of re-creation of that which is available to the senses do we complete this inner experience.” But how, Dilthey asks, can we actually attempt to ascertain the inner experience of another person? “How can one quite individually structured consciousness bring an alien individuality of a completely different type to objective knowledge through such re-creation?” The answer, Dilthey proposes, is the hermeneutical technique of so-called “understanding” (*Verstehen*): “*Understanding* is what we call this process by which an inside is conferred on a complex of external sensory signs,” Dilthey declares. It is precisely a “process by which we recognize, behind signs given to our senses, that psychic reality of which they are the expression.”⁶ Thus, one can appreciate not only how Dilthey’s hermeneutical method influenced Buber’s early approach to Hasidic sources, but also how Dilthey’s conception of the relation between language and meaning was bound up as

⁶ Wilhelm Dilthey, “The Rise of Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, edited by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Rithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 235-6.

well with his views on the relation between sensory appearance and inner reality, bodies and psyches.⁷

It is no surprise, then, that Buber's hermeneutical approach to Hasidic tales shifted with his shift from mysticism to dialogue, which also involved a shift from a mystical ontology to what we have termed a dialogical monism.⁸ Presumably, one who has experienced mystical ecstasy will still perceive some sort of aura even in material reality, and thus the new affirmation of oneness would be a sort of spiritual "falling back into immanence," as Jean Wahl worded it.⁹ However, what is most crucial is that Buber was now committed to not looking beyond the concrete, corporeal world, and, thus, in relation to sources, he would remain more firmly anchored to the language itself. Indeed, Buber conceded eventually that in his early years of Hasidic text study he "did not listen attentively enough to the crude and ungainly but living folk-tone which could be heard from this material."¹⁰ It is no coincidence, then, that Buber's book *The Great Maggid and His Succession* (1922), published just a year before the appearance of *I and Thou*, exhibits a remarkably different form of Hasidic tale. Upon opening the book, one observes readily that the tales are much shorter and the language is less flowery than those in Buber's two earlier anthologies, and students of traditional *mayses* will note that this simplicity

⁷ In this light, we might consider Daniel Boyarian's sapient reflections on the connection between hermeneutics and anthropology. According to Boyarin, the Rabbis of late antiquity affirmed the unity of body and soul, and they interpreted the Torah accordingly so that the significance of texts is bound to the signifiers of those texts. This differed from the dualism of Christian and philosophical exegetes (including Philo, the quintessential philosophical Jewish exegete of the time), who held a dualistic anthropology, where body and soul are fundamentally split, and thus they were far more prone to interpreting texts allegorically, where signifier and signified are distinct from one another. See Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*.

⁸ See above in chapter one, the section entitled "Dialogical Monism."

⁹ See Jean Wahl's movement "directed toward immanence, whereby the transcendence transcends itself. Perhaps the greatest transcendence is that which consists of transcending the transcendence, that is to say, of falling back into immanence." Wahl thus refers to the "second immanence" that appears "after the destroyed transcendence." As quoted in Wolfson, "Echo of the Otherwise," 320-321. Wolfson's discussion therein is very illuminating for our purposes.

¹⁰ Buber, "Hasidism and Modern Man," *HMM*, 2.

of style bears greater resemblance to the Hasidic originals. To be sure, Buber continues to alter and retell the narratives according to his own religious sensibilities, but he does so now with greater subtlety and humility. He strives more to “listen attentively” to the sources in their otherness. Indeed, part and parcel of Buber’s turn from mysticism to dialogue was a turn away from materiality-spirituality dualism, so now the very concrete events and utterances described in the texts are significant in and of themselves. They do not simply intimate psycho-spiritual states or transcendent truths; they are the holy elements of events in Hasidic community. Like the vast majority of moments in life, these later tales at first glance can appear mundane, anticlimactic, unsexy, even boring—but therein lies their profundity. They make readers lean in and listen. And they remind us that, actually, there is nothing more meaningful and mysterious than the everyday—if only we offer attention. Buber’s Hasidic tales in his “dialogical” years—that is, the last four decades of his life—resemble the way his own father had told stories: “At times in conversation, just as its way led him, he told of people whom he had known. What he reported of them there was always the simple occurrence without any embroidery, nothing further than the existence of human creatures and what took place between them.”¹¹

Thus, whereas Buber’s early work portrays Hasidism as a religious culture of mystical spiritualization and out-of-body ecstasy, Buber’s later writings depict the movement as one of down-to-earth hallowing and sanctification of everyday life. One detects these differences through comparing his introductory essays to *Die Legende des Baalschem* and *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge*. The first essay is structured around four different aspects of Hasidic spirituality that Buber deems central: *hitlahavut* (ecstasy), *avodah* (service), *kavanah*

¹¹ Buber, *Meetings*, 22.

(intention), and *shiflut* (humility).¹² Unsurprisingly, the opening section on *hitlahavut* is the most striking exhibition of Buber’s early mystical sensibilities. He defines *hitlahavut* unequivocally as the transcendence of materiality “the shaking off of the last chains, the liberation which is lifted above everything earthly,” and “embracing God beyond time and space.”¹³ It follows, then, that *hitlahavut* is a deeply personal, inward, and even anti-social state. “Hitlahavut is the individual way and goal,” and “the truest life of the man of ecstasy is not among men.”¹⁴ One who is in a state of *hitlahavut* continues to inhabit sensory reality, of course, but his perceptions penetrate beyond the superficialities of physical reality and social relations as he “raises everything corporeal to spirit”: “He can speak idle words with his mouth, yet the teaching of the Lord is in his heart at this hour; he can pray in a whisper, yet his heart cries out in his breast; he can sit in a community of men, yet he walks with God: mixing with the creatures yet secluded from the world.”¹⁵ In a striking illustration of the ecstatic mystic’s detachment from materiality, Buber cites a tale in which Rabbi Susya chides himself for pulling his hand reflexively out of flames: “‘How coarse Susya’s body has become that it is afraid of fire.’ The man of ecstasy rules life,

¹² For a penetrating analysis of the religious phenomenology conveyed in this essay, see Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal*, chapter 9.

¹³ *Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 19, 23. Buber’s dear friend Landauer certainly picked up on these aspects of Buber’s early Hasidic writings. In his 1910 review of *Die Legende*, in fact, Landauer celebrated how “everywhere [in the anthology] we are faced with the struggle of the soul to grasp the incomprehensible and ultimate, the experience beyond the life of the senses,” and how the God of these legends must “free people from the limitations and illusions of the life of the senses.” Landauer also highlights how Buber’s Hasidic legends are “steeped in a melancholy made of earthly depression and heavenly yearning.” Gustav Landauer, “Die Legende des Baalschem,” *Das literarische Echo* 13, no. 2 (1910): 149, as translated by J. Hessing in *The Jew in the Modern World* (2011), 827. Furthermore, just a few years later, Landauer wrote another article on Buber wherein he praised his Hasidic books for being so “filled with melancholy, tender beauty, and . . . the desire to be delivered from earthly oppression.” Gustav Landauer, “Martin Buber,” *Neue Blätter* (1913), reprinted in idem, *Philosophie und Judentum: Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 5, ed. Siegbert Wolf (Hessen: AV Verlag, 2012), 351–362.

¹⁴ *Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 29, 21. It is significant to note here that Buber came to reject the notion that mysticism should even be treated as a sociological concept.

¹⁵ *Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 18.

and no external happening that penetrates into his realm can disturb his inspiration.”¹⁶ In a similar vein, Buber tells about a deceased sage who appears in a dream and describes how “from the hour of his death he went each day from world to world. And the world which yesterday was stretched out above his gaze as heaven is today the earth under his foot; and the heaven of to-day is the earth of tomorrow. And each world is purer and more beautiful and more profound than the one before.”¹⁷ According to this mystical mapping of the “worlds,” the Hasidic mystic strives to ascend in consciousness as high as possible above the lowliness of crude materiality.

Buber’s discussion of *kavanah* (intention) in this essay is clearly rooted in the same worldview and conception of mystical life, according to which materiality is mere appearance and it is the mystic’s task—and joy—to break on through to the other side, as it were, and taste transcendence. In the way of *kavanah*, as Buber portrays it here, Hasidim regard sensory reality as the dungeon of immaterial souls and sparks of divinity—“each form is their prison”—and every moment of life is an opportunity to liberate and uplift them. Just “this is the meaning of *kavanah*: that it is given to men to lift up the fallen and to free the imprisoned.”¹⁸ Young Buber even goes so far as to quote a Hasidic dictum that “no setting free of [actual human] captives is greater” than the work of liberating holy sparks trapped within stones, plants, and other animals.¹⁹ (One can see why Landauer thought it necessary to rebuke Buber for the ethical-

¹⁶ *Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 20. Cf. Natan Neta Diener, *Menorat Zahav* (Warsaw: 1904), 107. Buber includes this tale in his later Hasidic anthologies, as well, but combines it—in the very same paragraph—with a contradictory anecdote wherein Susya exclaims, “Earth, Earth, you are better than I, and yet I trample on you with my feet. But soon I shall lie under you and be subject to you.” See “Zusya, and Fire and Earth,” in Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, I:249. Cf. Diener, *Menorat Zahav*, p. 129. For a wonderful article about this most curious rebbe, see Tsippi Kauffman, “Hasidic Performance: Establishing a Religious (Non)Identity in the Tales about Rabbi Zusha of Annopol,” *The Journal of Religion* 95.1 (2015): 51-71.

¹⁷ *Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 19.

¹⁸ *Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 35.

¹⁹ *Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 37.

political implications of his mysticism!) To be sure, the rest of Buber's essay "Life of the Hasidim" complicates the mystical path of Hasidism with the earth-bound dimension of *avodah* (service) and the ethical stance of *shiflut* (humility). At this stage in Buber's thought, however, he maintains that *hitlahavut* is "the basic principle of Hasidic life," and all other streams of the movement flow ultimately into ecstasy.²⁰

Buber's 1922 introduction to *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge* depicts the life of the Hasidim in blatantly different terms. At its foundations, this later portrayal of Hasidism offers an alternate map of the spiritual universe. In stark contrast to his comments in 1908, Buber insists now that notions of a "divine soul imprisoned in the material world" are fundamentally foreign to the kabbalistic insistence on "the Jewish idea of unity which excludes a primal duality," and any such imagery in the Jewish context is merely a consequence of historical influences from "Iranian religiosity."²¹ Thus, Buber presents the Kabbalistic doctrine of the "worlds" in a wholly different light than he did in 1908. The concepts of "upper" and "lower" worlds does not denote any literal or ontological distinctions, he insists now, but rather different levels of consciousness, so that "the world of making is this one that appears to our material eye; however, if you fathom it deeper and disclose its materiality, then just this is the world of formation, and if you disclose it further, then it is the world of creation, and if you fathom its being still deeper, so it is the world of separation," and so on.²² "By this is not meant that all world being is, in fact, mere appearance," Buber clarifies.²³ Moreover, the language of "above"

²⁰ See *Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 24, 40.

²¹ *OMH*, 118.

²² *OMH*, 119.

²³ *OMH*, 119-120.

and “below” does not signal any hierarchy of importance. “‘Above’ and ‘below’—the decisive importance is ascribed to the ‘below.’”²⁴

This alternate portrayal of the Hasidic worldview in Buber’s later writings is bound up with a different vision of religious praxis. It would not make sense any longer, for instance, to set liberation from corporeality at the heart of spiritual life. In direct contrast to his 1908 reference to Susya and the fire, therefore, Buber asserts now that “he who does harm to his body, does harm to his soul.”²⁵ Moreover, solitary spirituality and inner experience are no longer sufficient. Whereas Buber had written in 1908 that “the truest life of the man of ecstasy is not among men,” Buber now underscores Barukh of Medzhibozh’s commentary on *Pirkey Avot* 2:13 (“Do not be bad before yourself”), which wages a critique against “men who sit continually shut up in their chambers and learn and do not step out of the house to converse with the others.” Where the verse says “before yourself,” the meaning is precisely: “do not be bad in that you stay before yourself and do not go to men; do not be bad through solitude.”²⁶ In the same spirit, regarding Menahem Mendel of Kotsk, for example, who “after the prayer was transformed as though he came from another world, and scarcely recognized his own family,” Buber affirms that “he is not a true tsaddik who remains satisfied with this.”²⁷ Indeed, only when mystics pry themselves away from inner euphoria and open their eyes anew to fellow human beings do they approach true religious greatness. A tsaddik is “the man in whom transcendental responsibility has grown from an event of consciousness into organic existence.”²⁸

²⁴ *OMH*, p. 140.

²⁵ *OMH*, 126.

²⁶ *OMH*, 141. Cf. Barukh of Medzhibozh, *Butsina de-Nehora* (Piotrków: 1889), 12.

²⁷ *OMH*, 139.

²⁸ *OMH*, 131.

For an example of how these changes are manifest in Buber's tales, let us turn to his different portrayals in 1908 and 1922 of one particular image: "the language of the birds." In comparing these two tales, one detects Buber's shift from mysticism to dialogue in both his selection of tales and his style of presentation. The notion that extraordinary sages can discern concealed meaning from the sights and sounds of birds, among other (non-human) natural phenomena dates back at least to classical Midrashic literature and gains new traction in later Jewish mysticism.²⁹ In his *Legend of the Baal-Shem*, Buber includes a tale that he calls "The Language of the Birds" (*Vogelsprache*), which is based upon a *mayse* from the first major published collection of Hasidic stories, *Shivhei ha-Besht* (1815).³⁰ Although the original version fit on just one page of *Shivhei ha-Besht*, Buber's romantic retelling—which actually appears to have been composed initially by his wife Paula—stretches across thirteen pages of *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*.³¹ Rabbi Aryeh Leib, the preacher of Polnoye, comes to learn the language of the birds from the Besht. After various plot twists, the decisive moment arrives when the Besht accompanies Rabbi Aryeh on a carriage ride and declares, "I shall now, indeed, teach you my wisdom." It is significant that this exchange takes place on a carriage, for the Besht informs

²⁹ Interpreting 1 Kings 5:13, a variety of Rabbinic sources claimed that King Solomon understood the language of birds. See Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah, 1.1; Kohelet Rabbah, 1.11; Tanhumah, ed. Solomon Buber (Vilna: 1885), IV:112; Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 134a, Sukkah 28a; Zohar 1:11a; *Sefer Shivhei ha-Ari ha-Shalem ve-ha-Mevo 'ar*, ed. Ya'akov Moshe Hillel (Jerusalem: 1998), 20. See also Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), I:120, IV:210, 138, 142, VI:287-9; Eitan P. Fishbane, "Perceptions of Greatness: Constructions of the Holy Man in *Shivhei ha-'Ari*," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 27 (2012), 204-5; Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, 80, 310.

³⁰ Buber's direct source appears to have been *Shivhei ha-Besht* (Kapust: 1815), p. 34a. Cf. Ben-Amos and Mintz, eds., *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, 242-44.

³¹ *Die Legende des Baalschem* (1908), 227-239. For evidence that Paula wrote this tale, working directly with the Hebrew original, see Buber's letter to her on November 10, 1906: "I am sending you today the tale about the language of the birds, which you liked and out of which something very beautiful can be [made]." *MBB*, 1:249. Presumably, Buber edited the tale that Paula composed from the original source, but Paula should receive her due credit, however belatedly.

Rabbi Aryeh that only one “who is able to extend his soul so high that it penetrates into that sphere of the upper world in which the carriage stands”—that is, the chariot of Ezekiel’s prophetic vision—“and who then sees with such clarity and depth that he apprehends the mystery of the four creatures of the carriage, to him the meaning of all the sounds on the earth is revealed.” Only when the individual attains such high mystical consciousness, the Besht insists, will “the voices of the animals on the earth and the birds in the air convey to him those secrets which the senses of man ordinarily cannot perceive.” The Besht then tells Rabbi Aryeh to bend his ear close to his mouth and to listen to him with his whole soul. “Shut yourself off in this moment from all that exists, outside of you and my words!” the Besht commands. He whispers to Rabbi Aryeh “exalted and unheard-of things that the mysteries of the carriage and its figures would disclose to him,” and as the rabbi listens to the Besht, their chariot speeds through a forest and he begins to hear at the same time a symphony of bird songs: “Wonderfully enough, he soon distinguished individual words and sentences. The whole was a great conversation, and everything had a gay, lovely meaning.” After this stirring experience of instruction and apprehension, the forest fades into the background and the Besht turns to Rabbi Aryeh:

‘Have you mastered well what you have learned from me?’

Rabbi Aryeh looked at him radiantly with self-assured eyes. ‘Yes, master,’ he replied. ‘I have understood everything well!’

Then the Baal-Shem passed the palm of his hand lightly over his forehead.

Now the rabbi forgot all, all that the Baal-Shem had revealed to his spirit. He sat there, inconsolably empty and as if burnt out, listened to the birds chirping in the furrows and understood of it as little as he ever had before this day—it was nothing but an animal’s simple, senseless sound!

But the Baal-Shem smiled and said, ‘Alas for you, Rabbi Aryeh, you have a greedy soul! Could you not devote your soul to me entirely in the moment when I wished to instil the knowledge into it?’

The Besht punishes Rabbi Aryeh because he had listened to the bird sounds in the middle of the teaching and thus failed to pay undivided attention to the Besht’s voice, as he had been

commanded to do. There is much to say about this tale, but what is most significant for our present purposes is the nature of the teaching itself. There is a particular esoteric content that one must acquire in order to comprehend the language of the birds. When Rabbi Aryeh receives that secret knowledge, he “understood everything well,” and when that knowledge was taken away from him he heard “nothing but an animal’s simple, senseless sound.” Although this rendition of the tale transforms the version from *Shivhei ha-Besht* in various literary and poetic ways, the basic portrayal of how one learns the language of the birds, as well as the basic mode of cognition and way of knowing associated with that wisdom, adheres essentially to the original source. Moreover, it is consonant with Buber’s mystical sensibilities at that time when *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* appeared. Ultimate meaning is not accessible simply in the physical, superficial sensations of birdsongs, but rather in the transcendent, subsurface unity that sounds only intimate.

In his dialogical years, Buber omitted this story from his anthologies and included instead a different “Language of the Birds” tale with a strikingly different message. This alternate *ma’aseh* is about Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Habad Hasidism, and Buber drew it from the relatively late Hasidic book *Beit Rabbi* by Hayyim Meir Heilman.³² According to Heilman’s account:

On his way to Mezritch for the second time, [Shneur Zalman] was [visiting] with the holy rabbi Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz, may his soul rest in Eden. And the rabbi Rabbi Pinhas received him with love, affection, and great respect, and requested that he stay with him to be his student and he would teach him the speech of the birds, the speech of palm trees, the account of creation, the account of the chariot, and how to go through the palaces (בהיכלות).³³ But our rabbi [Shneur Zalman] responded to him, ‘Behold, the only thing that

³² Hayyim Meir Heilman, *Beit Rabbi* (Berditshev: 1902), 4-5.

³³ The “account of creation” (מעשה בראשית) and the “account of the chariot” (מעשה מרכבה), alluding to Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot) are originally Talmudic terms that were employed later as well in philosophical and mystical contexts to refer basically to cosmology or the natural sciences and theosophy or metaphysics. For the most part, and certainly in this Hasidic source, these branches of knowledge are esoteric, transmitted only to elite students. See Babylonian Talmud, *Hagigah* 13a. The term “palaces”

is necessary and required for a person to learn and understand is the matter of unifying “one” and “forever” (יהיך אהך ועד), and they teach this very well in Mezritch. After this, when he [Shneur Zalman] arrived to Mezritch, the rabbi the Maggid, may his soul rest in Eden, said to him, ‘Rabbi Pinhas wanted to teach you the speech of birds, etc., and I will teach you the matter of the higher unification and the lower unification, etc. And, in this way, [Schneur Zalman] received (קיבל) many things from Rabbi Pinhas.

In disagreement with Rabbi Pinhas, young Shneur Zalman supposes that studying various branches of esoteric wisdom—epitomized by the “the speech of birds,” but including also the speech of other natural phenomena and the teachings of cosmology, metaphysics, and mystical ascent—is superfluous, as long as one masters the core wisdom of divine unity, represented here by the Kabbalistic praxis of arousing “upper unification” and “lower unification” through the recitation of the *Shema*, whose first two lines conclude, respectively, with “אהך” (one) and “ועד” (forever).³⁴ In a surprise ending, however, the Maggid informs Shneur Zalman that those esoteric topics Rabbi Pinhas mentioned will be part of the Hasidic curriculum. Also, after the first reference to “the speech of the birds” in this text, the author Heilman adds a footnote that leads readers to the following anecdote at the bottom of the page:

One of the rabbis among the grandchildren of our rabbi [Shneur Zalman] told that once our rabbi journeyed with his grandson, . . . and there were birds flying around and chirping. Our rabbi stuck his head out from the carriage for a while. Afterwards, he said to his grandson, ‘Behold, the chirping of birds is their speech, and they have their own entire alphabet. And anyone who has a good sense of hearing and good apprehension can understand what they are saying, etc.

Shneur Zalman’s teaching here about the language of the birds seems to offer a bold revision of the mystical paradigms of the Besht, Rabbi Pinhas, and countless others in Jewish history. After all, if anyone possessing ears and a mind can understand the meaning of birdsongs, then there is no need to first learn elaborate lessons about Ezekiel’s chariot and other metaphysical mysteries

(*heikhalot*) dates back to the so-called “Heikhalot literature” of antiquity and denotes the mystical ascent through various levels or “palaces” of divinity on the spiritual path to God.

³⁴ See Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 142-4; cf. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likkutey Amarim, Sha’ar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah*, ch. 7.

in order to grasp the sounds of nature! Perhaps, then, this footnote in *Beit Rabbi* harmonizes with young Shneur Zalman's contention that learning the arts of divine unification is sufficient—that is, if one masters the core lesson, then one attains the “good apprehension” necessary to understand the birds? However, upon closer examination, what would this mean exactly? Does Shneur Zalman suggest that mastery of unification enables one to *intuit* the language of birds, or does it rather train one to *decipher* the concealed “upper” message behind the perceptible “lower” phenomena? And if Shneur Zalman intends the latter, then isn't his teaching basically similar to the traditional one, namely, that the language of birds is only comprehensible to those with the requisite education who can penetrate through physical phenomena to spiritual reality? Indeed, the text informs us that Shneur Zalman eventually “received (קיבל)” many lessons from Rabbi Pinhas, and this key term of *Kabbalah* denotes clearly here the transmission of esoteric wisdom in service of learning “the language of the birds, etc.” Of course, it is possible that the *ma'aseh* in the footnote is simply a separate, tangential tradition from that in the body of the text, and we are not supposed to read them in light of one another.

As we shall now see, Buber's version resolves these ambiguities in *Beit Rabbi* and, moreover, it affirms and amplifies Shneur Zalman's hints of reconceptualizing the “language of the birds.” Here is the entirety of Buber's rendition:

On his second journey to Mezritch, when young Zalman visited Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz, Rabbi Pinhas wanted to teach him the language of birds and the language of plants, but he [Zalman] refused. ‘A person needs only to understand *one* thing (*braucht nur ein Ding zu verstehen*),’ he said.

In his old age, Rabbi Shneur Zalman was once driving through the country with a grandson. Birds were hopping about and twittering everywhere. The rabbi put his head out of the carriage for a while. ‘How fast they chatter!’ he said to the child. ‘They have their own alphabet. One needs only (*braucht nur*) to listen well and apprehend well in order to understand (*zu verstehn*) their language.’³⁵

³⁵ See “The Language of the Birds,” in *TH*, I:266-7. I altered the English translation slightly according to Buber's original German in order to accentuate continuities and contrasts between the versions by

The alterations that Buber makes to Heilman's version have profound implications. First of all, Buber omits all explicit references to esoteric teachings or mystical doctrines. Rabbi Pinhas wants to teach Shneur Zalman the language of birds and plants, but says nothing about the account of creation, the account of the chariot, or visionary quests through palaces. Even more striking is that Buber omits overt mystical elements associated with the Maggid himself, as well. Whereas Heilman's Shneur Zalman plans to learn "והיך אהד ועד" in Mezritch, Buber's Shneur Zalman intends to learn from the Maggid "only *one* thing" (enigmatic emphasis in Buber's German original). Moreover, Buber omits the whole exchange between Shneur Zalman and the Maggid. On one hand, this serves to clear away additional references to mystical teaching, as Heilman's Maggid had promised to teach Shneur Zalman "the matter of the higher unity and the lower unity, etc." On the other hand, however, the omission of this exchange conceals any mention of Shneur Zalman studying with Rabbi Pinhas and learning "the language of the birds" from him. In Buber's version, then, the youth's refusal to study esoteric wisdom with Rabbi Pinhas was rooted in a precocious conviction that stood the test of time. Young Shneur Zalman sensed that he needed only to learn "*one* thing" to gain a capacity to grasp the language of the birds—and he was correct. As an old man, we see him do so *intuitively*, apparently without any particular training or methods beyond knowing the "*one* thing."

Thus, Buber's version unifies unmistakably the two anecdotes in *Beit Rabbi* to form a single teaching.³⁶ He seals the seamlessness between the two through poetic repetition of the phrase "*braucht nur...zu verstehen*" (needs only...to understand), but there is an even more

Heilman versus Buber. Cf. "Die Vogelsprache," in *Der Große Maggid und seine Nachfolge*, 88-89; "Die Vogelsprache," in *MBW*, 18: §501.

³⁶ In his unpublished notebook, Buber lists the whole anecdote as "Er will die Vogelsprache nicht lernen" (He Does Not Want to Learn the Language of the Birds), and indicates to take into account the footnote.

crucial phenomenological link, as the second part of Buber's tale goes on to deepen the connection between "one thing" and the "language of the birds." From the start, Buber accentuates the sensory elements of the event: "Birds were hopping about and twittering everywhere," he adds, and after Shneur Zalman sticks his head out the window he marvels to his grandson, "How fast they chatter!" as if to hint that all he was doing out there was *listening*. And whereas Heilman's Shneur Zalman suggests that understanding the speech of the birds requires "good apprehension," presumably through prior acquisition or inborn aptitude, Buber's Shneur Zalman says simply that one must "apprehend well," intimating a more spontaneous engagement with what is presently audible. It is significant that Buber uses the German verb "fassen" here, which bears the same double-meaning of mental understanding and physical grasping as in the English "apprehension" and, more importantly, the Hebrew word "תפיסה" used in *Beit Rabbi*. Buber perceives and preserves this subtlety in the original Hasidic source. Thus, the connection between "one thing" and the language of the birds in Buber's tale—if not also in the original *mayse*—is a fundamental unity between spiritual meaning and sensory moments. The "inner" meaning of phenomena is disclosed when the listener attends wholly to the "outer" sensations themselves. The medium is the message. This is a far cry from Buber's earlier legend of the Besht, wherein the divine message of birdsongs consisted of "individual words and sentences" encoded esoterically in "simple, senseless sound," decipherable only to spiritual adepts with the secret keys. Whereas the young mystical Buber conceived of "unity" in terms of an ecstatic experience of self-world oneness, the older dialogical Buber regards "unity" as a full-bodied convergence of spirituality and materiality in earthly moments of encounter.³⁷ However, let us

³⁷ In this context, it is helpful to take a second look at Buber's rendering of "*yahid ehad va'ed*" as "one thing." His intimation in this tale that mystical "unification" is essentially the devotion of undivided attention to the wholeness of what is happening harmonizes with his portrayal of the Hasidic conception of *yihud* ("unification") in his introduction to this very anthology. "Unification," he suggests, is precisely

not forget that both of Buber's starkly different tales that called "Language of the Birds" derived from Hasidic texts, and while he (and Paula, in the first case) altered the sources in his retelling, he did so in relation to motifs and messages that were genuinely or at least plausibly present in the raw material. And did the Hasidic authors of classics such as *Shivhei ha-Besht* and *Beit Rabbi* do anything less? Perhaps not. But, again, Buber and his intended audience's position outside of the Hasidic world is what classifies him as a Neo-Hasidic writer.

one's "life system in general," "an act," and "an event of meeting." *Yihud* means "nothing other than the ordinary life of man, only concentrated and directed to the goal of unification." See Buber, "Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement," *OMH*, 133-135. On the evolution of Buber's concept of unity, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Problem of Unity in the Thought of Martin Buber," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 27.3 (1989): 423-444.

Appendix C: A Hermeneutical History of *Na'aseh ve-Nishm'a*

In what follows, I will briefly trace the major trends of Jewish interpretations of the phrase *נעשה ונשמע* (Exod. 24:7) from antiquity through medieval exegesis, then show how some Hasidic sages waged their own revolutionary reinterpretations. In short, the exegetical history of *נעשה ונשמע* assumes astonishing forms that come to bear directly upon the central themes of this dissertation, and serve to highlight the dialectical relationship between Hasidic sources and Buber's own theological sensibilities.¹

In its original biblical context, the response of the children of Israel to receiving God's Law at Mount Sinai seems to have meant essentially, "We shall do and we shall *obey*." Indeed, the biblical Hebrew verb *נשמע* has a range of meanings that includes hearing, hearkening, and *heeding*. And in the particular context of Exodus 24:7, it served apparently to emphasize the people's obedience, so one might understand the whole phrase essentially as "We will faithfully do!"² From this perspective, the overall gist of the declaration would be approximately the same as the neighboring verses, "All that God has said, we shall do (*נעשה*)" (Exod. 19:8), and "All of the things that God has said, we shall do (*נעשה*)" (Exod. 24:3).

However, already in classical Rabbinic interpretation, commentators began to interpret *נשמע* hyperliterally as "we shall hear," and drew attention to an enigmatic ordering of operations in the statement, "We shall do and we shall *hear*." After all, wouldn't one wish to hear the contents of the commandments before promising to do them? And yet, according to these ancient

¹ For Buber's own interpretations of the phrase, see above in chapter three.

² See Exod. 24:7 in *The Jewish Study Bible*, edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 162.

exegetes, it was precisely this element of unexpectedness that exhibited Israel’s valor and virtue at Mount Sinai, for they displayed thereby a radical, unconditional acceptance of God’s Law. The fact that the people *הקדימו נעשה לנשמע*, “gave precedence to ‘we shall do’ before ‘we shall hear,’” became a common refrain in Rabbinic exegesis until today. In the most famous and foundational example, found in Tractate Shabbat of the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Elazar teaches that “when Israel gave precedence to ‘we shall do’ before ‘we shall hear,’ a heavenly voice went forth and said to them: Who revealed to My children this secret that the ministering angels use! As it is written, *Bless the Lord, O His angels, mighty in strength, who fulfill (עשי) His word, hearkening (לשמע) to the voice of His word* (Ps. 103:20). First they fulfill and then they hearken.”³ This notion that *נעשה ונשמע* is the sublime “secret of the ministering angels” could be, and certainly has been, interpreted in myriad ways. But in this particular Talmudic context, it is clear that the phrase *נעשה ונשמע* remains essentially a statement of radical obedience, however reimagined it is. Indeed, the discussion featuring Rabbi Elazar’s teaching above emerges immediately after a midrash that Israel accepted the Torah initially under duress, an image that would certainly help to explain Israel’s unreflective rush to declare their commitment! Moreover, just several lines after Rabbi Elazar’s teaching, the source continues:

There was a certain heretic who saw Raba engrossed in his studies while the fingers of his hand were under his feet, and he ground them down, so that his fingers spurted blood. “You rash people,” he said, “who gave precedence to your mouth before your ears! You still persist in your rashness. First you should have listened—if within your powers, accept; if not, you should not have accepted!” [Raba] said to him, “We who go in perfection, it is written of us, ‘The integrity of the upright shall guide them’ (Prov. 11:3), and of those who go in perversity, it is written of them, ‘The deviousness of the treacherous leads them to ruin’ (ibid.).

³ BT Shabbat, 88a.

This image of Raba's painful posture and bleeding hands during Torah study showcases the yoke of the Law in the most striking terms. An onlooker who has rejected the Rabbinic way concludes that such suffering could have easily been avoided if only Israel had listened to the contract before they committed themselves eternally to it. However, despite the painfulness of this path, Raba affirms that his people's unconditional acceptance is indeed the path of righteousness that will be rewarded, whereas traitors will surely meet their doom.⁴

From here on, in midrashic, philosophical, and mystical discourse alike, the words *נעשה ונשמע*—and the notion that Israel “gave precedence to *נעשה* before *נשמע*”—become shorthands for Israel's zealous obedience and unwavering acceptance of Torah, which are deemed to be fantastically praiseworthy. To be sure, there are countless hermeneutical innovations over the centuries, but the overwhelming majority point somehow, nonetheless, to the quality of Israel's unconditional acceptance of Torah, the faithfulness of their obedience before the Law, or the strength of their yearning to fulfill the Law. That is, almost all commentators invoke the phrase in order to characterize the people's *normative* and *behavioral* orientations in relation to God.⁵

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, such as citations of “We shall do and we shall *hear*” as proof that no Israelite at Mount Sinai was deaf,⁶ or interpretations of the verse to mean that Israel “shall do” what is commanded now and also “shall hear/obey” what will be

⁴ On the Israelite declaration, *נעשה ונשמע*, as a direct contrast to the other nations of the world who inquired calculatingly about the contents of Torah and then subsequently declined it, see *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, ed. Jacob Z. Lauterbach (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), Ba-ḥodesh V, pp. 316-317.

⁵ There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, such as citations of “We shall do and we shall *hear*” as proof that no Israelite at Mount Sinai was deaf (see, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Ba-ḥodesh IX, p. 338; Zohar 2:82b), or interpretations of the verse to mean that Israel “shall do” what is commanded now and also “shall hear/obey” what will be commanded in the future (see, for example, commentaries of Rashbam and *Ma'or va-Shemesh* on Exod. 24:7). However, for our present purposes, what is most important to note is that the term *נשמע* tends to be interpreted within the semantic range of hearing, hearkening, and heeding—and certainly not yet as intellectual “comprehending” or “understanding.”

⁶ See, for example, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Ba-ḥodesh IX, 338; Zohar 2:82b.

commanded in the future.⁷ However, for our present purposes, what is most important to note is that the term *נשמע* tends to be interpreted within the semantic range of hearing, hearkening, and heeding—and certainly not yet as intellectual comprehending or understanding.

This begins to change in Hasidism. Although, unsurprisingly, many *tsaddiqim* continue to employ *נעשה ונשמע* as an illustration of Israel’s normative commitment to God, there is now a striking upsurge in reflections upon what this two-word phrase says about the psychological, emotional, and spiritual textures of spiritual life, and what we would call today the phenomenology of religious practice. For a growing number of Hasidic sages, at least as far back as the Maggid of Mezritsh, the term *נשמע* does not only express what Jews did in the past at Mount Sinai when they “heard” God’s commandments, but even more pressingly what Jews are doing in the present whenever they undertake acts of devotion. Moreover, this “hearing” is now conceived to be the direct *result* of the “doing.” Thus, like their Rabbinic predecessors, Hasidic exegetes are struck by the perplexing order of “doing” prior to “hearing,” but whereas those ancient and medieval commentators drew conclusions therefrom about Israel’s unconditional obedience, these later sages perceive a different message: It is precisely *through the doing* that one apprehends or “hears” divinity. Religious insight emerges by means of religious action.

For example, the Maggid of Mezritsh (1704–1772) alludes to *נעשה ונשמע* in his teaching that when one performs a commandment with proper intention and focus, one unites the worlds of “action (*עשייה*),” “speech (*דיבור*)”—also known as the world of “hearing (*שמיעה*)”—and “thought (*מחשבה*).”⁸ While this unification refers to the various dimensions of God’s revelation of the Law, it refers no less to the practitioner’s own climb up those mystical rungs, from the bodily “doing” of the commandment, to the personal “hearing” of the commandment, and all the

⁷ See, for example, commentaries of Rashbam and *Ma’or va-Shemesh* on Exod. 24:7

⁸ See Dov Baer of Mezritsch, *Or Torah* (New York, 2006), parshat Shemot, 96-100.

way to the intellectual comprehension or “thought” of the divine Source of Torah itself. And while the Maggid does not explicitly quote Exodus 24:7 here, he nonetheless makes clear that it is through “doing” that one “hears,” and that this hearing is at the very least a gateway to “thought.” In fact, his intimations of the verse are so detectable that a later formulation of this very teaching has the Maggid referring directly to נעשה ונשמע in this context, although this alteration is most likely a reflection of how Hasidic reinterpretations of Exodus 24:7 took shape over time.⁹

One of the Maggid’s disciples, Rabbi Menaḥem Naḥum of Chernobyl (1730-1797), went even further than his teacher did to interpret נעשה ונשמע as representing a mechanism for theological insight. In a remarkable sermon,¹⁰ Rabbi Naḥum observes that the spiritual path is rocky and erratic, winding constantly between expansive awareness of the divine energy in all existence and more narrow modes of mindfulness in which that holy presence is eclipsed. However, he affirms that both of these states are essential parts of spiritual life, as the lows make room for the highs. Furthermore, in those inevitable periods of narrow consciousness, Rabbi Naḥum suggests that we can remind ourselves, “The whole earth is filled with God’s gravity,” and “Even now, at this level, here too there is Hashem, may He be blessed, for ‘there is no place empty of Him,’ although He is very constricted.”¹¹ With such patient and passionate

⁹ See Ḥayyim Avraham Deitschman, *Shemu‘ot Ṭovot* (Warsaw, 1938), 49:

...וזהו מ"ש ישראל נעשה ונשמע ר"ל מתחילה נעשה אח"כ ע"י מעשה שהוא עולם העשי' ונשמע ר"ל שנכנס לעולם השמיעה

Although the editor of *Shemu‘ot Ṭovot* claims that the work draws directly from Levi Yitshak of Berditchev’s own manuscripts based on the sermons of the Maggid of Mezritsch, it is clear that this book incorporates material from the era of its publication (first edition in 1938). On this source, see Mayse, *Beyond the Letters*, 70-72.

¹⁰ See Menaḥem Naḥum of Chernobyl, *Me‘or Eynayim* (Brooklyn, 2006), parshat Yitro, 171-173.

¹¹ Menaḥem Naḥum of Chernobyl, *Me‘or Eynayim*, 172. The maxims to which Rabbi Naḥum refers are, respectively, from Isaiah 6:3 and *Tiqqunei Zohar* 123b. This pairing of verses is extremely common in Hasidic discourse.

steadfastness, one’s consciousness will surely open up again into more spacious and sensitive states of spiritual awareness, where familiar metaphysical maxims are re-revealed in their palpable fullness. “And this is what is called ‘we-shall-do precedes we-shall-hear (נעשה קודם לנושמע).” Rabbi Naḥum associates the narrow state with נעשה, wherein one must *do* what is necessary to stay spiritually afloat amidst conditions of constriction, and he identifies the expansive state with נושמע, wherein the storm clouds part and one finally *hears* the deepest truths of existence once again. Also, for Rabbi Naḥum, this “hearing” that comes in the wake of doing is more precisely a personal comprehension, as “the essence of hearing (השמיעה) is the language of understanding (הבנה).”¹² Indeed, this is why God exclaims, according to the Talmudic teaching we saw earlier, “Who (מי) revealed this secret to My son” following Israel’s cry of נעשה ונשמע,¹³ for the transformative yearning and searching reflected in that word, “who,” is the very stimulant for the flowering of mindfulness: “When they think about ‘Who’ their life-force is, this [very question] reveals to them ‘this secret’ to give precedence to נעשה before נושמע.”¹⁴ Thus, even at times of despair or numbness, one must do the hard work of wondering and seeking in order to attain genuine awareness of God. For Rabbi Naḥum, therefore, the phrase נעשה ונשמע is primarily

¹² Rabbi Naḥum’s identification here of “hearing” with “understanding (הבנה)” inverts the Zoharic identification of “hearing” with *Shekhinah* (through Whom human prayer is heard) and “doing” with “understanding (בינה).” Thus, according to this medieval mystical reading, the fact that Israel gave precedence to “doing” before “hearing” demonstrates the strength of the “yearning in their hearts to draw near” to God. See Zohar 3:108b. The contradiction between this and Rabbi Naḥum’s teaching affirms that Hasidic commentators begin to interpret Exod. 24:7 according to new phenomenological sensibilities.

¹³ Note how Rabbi Naḥum rephrases the original Talmudic question—“Who revealed to My children this secret that the ministering angels use (מי גילה לבני רז זה שמלאכי השרת משתמשין בו)?”—in terms that emphasize the individual (“My son”) and his own religious immediacy, without any mention of angelic intermediaries.

¹⁴ Menaḥem Naḥum of Chernobyl, *Me’or Eynayim*, 173.

a map for spiritual growth and flourishing, testifying that the most profound insights into divinity can only come on the heels of religious labor.¹⁵

A couple decades or so later, Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav (1772-1811) also interpreted the two-word formulation as a principle of spiritual development, although in his own idiosyncratic way. The terms *נעשה* and *נשמע*, he suggests, correspond respectively to what is revealed (*ניגלות*) and what is concealed (*נסתרות*), and in this case, he is referring primarily to the revealed commandments and the concealed divine Source of those commandments, which one must gradually learn how to grasp and, moreover, how to integrate into one's practice.¹⁶ Rabbi Naḥman elucidates this dynamic with reference to the text of the Torah itself:

נעשה is in the aspect of what is revealed, that is, the commandments that everyone can observe according to his level. And *נשמע* is in the aspect of what is concealed, that which is so high and concealed that one is unable to make a practice out of it (*לעשות עבודה בזה*). For example: Alongside every commandment are words surrounding the commandment...such as 'And God spoke to Moses,' and the other words of the Torah surrounding the commandment. And the practice (*העבודה*) that is in these words of Torah surrounding the commandment is in the aspect of *נשמע*, the aspect of concealed, for while we can fulfill the commandment itself, we do not know the practice that is in these [surrounding] words, and so they are in the aspect of *נשמע*, the aspect of concealed.¹⁷

It is fairly straightforward, Rabbi Naḥman suggests, to observe the revealed commandments, but what is more complex is to grasp how to enact the Torah surrounding those commandments, and that is why the latter is called "concealed." And the way to unveil the divine con-text of the commandments is to embody them. Hence, the seemingly strange ordering of *נעשה ונשמע*, for one must *do* the commandments in order to *hear*, as it were, what is concealed within/around them. Moreover, every such disclosure through performance reveals a new level of concealment that

¹⁵ See also Rabbi Naḥum's use of the phrase in his commentary on parshat Ḥayyei Sarah in *Me'or Eynayim*, 68-73, esp. 69-71. In this sermon, Rabbi Naḥum suggests that one must first embody the thirteen attributes of God in order to then draw down and cleave to the supernal, spiritual wisdom (*הכמה*) of God, from which the Torah springs.

¹⁶ See Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei Moharan* (Jerusalem, 2015), XXII, pp. 299-303.

¹⁷ Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei Moharan*, XXII, p. 300.

requires further practice in order to integrate into one's religious life and consciousness. Thus, *נעשה ונשמע* is no less than a roadmap for a life-long process of revelation through praxis, for “at every level, and in every world, there is an aspect of *נעשה ונשמע*.”¹⁸ Stage by stage, one journeys to increasingly high summits in the mystical chain of mountains, directing one's “listening heart (לב שמע)” ever more prayerfully into the “worship of the heart (עבודה שבלב).”¹⁹ And, finally, the very few enlightened ones—perhaps only *tsaddiqim*, perhaps only Naḥman—witness the very fountainhead of creation and the burning sunrise of all being (עד שיבוא בראשית נקדת הבריאה, שהוא (תחלת האצילות)). “And there, too, there is an aspect of *נעשה ונשמע*.”²⁰ At this spiritual summit, however, what is done and what is heard converge in “the actual Torah of God (תורת ה' ממש).”²¹ Employing the Neoplatonic maps and terminology of medieval Kabbalah, Rabbi Naḥman envisions how the highest possible apprehension or “hearing” of God depends entirely on the devotional acts of personal practice.²²

As demonstrated in chapter three, the Kotsker rebbe also has a striking interpretation of Exod. 24:7 in this spirit, which Buber reformulates for his Hasidic anthologies and also goes on to integrate into his own philosophical writings. And without waging any hasty claim of direct influence, we may marvel at the number of modern Jewish thinkers who come after Buber to interpret the phrase *נעשה ונשמע* in terms of a deeper theological understanding that emerges through bodily action. In 1955, Abraham Joshua Heschel—who was indeed a reader of Buber, and yet also a descendent of Hasidic *tsaddiqim* and a self-proclaimed disciple of the Kotsker—

¹⁸ Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei Moharan*, XXII, p. 301.

¹⁹ Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei Moharan*, XXII, 300-301. Regarding the two “heart” quotations, see I Kings 3:9; *b. Ta'anit* 2a.

²⁰ Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei Moharan*, XXII, 302.

²¹ Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei Moharan*, XXII, 302. Both designations are used here interchangeably.

²² On this interpretation of Exodus 24:7 by Rabbi Naḥman, see also Michael Fishbane, “The Mystery of Dance According to Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav,” in idem, *The Exegetical Imagination*, 183-184.

appeals explicitly to Exodus 24:7 and Tractate Shabbat 88a to corroborate his claim that genuine theology turns “upside down the order of attitudes as conceived by our abstract thinking,” and dissolves binaries of “thought and fact, the abstract and the concrete, theory and experience.”²³ In 1964, Emmanuel Levinas delivered a Talmudic lecture in which he employed the very same sources to make similar claims about the epistemological abyss between philosophy and religion,²⁴ and Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg goes on later to reconfigure Levinas’s discussion in her own hermeneutical tapestry.²⁵ And the list goes on.²⁶ Again, my point is not necessarily that Buber was responsible in any directly causal way for the transmission of Hasidic interpretations of Exodus 24:7 to the non-Hasidic Jewish world—although that was surely the case for some of his readers. A more defensible and, dare I say, intriguing claim is that conceptions of theological insight as inseparable from earthly action are particularly appealing for modern thinkers. And despite all the immense cultural divides between Haskalah and Hasidism, Berlin and Berdichev,

²³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: 1983), 281-282.

²⁴ See Levinas, “The Temptation of Temptation,” in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50. In fact, Levinas even credits Buber with the “ingenious interpretation” of Exod. 24:7 as a statement that action leads to understanding. *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁵ See Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 309-313.

²⁶ For example, see the comments by Jay Michaelson, a contemporary Jewish spiritual writer with a Buddhist bent who has undoubtedly read Buber, Heschel, Levinas, and Zornberg, and who has also been influenced deeply by Hasidic sources: “*Na’aseh v’nishmah*, say the Israelites at Sinai: we will do, and by doing, we hope to understand.” Jay Michaelson, *God in Your Body: Kabbalah, Mindfulness and Embodied Spiritual Practice* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2007), xiv. See also: “Imagine... if one only viewed maps of the world, and never left home; such would be the incompleteness of *nishmah*, ‘we will understand,’ without *na’aseh*, ‘we will do.’ Indeed, as the verse from Exodus suggests, experience may generate theology, rather than flow from it.” *Idem*, *Everything is God: The Radical Path of Nondual Judaism* (Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2009), 149. Cf. “Like the children of Israel said, *na’aseh v’nishmah*—when I do the work, I hear the voice. But only then.” *Ibid.*, 124. Michael Fishbane has also embraced Exod. 24:7 very insightfully as a motif in his theological writings, although in a somewhat different way. According to his own exegetical imagination, the Sinaitic declaration “We shall do and we shall hear” expresses a commitment to being attentively responsive and “attuned” vis-à-vis the ever changing textures of moments, which is also always already a thoroughly hermeneutical activity. See Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*, 82-83; see also *ibid.*, 73, 149.

it remains the case that Hasidic communities were indeed touched by the material conditions and intellectual *Zeitgeist* of modernity. However, this broad intellectual-historical question is, too, beyond the scope of my dissertation. In short, my relatively modest claims in the above discussion have been the following: (1) Interpretations of the phrase *נעשה ונשמע* as a declaration that religious action engenders theological understanding seem to have emerged in Hasidism—and if there are any pre-Hasidic precedents for that interpretation of Exodus 24:7, then we can at least say that this gloss became far more widespread in Hasidism than ever before in the history of Jewish exegesis. (2) Buber himself was clearly influenced by Hasidic interpretations of Exodus 24:7—at least by that of the Kotsker, who was in turn likely influenced by the commentaries of his predecessors—and Buber integrated that exegesis dialectically into his own religious thought. Together, these two claims shed light on the relationship between Buber’s notions of embodied theological cognition and his intimate engagement with Hasidic sources.

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