

THE VOID OF GOD, OR THE PARADOX OF THE PIOUS ATHEISM: FROM SCHOLEM TO DERRIDA

AGATA BIELIK-ROBSON

UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM AND POLISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

Abstract. My essay will take as its point of departure the paragraph from Gershom Scholem's "Reflections on Jewish Theology," in which he depicts the modern religious experience as the one of the "void of God" or as "pious atheism". I will first argue that the "void of God" cannot be reduced to atheistic non-belief in the presence of God. Then, I will demonstrate the further development of the Scholemian notion of the 'pious atheism' in Derrida, especially in his Lurianic treatment of Angelus Silesius, whose modern mysticism emerges in Derrida's reading as the 'almost-atheism' (*presque-atheisme*). The interesting feature of this development is that, while for Scholem, the 'void of God' is a predominantly negative experience, for Derrida, it becomes an affirmative model of modern — not just Jewish, but more generally, Abrahamic — religiosity which, on the one hand, touches upon atheistic non-belief in the divine presence here and now, yet, on the other, still insists on commemorating the 'withdrawn God' through his 'traces.' What, therefore, for Scholem, constitutes the ultimate cry of despair, best embodied in Kafka's work — for Derrida, reveals the more positive face of the modern predicament in which God has *absented* himself in order to make room for the creaturely reality. And while Scholem envisages redemption as the full restoration of the divine presence — Derrida redefines redemption as the 'pious' work of deconstruction to be undertaken in the 'almost-atheistic' condition of irreversible separation between God and the world.

The gift would be that which does not obey the principle of reason: It is, it ought to be, it owes itself to be without reason, without wherefore, and without foundation.

Derrida, *Given Time*, 156.

I. INTRODUCTION

My essay takes as its point of departure the paragraph from Gershom Scholem's "Reflections on Jewish Theology," in which he depicts the modern religious experience as the one of the "void of God": the Gnostic *kenoma* contrasted with the divine *pleroma*, the fullness of being, life, and joy, which is dramatically lacking in the created world. According to Scholem, the Jewish modernity proceeds under the auspices of Isaac Luria, who, in his late kabbalistic conception of *tsimtsum* and "breaking of the vessels," inaugurated modern theology focused on God's absence in the world and on the messianic hope of redemption which will bring back the divine presence in the act of the "renewed creation." For Scholem, therefore, living in the traces of the withdrawn God...

...is the point at which the horrifying experience of God's absence in our world collides irreconcilably and catastrophically with the doctrine of a Creation that renews itself... The emptying of the world to a meaningless void not illuminated by any ray of meaning or direction is the experience of him whom I would call *the pious atheist*. The void is the abyss, the chasm or the crack which opens up in all that exists. This is the experience of modern man, surpassingly well depicted in all its desolation by Kafka, for whom nothing has remained of God but the void — in Kafka's sense, to be sure, the void of God.¹

¹ Gershom G. Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, ed. Werner Dannhauser (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1976), 283.

My interpretation of this paragraph has few stages. First, I want to show that the Kafkan paradoxical belief in the absence of God cannot be reduced to the simply atheistic non-belief in the presence of God. Then, I attempt to demonstrate the further development of the Scholemian notion of the “pious atheism”: most of all in Jacques Derrida, especially in his Lurianic treatment of Angelus Silesius whose early-modern mysticism emerges in Derrida’s reading as the “almost-atheism” (*presque-athéisme*). The interesting feature of this development is that, while for Scholem, the “void of God” is a predominantly negative experience, for Derrida, it becomes an affirmative model of the modern — not just Jewish, but more generally, Abrahamic — religiosity which, on the one hand, touches upon the atheistic non-belief in the divine presence here and now, yet, on the other, still insists on commemorating the “withdrawn God” through his “traces.” What, therefore, for Scholem, constitutes the ultimate cry of despair, best embodied in Kafka’s work — for Derrida, reveals the more positive face of the modern predicament in which God has *absented* himself in order to make room for the creaturely reality. The difference between the pious atheism as belief in the absence of God and the simple atheism as non-belief in the presence of God helps thus to define the modern *paradox of creation*, which perceives the “void of God” as the necessary condition of the emergence of the created world. In the conclusion, I will argue that the formula of the “pious atheism,” far from being an external form of non-belief, follows from the internal logic of the monotheistic faith.

II. PIOUS ATHEISM

The Derridean development of Scholem’s “void of God” motif is not just the simple reversal of the latter’s position: Scholem’s reaction to the divine absence is, in fact, highly ambivalent. In the interview belonging to the same, late, stage of his thought, Scholem states seemingly paradoxically: “my secularism is not secular”² which may suggest that his vision of the created reality is not altogether negative. In the same dialogue, he also implies a complementary statement which could be paraphrased as: “my mysticism is not mystical.” While the former paradox points to the zone of non-secular secularity, or what Scholem himself calls a “pious atheism”³ the latter points to the equally contaminated realm of a non-mystical mysticism, or in his own words, a “frustrated mysticism,”⁴ which no longer desires to witness transcendence in its purity and returns back to the world to look for the “impure” traces of God, scattered within the immanence. According to Scholem, it is precisely this dialectical manoeuvre, creating the *in-between* sphere of *negotiation*, as the intersection of the transcendent and the immanent realms, which makes possible to *think* the idea of revelation — instead of relegating it instantaneously to the apophatic realm of the unthinkable. Scholem does not claim the authorship of this dialectical manoeuvre; he attributes it to the dialectics of the Judaic tradition, from Talmud to Kafka, that had to negotiate with the aporias of radical transcendence in order to find a way to *talk* about its traces in creaturely reality, without which it could not have become a *tradition* understood predominantly as *Tradierbarkeit*: the written and spoken means of transmission.

The dialectics of the trace produces thus two equally dialectical positions, which perceive the interplay of the divine presence/ absence from two different angles: *mysticism of separation* on the one hand, and *pious atheism*, on the other. The separated “non-mystical mysticism” seeks God’s past signatures, the left-overs of the always bygone divine presence; unlike participatory mysticism, it can never witness a full revelation of God’s glory in the world. The pious atheism, on the other hand, relies on the negative knowledge of separation, which suppresses the longing to commune with absent God, at the same time, however, preserves a dim, irretrievable memory of the world as created. The *God of Void*, as pursued by

2 Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 46.

3 *Ibid.*, 283.

4 Gershom G. Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism.” In *The Messianic Idea in Judaism: And Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (Schocken Books, 1995), 2.

the separated mystic, and the *Void of God*, as experienced by the pious atheist — are two complementary visions that originate from the kabbalistic theology of the trace.

Scholem's ambivalence towards this dialectics refers mostly to the motif of the absence of God. On the one hand, he calls the divine trace a place of the metaphysical *catastrophe* in which transcendence and immanence come into a terrifying clash: "the point at which the horrifying experience of God's absence in our world collides irreconcilably and catastrophically with the doctrine of a Creation that renews itself."⁵ Yet, just few lines later, Scholem reminds us that if it weren't for the "creation of the void," the world as such could not have emerged; the void, therefore, is not just a side-effect of a cosmic error (as in the original Gnostic doctrine of *kenoma*), but originates from a "pious" intention, i.e., has divine beginnings itself –

Creation out of nothing, from the void, could be nothing other than creation of the void, that is, of the possibility of thinking of anything that was not God. Without such an act of self-limitation, after all, there would be only God — and obviously nothing else. A being that is not God could only become possible and originate by virtue of such a contraction, such a paradoxical retreat of God into himself. By positing a negative factor in Himself, God liberates creation.⁶

The ambivalence, therefore, arises at the point of intersection of the two colliding interpretations of the *Void of God*, which then immediately reflect on the two theologies of the *God of Void*. On the one reading, which comes to the fore most strikingly in Scholem's quote on Kafka, the Void of God appears as the Gnostic *kenoma*: the desert of negativity which can only signalize the condition of ultimate abandonment. But on the other reading, implied in the last quote devoted directly to Isaac Luria's concept of *tsimtsum*, the Void of God appears as a necessary condition of the creaturely act in which being separated from God does not announce sheer negativity of abandonment, but, to the contrary, a possibility of creating — and then liberating — something else than God himself. From the beginning, the *atheism of piety* and *mysticism of separation* can thus take two very disparate forms: either the Gnostic lament over the world as separated/ abandoned by God — or the dialectical praise of the world as separated/ made different from God. In the former case, the divine absence will be experienced in all its painful "desolation" which opens cracks of incongruity in every created thing (as in Kafka's prose) — in the latter, however, the divine absence will be experienced as a generous withdrawal which first allowed and then liberated creation, leaving it not-yet perfect, but certainly not doomed.

In the Gnostic view, *kenoma* only helplessly gestures towards the Hidden God who abandoned his botched work beyond repair, always endangered by the annihilation which will make new, better, creation possible — but in the more affirmative Lurianic perspective, the Void of God merely contains traces of the Hidden God who himself withdrew from the world in order to leave it to its own, however imperfect, devices. Scholem's ambivalence, therefore, circles round the rhetorical decision which theological idiom to follow in order to capture the monotheistic condition of separation: whether the one emphasizing God's hiddenness as abandonment or the other interpreting God's hiddenness as liberating withdrawal. And while the former belongs to the rhetorical arsenal of traditional theology, easily falling into the mode of lamentation over the world as *agunah*, the "deserted bride" — the latter promises a change of tone, which pays more attention to the created reality and, in this manner, chimes better with the modern process of secularization. Yet, on one proviso: secularization conceived not as an epoch of falling away from God, but as an era of the theological change of emphasis pointing now to the *saeculum*, i.e., creation as worldliness. It is precisely this shift of religious interest which the paradoxical formulations — "pious atheism," "non-secular secularity," and "non-mystical mysticism" — try to capture.

5 Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 283.

6 Ibid.

III. A-THEISTIC MYSTICISM

Although confusing from the point of traditional theology, these formulations make sense as harbingers of a new theological approach which no longer centres on God conceived as the Absolute, but on the World conceived as a creaturely domain.⁷ Modernity, therefore, could be also seen as an epoch realizing a theological destiny: not so much a time of the Nietzschean “death of God,” which paves way towards the simple atheism of non-belief, as the time of the “withdrawal of God” who conceals himself for the sake of created beings. Yet, for the theologians — and Scholem belongs to them — it is still a “painful” process which they can only observe with an anxious ambivalence.⁸ It is rather the secular thinkers, writers, and artists of early modernity who flesh out the paradox out of the pious atheism with their freshly awakened interest in the world.

Thus, while theological discourse, still troubled by the loss of its beloved object, God the Absolute, lags behind modern transformations, they can be best witnessed in the domain of aesthetics: the most important here being the transition *from totality to detail*.⁹ When we look at the 17th century Dutch still natures, we immediately notice the epochal change in the symbolic representation of the world: the totalistic images of the Great Chain of Being, characteristic of the late middle ages, give way to a more nominalistic vision which focuses on singularities isolated from the general context. Willem Claesz’s lemon peel or a freshly cut flower have more light in their shiny texture than all Italian renaissance overtly holy pictures; they are also much more alive than the misleading name of the genre, *nature morte*, suggests. Full of their own inner luminosity, the “details” as if step out of the canvas which cannot contain and control them. Loosely arrayed in accidental configurations, they celebrate their singularity which can come to the fore only thanks to the act of separation. The exaggerated non-togetherness of the Dutch paintings, which deliberately represent each thing as isolated, is thus an aesthetic articulation of the modern tendency towards *secularization*, by Hans Blumenberg translated as *Verweltlichung*: the passage into the world and all the worldly singularities that constitute it, liberated from the divine “chains” which used to shape creation according to God’s sacred hierarchy of beings.¹⁰

In his *Theory of the Novel* — the book which takes the transformation of modern aesthetics as its theme — Georg Lukacs explains this passage with the help of the Hegelian metaphor of *Lichtwesen*, which, in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tells the story of creation in terms of God’s self-occlusion and self-contraction. The light, once concentrated solely in one highest being claiming all love and attention, now gets distributed more evenly and less hierarchically, thus allowing the world to emerge as the horizontal multitude of beings. No longer blinded by the source of light, which now sets over the horizon of the world, the creaturely “details” can finally reveal themselves and offer to an epic kind of contemplation which produces both, Dutch paintings and modern novel. The visibility of the worldly detail, therefore, becomes possible once the all-pervading light of the divine *Lichtwesen* “sets down” and, instead of consuming all particular forms in its fire, lets them come to the fore. And if, for Hegel, the so called Oriental metaphysics favours the undifferentiated totality in which all singularities dissolve — the Occidental on-

7 The ‘traditional theology’ is obviously a very vague term, but we can nonetheless stipulate its meaning as the one which privileges the mystical approach to God combined with the strictly transcendent vision of the *eschaton* and turns them into the paradigmatic model of the religious experience. It was precisely this stipulation which made Karl Löwith criticize the modern immanentist development of Judeo-Christianity as an ‘illegitimate innovation’ of the monotheistic faith, ultimately lacking the mystical/transcendent legitimacy. See Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949), 155.

8 Maurice Blanchot, glossing on Scholem, puts it very aptly: “It is as though the creation of the world, or its existence, would have evacuated God from himself, posed God as a lack of God and therefore had as its corollary a sort of ontological atheism that could only be abolished along with the world itself. *Where there is a world there is, painfully, the lack of God*”: Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, ed. Susan Hanson (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993), 117; my emphasis.

9 The originally French word, which emerged in the 17th century, ‘detail,’ signifies detachment and partition: *de-tail* or *de-taille* means cut from the totality. *Detailler* derives from the Latin *talea*, to cut or twig.

10 Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, ed. Robert M. Wallace (MIT Press, 1985), 47.

tology favours the *abendländisch*, Western, delicate light of the setting sun which gives the primacy to the worldly *pleroma* of infinite details:

Light disperses its unitary nature into an infinity of forms, and offers up itself as a sacrifice to being-for-self, so that from its substance the individual may take an enduring existence for itself.¹¹

Ernst Bloch, at that time still Lukacs' friend, interprets this transition as the development of *mystical nominalism*, which should not be confused with the dreary doctrine of Ockham's razor that produced the disenchanting effect of modern enlightenment, but the rich and ecstatic reverse of modern nominalism as the celebration of ontological multitude emancipating itself from the Neoplatonic hierarchy of universals.¹² While science proceeds along the road of instrumental reason, modern art, its less profane twin, experiments with the first intimations of this new worldly "mysticism of separation" — of the *détaille* world full of inner *details* — which, at the same time, is a form of the "pious atheism": a-theistic, because no longer focused on God only, but also pious, because referring to the divine traces within the creaturely immanence. In this new type of mystical nominalism, God is still obliquely present — yet, paradoxically, by his absence, or rather, by the active process of self-absenting: every time a singular thing comes to the fore, alighted with its own luminosity, God moves away from the centre, folds himself in the act of *tsimtsum*, and hides in self-withdrawal.

Even before the Dutch Paintings, this new vision becomes developed by the first prophet of the modern mystical nominalism: Angelus Silesius whose baroque sacred epigrams coin a new idiom of vision breaking away from the traditional Neoplatonic hierarchy of beings (still very much present in Meister Eckhart and *theologia deutsch*, Silesius' direct precursors). Silesius' mysticism indeed anticipates the developments of modernity. It is, in fact, a mystico-poetic variation on Duns Scotus' scholastic thesis on the *univocatio entis*, now transformed into an intense vision of all things existing on the same plane with God, equally strongly and *causa sui*, "without why" (*ohne warum*). As in Silesius' most famous distich:

*Die Rose ist ohne warum; sie blühet, weil sie blühet
Sie achtet nicht ihrer selbs, fragt nicht ob man sie siehet*¹³

The rose which is rose which is rose... *ad infinitum* (as in Gertrude Stein's modernist paraphrase of Angelus Silesius), is a finite being which fully rejoices in its autonomous ontological status, freed from any dependence and need of legitimacy, resplendent with the autotelic joy of being what it is. The whole glory of the highest being of God, formerly so cherished by theological absolutism, is now given to the

11 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. A. V. Miller Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 420. Lukacs, inspired by Hegel, interprets the relation between the details and the totality in the modern epic form via the latter's metaphor of the dispersion of light, which allows the singular beings to assume a more 'enduring existence': "The irony of the novel is the *self-correction of the world's fragility*: inadequate relations can transform themselves into a fanciful yet well-ordered round of misunderstandings and cross-purposes, within which everything is seen as many-sided, within which *things appear as isolated and yet connected*, as full of value and yet totally devoid of it, as abstract fragments and as concrete autonomous life, as flowering and as decaying, as the infliction of suffering and as suffering itself. *Thus a new perspective of life is reached on an entirely new basis — that of the indissoluble connection between the relative independence of the parts and their attachment to the whole*. But the parts, despite this attachment, can never lose their inexorable, abstract self-dependence... The ability of parts which are only compositionally united to have discrete autonomous life is, of course, significant only as a symptom, in that it renders the structure of the novel's totality clearly visible": Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, ed. Anna Bostock (Merlin Press, 1988), 75–76; my emphasis. Even if Lukacs's description is partly critical (since, according to him it lacks a convincing vision of a new totality), we still can take it as a very apt diagnosis of the modern epic perspective which sees the world nominalistically — as a parade of 'relatively independent' parts/ details.

12 This enigmatic term, promising the other, still unfinished, project of modernity appears in Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* in the sentence which issues a warning against the return of totality that would abolish the detail-oriented perspective of modern art: "modernity's paths, the irreversible eruption of its mystical nominalism, have to be followed through to the end, or Egypt [...] will again be enthroned": Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, ed. Anthony Nassar (Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), 27. On the nominalistic roots of modernity, see also Michael A. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011).

13 In Mortimer's translation: "It blooms because it blooms, the rose that has no Why/ Forgets itself and cares not for any gazing eye"; Angelus Silesius, *Sacred Epigrams from the 'Cherubinic Pilgrim'*, ed. Anthony Mortimer (AMS Press, 2013). As to the scriptural justification of Silesius' mysticism, compare Luke 12:27: "Consider the lilies in the field, how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

creaturely existence which can finally breathe freely, emancipated from the burden of justifying its finite mode of being. This is no longer the lower realm of existence, filled with the perishable contingency, but the non-infinite being affirmed in its finite perfection and truly elevated to the status of *tselem*, God's likeness and image. Perhaps even more than that: not just a faithful copy or replica of God, but his *only* likeness and image. The rose is the most *gelassen* of all creaturely things, for it is free of care to be anything else than it is; it is fully content to be the right kind of *Ichts*, the ineffable "something" that determines its inner essence, the strictly singular Scottian *heacceitas*. As such it is *sicut Deus, vergöttert*, "like God": *causa sui*, or *ohn Ursache*, as Daniel Czepko, Angelus' direct precursor and another fellow Silesian called it, thus translating the *theologia deutsch* motif of *sonder waeromme*. "Without why" — meaning: self-reliant, both temporal and yet eternalised by its inner, peaceful and essential, fulfilment.¹⁴

The lineage of the philosophers, writers, and poets inspired by this one aphorism of Silesius is truly impressive and not *ohne warum*: from Hegel, Schlegel and Schopenhauer, through Gertrude Stein, Paul Celan, Lionell Trilling, to Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida and Umberto Eco. The existential tautology of the Rose fascinated the later generations of thinkers for many reasons: it reflected on the favourite symbol of the Rosicrucians, but also expressed what Hegel called a "new religious sentiment," which boosted the autonomous value of the world as ontologically univocal, i.e. enjoying the same kind of being as God himself.¹⁵ In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel praised Angelus Silesius for the "greatest audacity and depth of intuition and feeling which has expressed in a wonderful mystical power or representation the substantial existence of God in things and the unification of the self with God."¹⁶ Hegel's interpretation of Silesius goes even further than the idea of singular beings merely engaging in *imitatio Dei*; in fact, what he implies is the most "audacious" *inversion* in God who is now in a restless search for his own being, while singular creatures enjoy the divine "substantial existence." This is also the reason why Leibniz, while extolling wild beauty of Angelus' poetry, nonetheless accused it of "inclining almost to godlessness" (*beinahe zur Gottlosigkeit hinneigend*).¹⁷

Almost — but not yet quite. Not to be confused with a simple atheism, this *presque-atheïsme* (as Derrida translates Leibniz's formulation: *inclinant presque à l'athéïsme*), still contains an element of piety which takes the form of gratitude for the perfect gift: the possibility of the creature to revel in its own glory, *as if* God, the donor himself, no longer existed. The almost-atheism of Silesius is thus synonymous with the *almost-oblivion*: the creature enjoys most the perfect gift of creation the very moment it forgets that it had ever been created. Or, more aporetically: the creature becomes the perfect creature precisely the moment when it no longer recognizes itself as creature. The paradox of creation, therefore, must involve a serious interplay with atheism which, at least for a while, erases God out of the picture: the more autonomous the creation — the more world becomes world, the God's true other — the less present and the less visible the divine traces. The more, in Levinas' words, creation manages to stand on its own

14 Angelus Silesius stands precisely on the crossroads, in the middle of the passage to modernity, still undecided which way to follow. Silesius' use of *Gelassenheit*, teeming with irreconcilable aporias, is a good example of his transitory condition. In Meister Eckhart, *Gelassenheit* is interpreted in the kenotic way which stresses the negative aspect of self-abandonment. Meister Eckhart, who speaks of 'poverty of spirit' and 'nakedness of being' in the *gelassen* manner, recommends it as an act of *regressio*, which erases the actuality of the self-immersed in the plural reality, so it can go back to the state of unity with the original Godhead: the eternally peaceful, restful and pleromatic nothingness. But the natural kenosis of Silesius' rose rings with much more affirmative, generous tones: by being *gelassen*, the creature only confirms its existence here and now and gains self-sufficiency which so far was the sole attribute of God. As far removed from the Gnostic/ Neoplatonic lament on the fallenness of the material things as possible, this new mystical insight does not follow the path of remanation or *regressio*: when applied to the rose, *Gelassenheit* does not indicate a wish of the return to the original pleroma but a *contrary* desire to bestow on the material creation a divine glory of Creator. Angelus Silesius' own version of *die Gelassenheit*, therefore, departs from Eckhart — at least partly, in some more original and daring epigrams — because it radically reinterprets the idea of sacred simplicity, by replacing the more traditional motif of *autokenosis* with the new motif of *ontological tautology* which bestows creaturely beings with the "innocent indifference of plant life": Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 420.

15 G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, ed. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (SUNY Press, 1977), 190.

16 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art, Vol. 1*, ed. T. M. Knox (Clarendon Press, 1975), 371.

17 Jacques Derrida, *On The Name* (Stanford Univ. Press, 1995), 36.

feet — the less need of *creatio continua* which sustains the world in being.¹⁸ The *presque-athéisme* of this theological position still makes room for the “pious” memory of God, but no longer imagined as a cosmic womb constantly maintaining the creaturely reality in existence: rather, God figures here as a more and more distant parent who had weened the world and let it grow into independence. The moment in which the creature sees itself as *ohne warum*, “without why,” and forgets God, the hidden deity triumphs as the successful creator. As Derrida says in *Shibollet* on the paradox of the trace, which strictly parallels the paradox of creation: “one can only recall it to oneself in forgetting it (*on ne peut se la rappeler qu'en l'oubliant*).”¹⁹

This one epigram of Angelus Silesius could also explain Hegel’s idiosyncrasy of announcing the mysterious “religion of flowers” as the first truly Occidental form of cult replacing the Oriental religion of the sun: the mystical promise of blossoming as the spontaneous production of the chromatic light sheds a new visibility on the finite secular beings, no longer occluded by the “all-burning” hyper-luminescence of the Absolute. In *Glas*, the book devoted both to Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and Jean Genet’s *Pompes funebres*, Jacques Derrida spots this peculiar sequence in the Hegelian history of religion, usually omitted by other Hegelian scholars, and comments: “The introjection of the sun, the sublime digestion of the luminous essence, will end “in the heart of the occidental”: it begins in the flower.”²⁰ It is, therefore, the flower — Silesius’ Rose Without Why — which best expresses the paradox of creation that will occupy the Western modern, mostly non-normative, theology with its own “pious” version of the “almost atheism.”

This *almost* makes here all the difference. Silesius/ Hegel/ Scholem/ Derrida’s position differs fundamentally from all the modern attempts to turn the Rose Without Why into a symbol of *ontological tautology* which would no longer need a hypothesis of creatureliness and thus forget God — not just for a while, but for good. It is also via the allusion to Silesius’ celebrated epigram that Martin Heidegger introduces his seminal concept of *phusis*, which emphasizes the spontaneous (*sponte sua* meaning “self-caused” or otherwise “ohne warum”) coming-to-presence of beings:

What does the word *phusis* say? It says what emerges from itself (for example, the emergence, the blossoming, of a rose), the unfolding that opens itself up, the coming-into-appearance in such unfolding, and holding itself and persisting in appearance — in short, the emerging-abiding sway (*Walten*)... *Phusis* is Being itself, by virtue of which beings first become and remain observable.²¹

The rose, which appears here as the *exemplum* of the “physical” being presenting itself *sponte sua*, is chosen by Heidegger by purpose. For Heidegger, Silesius’ distich succinctly expresses the secret of the spontaneous growth of physical beings which spring forth from their origin (*Ur-Sprung*) without any external help or prompt. Where there is *phusis*, there is no longer any need for the hypothesis of God the Creator who makes room for his creation. Also Gertrude Stein’s emphatic tautology — *Rose is rose is rose is rose...* — clearly indicates that the blossoming rose is not a “God’s creature” but a self-standing singular being in no need of legitimation, just as yet another variation on the “mystical rose,” Paul Celan’s *Niemandrose*: a rose which belongs to Nobody, for there is no Maker either above or below her, neither the artisan master-mind nor any *Grund* that would supply her with a sufficient reason.

IV. ALMOST-ATHEISM

The *presque* — “almost” — makes here all the difference, because it implies the paradox of creation, absent from the formula of simple atheism: the more perfect and autonomous the creaturely being, the more hidden the Creator himself; the more the former comes to the sight, the more invisible the latter

18 For Levinas, the Scholemian ‘pious atheism’ constitutes the very essence of Judaism: “... the idea of Infinity, the metaphysical relation, is the dawn of humanity without myths. But faith purged of myths, the monotheist faith, itself implies metaphysical atheism... Atheism conditions a veritable relationship with the true God *kat exochen*”: Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, ed. Alphonso Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff, 1991), 77.

19 Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* (Fordham Univ. Press, 2005), 49.

20 Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, ed. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Nebraska Univ. Press, 1986), 246.

21 Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, ed. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 15.

becomes. In his reading of Angelus Silesius, *Sauf le nom*, Derrida chooses Heidegger as the sparring partner in the philosophico-theological confrontation: while Heidegger interprets Rose Without Why as the example of the spontaneous self-generation of *phusis*, Derrida wants to explore the aporetic double bind of memory and oblivion, piety and atheism, which is implied by the mystical vision of the Rose as a perfect creature.

Derrida's *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger aims also at the deconstruction of the latter's description of *phusis* as the happily free, autopoietic emergence of things. On Derrida's suspicious reading, Heidegger's obsession with Being does not allow him to "let go" — separate and liberate — singular beings. The very term used in *The Introduction to Metaphysics*: "emerging-abiding sway," *das Walten*, names the gentle rule which governs without violence because it is spontaneously accepted by all things that submit themselves to its swaying rhythm without protest, thus affirming their participation in the "physical" totality. Being withdraws itself, sways gently *im Entzug*, yet, at the same time, it always lurks in absences, ready to reclaim beings kept as if on Being's leash and revert them to the primordial indifferenciation; it never *leaves* beings for good, even if it *abandons* them (for Derrida, the difference between *leaving* and *abandoning* is subtle, but crucial). Heidegger's *Seinsverlassenheit* will thus always preserve the ominous, vengeful quality of a pending threat, which does not allow the world of beings to assert themselves in their ontological independence as separated details. In fact, the more Heidegger becomes obsessed with the absolute power of *Seyn* (the always hidden, "letheic," aspect of being, which David Farrell Krell translates ingenuously as *beyng*), the less the realm of beings enjoys its share of *Anwesenheit*, the coming-into-presence. The *phusis* is totally at being's disposal, whether it lets beings be or, equally capriciously, returns them to the abyss.²²

Derrida's reading of Angelus Silesius in *Sauf le nom* takes another route, by attempting to think the Heideggerian *Seinsverlassenheit* truly to the end, which for him requires a radical change of the idiom: not the originally Heideggerian "thinking of Being," but a more magnanimous discourse of the proper *tsimtsum* that truly "lets beings be," by simply "letting beings go." The paradox of creation would thus also bear on the paradox of freedom: to be free is not to spring forth from the abyssal origin, but to be a creature-let-go, i.e., released from the leash, *gelassen* (Silesius) or *freigelassen* (Hegel). We can thus imagine the Derridean self-effacing deity paraphrasing God's famous speech from Exodus: "Let my beings go! Let them wander and disperse, even to the point of forgetting my name!" Because for Derrida, to *be* — and *a fortiori*, to be free — means precisely to *go*: to leave the place of the origin, to let oneself be properly *laissé*, to wander away.

Indeed, the secret word that, for Derrida, combines "to let" and "to leave" is *laisser*: he chooses it as the best French equivalent of Angelus' *Gelassenheit* which he, in a visible *clinamen* from Heidegger ("whether Heidegger likes it or not"²³) understands as a "serenity of abandonment"²⁴ and "all the withouts" — *ohn warumb* most notably — that loosen the chains of being, or what Heidegger calls *der Fug des Seins*. Derrida quotes Silesius's epigram, *Nichts lebet ohne Sterben* –

*Gott selber, wenn Er dir will leben, muss ersterben:
Wie denkst du, ohne Tod sein Leben zuererben?*

22 Thus, although started as a story of the liberation of beings from the control of the divine Creator, the Heideggerian saga quickly transforms into *absolute tragedy*. As David Farrell Krell notices, Heidegger himself remarks in *Schwarze Hefte: Das Seyn selbst ist 'tragisch'*. On which Krell, declaring that in his critique of Heidegger he is inspired directly by Derrida, very rightly comments: "Heidegger's situation is worse than paranoia. The paranoid sufferer can blame this or that being (*Seiendes*) for menacing his or her life and making them miserable. For Heidegger, by contrast, no one and no thing is to blame, but only *beyng*. That is to say, when one surrenders the preoccupation with beings (again, *Seiendes*), and when one turns to *beyng* (*Seyn*) instead, one discovers that the sole menace derives from *beyng* itself. *It is not we human beings who have abandoned or forgotten beyng, but beyng has abandoned and forgotten us*. But, to repeat, because *beyng* is not some identifiable being or person out there in this world, *no one* is threatening Heidegger. Hence his Polyphemic rage. *Nothing* is plaguing him. Except that precisely the nothing is plaguing him": David F. Krell, *Ecstasy, Catastrophe: Heidegger from 'Being and Time' to the 'Black Notebooks'* (SUNY Press, 2016), 6–7; my emphasis.

23 Derrida, *On The Name*, 82.

24 *Ibid.*, 84.

(God himself must die if he wills you to live:
How else can you inherit life without death?)

And then exclaims with enthusiasm: “Has anything more profound ever been written on inheritance?”²⁵ Indeed, this epigram, written already under the influence of Jacob Boehme, himself most probably influenced by the Lurianic kabbalah, tells the secret of *tsimtsum* as the last word in the logic of univocity: if the finite beings are to exist in the world, God himself must contract his infinity and pass on his existence in the manner of metaphysical inheritance.

However, Derrida does not forget that “these maxims of Silesius [...] have a Christian sense”²⁶ which means that they convey the Lurianic lesson only implicitly, under the more expected and conventional teaching on God’s *kenosis*. But they convey it anyway; whether in the context of self-sacrifice or a free act of letting-go (*laisser*), Silesius’ God obeys the disjunctive logic of radical univocity: *either God, or World*. In fact, Angelus sometimes drops the kenotic context and then speaks in the new idiom already anticipating Hegel, in which God pours himself forth into the World and in this manner secures his worldly survival in the form of particular beings:

*Was is Gott Eigenschaft? Sich in Geschöpf ergiessen
Allzeit derselbe seyn, nichts haben, wollen, wissen (2: 132)*

(What is God’s property? To pour Himself into creature
To be Himself all the time: to know and to want nothing else).

The true *Gelassenheit*, therefore, is the art to “abandon God who abandons himself” (2: 92): not to cling to him, not even try to grasp him — just “not give anything to God, not even Adieu, not even to his name.”²⁷ *Oubliez Dieu* — yes, but this oblivion is never as unproblematic as the simple Nietzschean injunction to forget God: himself, his name, and his shadow. Derrida comments:

This is how I sometimes understand the tradition of *Gelassenheit*, the serenity that allows being without indifference, lets go without abandoning, unless it abandons without forgetting or *forgets without forgetting*.²⁸

To “forget without forgetting” — where “without” figures as the Blanchotian *sans*, announcing the aporetic simultaneity of both, memory and oblivion — constitutes the very essence of the “pious” *presque-athéisme* which guards in itself the paradox of creation. God, by committing *tsimtsum*, “lets go without abandoning”: God *laisse* his creatures in the spirit of *Gelassenheit*, which lets them forget the possessive pronoun: *his*.

This, theologically speaking, is the very opposite of the definition of being pronounced by Franz Kafka, which plays on the equivocation of the German word ‘sein’ meaning both a verb ‘to be’ and the masculine possessive pronoun: *Sein heisst Ihm zu gehören* (“to be means to belong to Him”). If Scholem calls the created reality *kenoma* — the ontological nothingness marked by cracks and crevices — it is only because he is led by Kafka’s Gnostic intuition: once being means “belonging to Him,” the divine abandonment cancels the very beingness of all beings, because it withdraws from them their necessary reason of existence. But if being means to be able to forget that it was once *his*, God’s withdrawal only asserts contingent singular beings in their separate right to be. To believe in this other metaphysical lesson is the very gist of the “almost-atheism” and its correlate in the “mystical nominalism,” which no longer interested in “God solely,” celebrate the ontological emancipation of separated [*detaillé*] creatures.²⁹

25 Ibid., 82.

26 Ibid.

27 Derrida, *On The Name*, 84.

28 Ibid., 73; my emphasis.

29 The idea that modernity will not start unless it forgets about God (at least a bit), is also the central thesis of another masterpiece from the 16th century: Erasmus’ *In the Praise of Folly*, which indeed praises stupidity as blessed ignorance (its epigraph openly states that *to know nothing is the sweetest life*). Only thanks to the ‘powers of Lethe,’ Erasmus says, people can muster courage to live happily in the world; the forgetfulness of one’s mortal condition is the necessary reverse of happiness. Unlike Luther, therefore, with whom Erasmus enters into a famous dispute, the latter does not insist on theological rigorism. While Luther never ceases to remind us that our freedom is nothing but an illusion, which can be dispelled only the pious doctrine of *servio arbitrio*, Erasmus

V. THEOLOGICAL A-THEOLOGY

The crux of the pious “almost-atheism” would thus consist in rethinking the idea of God’s absence within the world as the result of his generous *Verlassenheit* and, as such, as the process occurring within modern theology itself: not as a secular gesture of aggressive atheization and the rupture with all theological discourse, but as a move occurring within the “modern religious sentiment.” The Blochian “mystical nominalism” inaugurates modern theology of creaturely reality — the *eclosion*, “coming-into-blossom” or “coming-into-glory” of the Scholemian “liberated creation”: liberated precisely due to the generosity of the divine *tsimtsum*.

It is, indeed, in Luria where we can see the origins of this new, simultaneously hermetic and philosophical vision, despite his overtly Gnostic pessimism: not only the departure from the Neoplatonic hierarchy of beings, but also from the idea of the original sin/ guilt/ error responsible for the Fall of creation. The most famous metaphor of the Lurianic system, next to *tsimtsum*, the “breaking of the vessels,” *shevirath ha kelim*, which provides an esoteric equivalent to the nominalistic destruction of the universals, is clearly *nobody’s fault*: it is rather the first and paradigmatic occurrence of the unintended consequence, the first in the series of the worldly “time out of joint.”³⁰ Translated back into the theological idiom, the unintended consequence indicates an event happening beyond God’s will and control, which, precisely due to this deregulation, launches a new life of the world. Here, alienation and freedom go hand in hand.

Thus, if we disregard the Gnostic rhetoric of lament, which lends the overt garment for Luria’s thought (later continued in Kafka), and focus only on its more or less unintended purely philosophical consequences — that is, the way Hegel wanted to interpret religion, by sublating it into philosophy — we will immediately see that the breaking of the vessels strictly follows the logic underlying the motif of God’s self-contraction. For, if God’s intention was to “invent the other,”³¹ then the only way to fulfil this intention was to, paradoxically, deviate from it: to create something truly different that would venture beyond anything intended by *betraying* it. If God wanted to give birth to the new category of being, he had to let it go: cut the umbilical cord of intention and make it emerge through the rupture of radical estrangement.

The whole point here is to perceive the discovery of alienation — in Luria’s idiom: *galuth*, the expulsion of the world from the divine pleroma, the universal exile of all things — not as a merely negative inertia responsible for the metaphysical Fall, but as a positive force of creation, inventing a difference that would really make the difference. In consequence, *tikkun*, the redemptive restoration of the divine within the world, is never a simple return to the original state of the divine unimpaired plenitude: it is, to use the prophetic formulation from the Talmud, a “second deed” which is “greater than the first one.”³² It is never a simple annulment of the state of alienation but its productive subsumption-sublation into

gives modern people permission to forget and act *as if* they were indeed innocent ‘like children’ and free — to live, test new liberties of the secular age, and pursue happiness: “... my method is this: I bring them to my well of forgetfulness, (the fountain whereof is in the Fortunate Islands, and the river Lethe in hell but a small stream of it), and when they have there filled their bellies full, and washed down care, by the virtue and operation whereof they become young again”: Erasmus, *In the Praise of Folly* (Reeves and Turner, 1876), 12. A similar apology of forgetfulness will be uttered by Hans Blumenberg few centuries later in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* apropos Descartes. According to Blumenberg, the only way out for the Cartesian *cogito* was simply to ignore and forget the hovering presence of the Malicious Demon (or, as Blumenberg stipulates, the nominalist *Deus Fallax*), who could not be refuted logically, and then reason *as if* the hyperbolic doubt never happened: Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 196–97. It is also not at all an accident that the last seminar of Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, contains the praise of *bêtise*: a kind of animal ‘stupidity’ which lets us live, by allowing to forget — at least, partly — the abyssal uncertainties of our finite condition. In reply to Heidegger, which in some way repeats the opposition between serious, always inquiring Luther and light-hearted, deliberately foolish Erasmus, Derrida writes: “it is *bête* to think that life is simply life, without asking oneself the question, as Heidegger will immediately do, of a death that is life, a life that is death, a death that belongs to the very being of life ... the stubborn *bêtise* consists in not asking questions”: Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Vol. 1, ed. Geoffrey Bennington (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), 306.

30 See the discussion on the modern ‘dis-jointedness,’ being at the same time yet another confrontation with Heidegger in Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (Routledge, 1994), 40–45.

31 See Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Vol. 1 (Stanford Univ. Press, 2007).

32 See *Ta’anit*, 24 a.

a final synthesis marking the ultimate evolution of the created being. The alienation, therefore, leading to the “almost-atheism” and “almost-oblivion” of God, no longer constituting the focus of piety, is not something to be deplored: the “modern religious sentiment,” tarrying with the paradox of creation, must also tarry with the alienation as a necessary condition of the true birth of the world.

Yes, but one might ask: why *almost*? Why not go till the very end and announce that the internal logic operative within the monotheistic belief in God the Creator presses towards full atheization? Such is precisely the standpoint of Jean Luc Nancy who, in his own attempt to deconstruct Christianity, claims in the Hegelian manner that “monotheism is in truth atheism.”³³ Derrida often engaged with Nancy in heated polemics; in fact, the whole altercation between Derrida and Nancy on the issue of modern “atheologization” can be reduced to the one slogan-like opposition: the Derridean “crypt,” which offers the withdrawn God a hide-out in form of the weak memory of his traces, versus Nancy’s “no hiding places,” which stakes on the absolute recoil of the divine. While for Nancy, Christianity is “the religion of the death of God”³⁴ in which God dies with no remainder and leaves the world behind as its dead “corpse” in the *kenoma* of spiritual emptiness — for Derrida, who secretly follows the logic of *tsimtsum*, the tomb of God is not so totally *empty*.

For Nancy, indeed, the world is the Kafkan *kenoma*, although presented in a strangely affirmative manner: the dying God inaugurates the world (the word “created” would be too strong here), by self-emptying himself into the void, i.e. by ex-piring as the living spirit and thus releasing his substance in the form of “God’s dead body,” or the *corpus*.³⁵ The world thus emerges as the effect of *kenosis* understood as radical *desacralization*: the disappearance of the sacred infinite, which leaves behind the corporeal finite and profane. The self-deconstruction of Christianity, therefore, is so consummate, so complete, that there remains no one trace of the God who died; not even the spectre, vestige or shadow, no “hiding place.” What in fact remains is only the corpse, the empty husk, the “site” made vacant by the dying God:

God there empties himself of substance and the divine here becomes the measure of the dividing of light and shadow, of the seeing and the visible. The site, this body, is thus the site, the hollow of God emptied out and of the divine void. Or again: what remains of the divine — what remains divine of the divine — would be this name *dies/divus*, which would gather in itself a *kenosis* wherein atheology would come to show itself as destitution and the truth of the ‘mystery’... The strange: a divine body discerning.³⁶

For Nancy, to come into being means to simply take place in this “site” of *dying*; it is to receive the “gift of death” from “a god whose void-of-divinity is the truth.”³⁷ And if *kenosis* is the greatest “mystery” of the Christian religion, then it truly unravels itself only in the passage from theism to atheism as conducted by God himself. Nancy’s point in *Dis-enclosure* is that the tendency towards atheization is also an internal affair of the monotheistic faith, yet for him anything short of *absolute atheism* would be merely a compromise. He thus describes the religious transformation brought by Christianity as the irreversible demise of the figure of eternal life and the promotion of finitude understood, in the Heideggerian manner, under the auspices of death:

What is changing, in the instituting configuration of the West, is that man is no longer the mortal who stands before the immortal. He is becoming the dying one in a dying that doubles or lines the whole time of his life. The divine withdraws from its dwelling sites — whether these be the peaks of Mount Olympus or of Sinai — and from every type of temple. It becomes, in so withdrawing, the perpetual imminence of dying. Death, as the natural end of a mode of existence, is itself finite: dying becomes the theme of existence

33 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (Fordham Univ. Press, 2008), 35.

34 Nancy, *Dis-enclosure*, 35.

35 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, ed. Richard Rand (Fordham Univ. Press, 2008), 63: “Thus, indeed, he’s the one who’s exposing himself *dead* like the *world of bodies* [...] In other words: no God, not even gods, just *places*. Places: divine through an opening whereby the whole ‘divine’ collapses and withdraws, leaving the world of our bodies bare. Places of bareness, of destitution, place of *limon terrae*.”

36 Nancy, *Dis-enclosure*, 73.

37 *Ibid.*, 36.

according to the always suspended imminence of *parousia*... The only consistence is that of the finite so far as it finishes and finishes itself... Death thus puts the existent in the presence of existing itself.³⁸

Each and every singular being is thus resplendent with glory — “Glory, *eclat*, or splendor” — but, “ultimately, *there would no longer be messianism here*, but charisma, an inappropriable gift. Glory purely and simply gives itself, and precisely as that which is not appropriable.”³⁹ In the universe of the finite things, beings shine with the deadly glory — the charisma of death — with which they imitate God in his likeness and image of the first “dying One.” Ultimately, the only remainder of the divine is the abyssal *strangeness* of existence: the very fact *that* beings spring forth into a fragile and transient being which partakes of the divine *corpus*.

In this liberated world, therefore, *there would no longer be messianism*: no expectation or anticipation of anything else that would pass beyond the stage of the “finite-finished” beings, cut in their barely blossoming buds. Once monotheistic theology reaches its inner truth in the form of atheism, the energy of transition — from the infinite to the finite, from God to creation — is already exhausted. Nancy leaves us with the Open, the Heideggerian *das Freie*, which he projects on the Hegelian process of *Freilassen*: the releasement of the world in which there is nothing more to be done. Once the world becomes liberated, modern theology expires: God who was there, but only in the beginning, dies and evaporates without the trace, which, for Nancy, constitutes the last and ultimate revelation as “the end of revelation.”⁴⁰ Unlike in Hegel, however, whom Nancy revises in the Heideggerian manner, the liberation of the contingent world cannot be described as merely *alienation*: the term *Ent-fremdung*, still keeping the world in the divine thrall, is not radical enough to intimate the sense of freedom as a true un-leashment which can only be paralleled by a true, truly consummate, atheism. What Nancy wants to preserve from the Hegelian “estrangement” is — simply — the unfathomable “strangeness” of things springing into existence, which resembles more the spontaneous “wonder” of the Heideggerian *phusis* than the creaturely miracle of Silesius’ Rose.

Compared to Nancy, Derrida is closer to the Lurianic/ Hegelian spirit (if not necessary the letter), which plays with the idea of freedom *as* alienation conceived affirmatively: not as the condition of terrible estrangement, but as a *sine qua non* of a positive freedom — freedom to gain more ontological autonomy, more being, more self-assertion. From the messianic perspective, therefore, which reverberates in Derrida’s *presque-athéisme*, God, albeit hidden and self-exiled, lends the creaturely reality its sense-direction into which the world moves by exercising its positive sense of freedom: deeper into what Hegel designates as “real being,” and which, so far, was only anticipated in the most celebrated example of mystical nominalism, Angelus’ *Rose ohne warum*. Pace Nancy, therefore, Derrida is not willing to end the story of creation, which still must continue: what emerges as the blossoming flower at the beginning of the Occident and its religion of the setting sun, must also bring historical fruits.

Hence, for Derrida, the divine trace is not something to be just contemplated: it is a sign of orientation for the messianic sense of *futurité*. The world, although left by God (*verlassen*), is not to rest on its (merely blossoming) laurels. Just as the “crypt” is not just the sepulchre of the dead God, harbouring his *corpus*; it is also a “safe place,” a site of his secret-spectral survival which *haunts* the living via the oblique memory of the trace. As Derrida says in *Specters of Marx*:

The inhabitant of a crypt is always a living dead, a dead entity we are perfectly willing to keep alive, but *as* dead, one we are willing to keep, as long as we keep it, within us, *intact in any way save as living* [*sauf donc vivant*]. [...] this element itself is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it *spectralizes*. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death. It requires, then, what we call, to save time and space rather than just to make up a word: *hauntology*. We will take this category to be irreducible, and first of all to everything it makes possible: ontology, theology, positive or negative onto-theology.⁴¹

38 Ibid., 59.

39 Ibid., 57; my emphasis.

40 Ibid.

41 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 51; my emphasis.

According to Derrida, therefore, modernity is not so much the age of a liberated atheism as rather of “a-theology” realising itself as “hauntology”: not a simple secularization, but rather *spectralization* of God whom we, the creatures, want to keep and guard “in any way save as living,” that is, whom we want to memorize, but only as withdrawn — no longer present, yet not completely dead either. This “a-theology” — Bataille’s term which Derrida borrows to describe the relation between modernity and religion — hides an encrypted secret which can be neither fully articulated in any overt theological discourse, nor ever completely erased. God, who is *almost* forgotten, *almost* repressed, *almost* annihilated; God *tsimtsem*, i.e. contracted to this “irreducible” remnant, is the one who haunts, but this new form of “binding” cannot be compared to any traditional bond (*re-ligere*) which used to link the divine to the creaturely reality. At the same time, this haunting, precisely because it forms a bond, does not allow to resolve the theological tension between God and his creatures into a simple self-fulfilled atheism.

Derrida’s elaboration of Scholem leads towards a very strong theological conclusion: once we let go the “pain,” which, in Scholem’s original account, still attaches itself to the traumatic “lack of God”; once we get over the nostalgia after the divine presence, the paradox of creation comes to the fore as the only possible form of the monotheistic faith. It requires that we maintain ourselves in the insoluble aporia — between theology and atheism, memory and oblivion, piety and releasement — which can only be captured by the seemingly oxymoronic formulations: “pious atheism,” “non-mystical mysticism,” “non-secular secularism,” and — last but not least — Derrida’s *presque-athéisme*. Yet, the belief in the absence of God is still a *belief*, a form of faith not to be confused with the atheistic statement of non-believing. Even more: it is the only kind of belief which, as Derrida forcefully argues, befits mature self-reflexive monotheism.

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