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Religion of the Father? Judaism, Anti-Judaism, and the Family Romance

ABSTRACT: One of the most common clichés of our culture defines Judaism as the “religion of the Father.” For some this is just a neutral description referring to the fatherly aspect of the Jewish God; for others this is the very epitome of the patriarchal prejudice which privileges the masculine Father Figure at the expense of everything maternal. In my essay, however, I would like to challenge this staple association, by pointing to the simple fact that Jews themselves very rarely – if ever – describe their religion in openly patriarchal terms. In fact, when described in psychoanalytic terms, the role of the Father is here merely transitory: he is to inaugurate a series of subsequent detachments, starting from the disintegration of the first bonds of love (to maternal body and, more generally, to the body of nature) and ending with the complete neutralisation of the “family romance.” The Father Figure, therefore, is called upon only to counteract the power of the primordial “attachments” and initiate a process of separation which will allow the subject to establish himself as a free and mature moral agent, truly “born” into the world.

KEY WORDS: Judaism, God, Law, Mother

In this case, truly all of us Europeans – Rosenzweig, Buber, everybody coming from there – have gone through Paul and Luther. I would say that there is a pre-Christian Jewish existence, and there is a Jewish existence within Christianity – as it was Rosenzweig’s case – and there is post-Christian Jewish existence. I myself belong to the third category, for if one considers, following Nietzsche, that Christianity is “over,” and that the gods are being resurrected, then one stands again on a timely battlefield of God against the gods.

Jacob Taubes¹

¹ A fragment of private conversation qtd. in TREML 446–447.

We may call this new type of religion 'counter-religion' because it rejects and repudiates everything that went before and what is outside itself as "paganism." It no longer functioned as a means of intercultural translation; on the contrary, it functioned as a means of cultural estrangement. Whereas polytheism, or rather "cosmotheism," rendered different cultures mutually transparent and compatible, the new counter-religion blocked intercultural translatability. False gods cannot be translated.

Jan Assmann²

One of the most common clichés of our culture defines Judaism as the "religion of the Father." For some this is just a neutral description referring to the fatherly aspect of the Jewish God; for others this is the very epitome of the patriarchal prejudice which privileges the masculine Father Figure at the expense of everything maternal. In my essay, however, I would like to challenge this well-established association, by pointing to the simple fact that Jews themselves very rarely – if ever – describe their religion in openly patriarchal terms.

On the one hand, the term – "religion of the Father" – derives from the Christian reception of Judaism, which contrasted it to the "religion of the Son" (as for instance, in the famous prophecy of Joachim da Fiore, who, in his historical vision of the Holy Trinity, talked about three subsequent ages marked by the religions of the Father, of the Son, and finally of the Spirit). On the other hand, the patriarchal qualification of Judaism often emerged on the "pagan" side of the divide, aiming at the critical rejection of the whole Judeo-Christianity as the "counter-religion" which as the first dared to oppose the original maternal matrix of cosmotheism: Mother-Nature. It is mostly this latter view which I am going to discuss here. The two epigraphs with which I open this essay – one coming from Taubes, the other from Assmann – suggest that our current situation is no longer characterised by the Christian supersessionism, in which it is the "religion of the Son" that succeeds and dominates the "religion of the Father," but is constituted by a late-modern repetition of the ancient battle between "matriarchal" gods and the "patriarchal" God: the "timely battlefield" in which Judaism once again reappears as the voice of "counter-religion" protesting against the "resurrected gods" of the new polytheistic order. It is only in the eyes of the fiercest critics of monotheism, who at the same time profess strong "pagan" leanings (Jung, Assmann, Lyotard), that Judaism reveals itself as the violent patriarchal reaction against the primordial cult of Mother-Nature, that is, the cosmic Mother-Matrix of all the deities springing forth from her womb to form the polytheistic pantheon. By seeing in Judaism nothing but the rebellion of the "prodigal son"

² ASSMANN 3.

against the powerful omnipresence of the life-giving maternal source (Lyotard) or just a “counter-religion” which maintains itself only as a violent war waged against nature (Assmann), they tend to define it as one-sidedly anti-matriarchal and, because of that, paradigmatically pro-patriarchal.

My purpose here will be to demonstrate the inadequacy of such a biased perspective. By engaging in the detailed discussion with those “pagan” critics of Jewish monotheism, I will try to prove that Judaism can by no means be identified as the “religion of the Father” only. Although it shows many “anti-matriarchal” aspects, it is not for the simple sake of falling on the other side of the parental feud. It is rather a bold attempt to redefine the functioning of our psyche in such a way that she can forget about and liberate herself from the family romance: to *lekh lekha*, “get herself away” from the place of her origin and step forward into the future, which can be truly called *future* only when it is no longer dominated by these two most powerful figures of the past – Mother and Father. The liberation – getting properly born, matured, “stand on one’s feet finally” (Levinas) – is the final goal of this peculiar religious process in which the “patriarchal” forms only a moment: a strategic phase in which the authority of the “name of the Father” must be used to counteract the power of the original maternal attachment. The Father is there to detach the psyche from her union with the Mother and constitute her as a separate unit, but this “change of heart,” where love is being *converted* from the primary attachment to the maternal body into the fascination with the distant paternal ideal, is merely a stage in the process the ultimate goal of which is to loosen the ties of the family romance altogether.

Yet, precisely because of that – because of this painful *conversion* which *volens volens* must involve father’s intervention – Judaism inevitably evokes enormous resistance. Tearing the psyche away from the “place of her origin,” from the symbiotic union with the maternal body (literal and metaphorical, both mother and Mother-Nature), requires violence which, as Freud convincingly shows, can never be forgotten or forgiven. Even though Judaism promises the ultimate dissolution of the familial ties, it is eternally remembered – and resented – as the “religion of the Father” which destroys, negates, separates, and puts asunder the “cosmic womb.” By forcing us to get born, to walk away, to exit the imaginary worlds of primary narcissism, Judaism pushes the psyche to the constant birth of Exodus, but this *exit* tends also to be felt, with sorrow and rancour, as Exile.³

³ It is precisely in the complex interplay of the symbols of Exodus and Exile that Judaism codifies its psychoanalytic “revolution of desire.” The mixed multitude, which constitutes the Israel in the desert, demonstrates the mixed attitude towards the revolutionary project of Exodus: some wish to forget Egypt and invest all hopes in the Promised Land; some prefer to stay in the desert and follow the theocratic Law of the Father; some, tired of the exile, want simply to go back to the “land of the fattened calf,” and revert the whole process.

Which brings me to my main thesis: psychoanalytically speaking, the narrative of Jewish Exodus, *yetsiat mitsraim*, delivers a “great code” which contains a unique strategy of coping with the “trauma of birth.” The emphasis put on the opening and affirmative – instead of traumatic and negative – event of birth immediately reflects on the different role assigned to the parental figures. By stressing the necessity of separation, that is, more or less violent break of the attachment to the maternal body, Judaism may indeed present itself as an anti-matriarchal “religion of the Father” – but it is only so from the perspective of those who criticise this strategy of detachment. Those, however, who are in favour of the Jewish “revolution of desire,” will venture further and, as I indicated in the introduction, will insist on deepening the separation up to the point of invalidating all attachments and all familial ties.

In Praise of Separation: Rank, Ferenczi, and Santner

By claiming that the most significant traumatic event in human life was *not* of a sexual nature, as Freud famously insisted, Otto Rank, the inventor of the “birth trauma,” poised himself on the verge of psychoanalytic heterodoxy. Controversial till nowadays as a prodigal advocate of “anti-Oedipal heresy,” Rank nonetheless provides key insights into the psychology – or, better, in Santner’s phrasing, *psychotheology* – of the natalistic experience: the lingering memory of the prenatal bliss, the traumatic rupture of the intrauterine existence, the ambivalent figure of the mother who simultaneously gives shelter and expels from it, and the paternal function which consists in tearing the child away from its infatuation with the womb. In RANK’S somewhat exaggerated account, all symbolic and culture-forming achievements of human race “finally turn out to be a belated accomplishment of the incompleting mastery of the birth trauma” (5). Myths, marking the “pagan” stage of the development of mankind, are thus nothing but “the most sublime attempts to ‘undo’ the birth trauma, to deny the separation from the mother” (105). According to Rank, the vast majority of cultures choose the “pagan” way, that is, maintain the high level of maternal ambivalence which “rests on the protection given by the mother (womb), but on the other hand is due to the fear of her caused ultimately by the birth trauma” (90) and as such constitutes the insoluble enigma of natality: *the* enigma itself, the alpha and omega of all mysteries. Attracted by its fascinating ambiguity, the “pagan” economy of pleasure seems unable to leave this mystifying knot of ultimate bliss and at the same time lethal threat: “Just as the anxiety at birth forms the basis of every anxiety or fear, so every pleasure has at its final aim the re-establishment of the intrauterine pleasure” (17), “naturally” imagined as “the best of all worlds” (63).

The very idea of separation, on the other hand, is unanimously associated with evil, sin, and the negation of life: “To be dead has the same meaning for the child as to be away – that is, to be *separated* – and this directly touches on the primal trauma” (24). Hence the “pagan” solution understands augmentation of life as *restitutio ad integrum*, that is, as a symbolic reconciliation with the totality represented by the life-giving womb, which undoes the traumatic occurrence of birth and its incipient evil of the deadening separation.

There is, however, a possibility of the “reversal tendency.” The spell-binding ambivalence of natality may prevail and preserve its mesmerising status in later cultural formations, but it may also strive towards resolution, something Rank calls the “heroic conversion” and which indeed chimes closely with the *Gegenstrebigkeit* of the Judaic model:

By means of the reversal of feeling (hate) towards the father, the entire situation of the mother’s protecting womb, in its cultural and cosmological significance, becomes a unique, gigantic, hostile entity, which pursues the hero, identified with the father, and ever challenges him to the new battles.

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Yet, in Rank’s psychoanalytically rather conservative interpretation, the “hero conversion” is, in the end, doomed to failure: the vindictive Mother figure takes its inevitable revenge by meeting the hero with his final destiny being also her final victorious manifestation – death. Here we touch on the “pagan” limitation of psychoanalysis itself which did not take the name of Oedipus as its guiding aegis in vain. In absolute fidelity to Freud’s orthodoxy, Rank says: “The Unconscious can think of separation, departure, and dying only in terms of the wish-fulfilling regression to the womb, because it knows and can portray *no other* wish tendency” (81; my emphasis). Thus, whenever the “reversal tendency” of a “forward movement” (81) emerges, it must be reinterpreted, quite acrobatically, as a disguised or displaced desire for regression. Psychoanalysis, described as a new powerful mythology by Freud himself, pays thus its due to the pagan gods: any attempt to go “in the other direction” reveals itself ultimately as futile and illusory. On this account, a Jew would be only suffering from an “eternalised” hero syndrome, taken out of the context of psychic development and frozen in the vacuum: while he “converts” from hating father to hating mother, he fails to reconcile himself with the maternal element, which is the final, proper and inevitable goal of the heroic “circuitous journey.”

Yet, already in Sandor Ferenczi’s *Thalassa* (published in the same year as the *Trauma of Birth*, 1924, in close collaboration with Rank), the tables begin to turn, however timidly. For the most part of the book, Ferenczi explains coitus in terms of a secret regressive wish to return to the maternal womb, but he also

makes room for another, quite opposite, desire to progress: to leave the matrix for good and celebrate the birth as the exodic moment of emancipation:

We too consider coitus as such a partial discharge of that still unassimilated shock which is the legacy of the birth trauma; at the same time it appears to be like a game, or, more exactly expressed, a commemoration celebrating a happy liberation from the bondage.

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This is not an accident that the last phrasing of this quote, although referring to the successful completion of sexual act – “a commemoration celebrating a happy liberation from the bondage” – could come directly from the *Pesach Hagadda*, and, considering Ferenczi’s Jewish orthodox background, it very well might indeed. In Ferenczi’s psychoanalytic speculation, Exodus figures as the paradigmatic emblem of the *gegenstrebige* movement, strongly opposed to the womb nostalgia which he, following Otto Rank, perceives as the predominant “default” tendency of human psyche. While the “natural” vector of human desire orients itself regressively towards the bliss of the primary narcissism, the “exodic” movement pushes in the other direction, wishing for another fulfilment which would not cancel out the fact of being born, that is, of becoming a separate individual.

A similar praise of separation as unique for Judaic tradition was uttered recently by Eric SANTNER who, in his seminal work on Rosenzweig and Freud, pioneering the psychoanalytic approach to Jewish religion, states:

The losses correlative to the advent of monotheism can be understood as a series of traumatic cuts or separations: of the deity from plastic representation; of spirituality from magic, animism, and sexual ecstasy; of thinking from the fantasy of the omnipotence of thoughts; of death from the cult of the afterlife (call it separating from “Mummy” and all forms of “mummification”).

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In this clever punning, Santner makes an imaginative shortcut linking Egypt as the realm of death (“mummification”) with Paradise as the lap of Mother-Nature, signifying the prenatal blissful existence (“Mummy”). This pun, which on the deeper structural level identifies life-before-birth with death (reminding us immediately of the Beckettian highly ambivalent “womb-tomb”), makes it absolutely clear that in Judaic tradition *there is no life before birth*: the true life begins only *after* we are finally and irreversibly born. The peak of life does not reside in the pleromatic experiences of the primary narcissism, but in the affirmation of the very trauma that constitutes birth: the violent destruction of the dyadic union between mother and child, followed by the latter’s ultimate separa-

tion. And the traumatic character of this event can never be denied by any reparatory or reenchanting magic: the affirmation of life after birth amounts to the affirmation of trauma, full stop. The violent rupture which disenchants and cuts off the child from the umbilical cord of pleromatic magic is the necessary ingredient of life understood in the Jewish way. Thus, what Santner calls the “losses correlative to the advent of monotheism” are, in fact, traumas inverted into affirmative – albeit hesitant and “wandering” – steps of a liberated and separated living being, precisely as in Milton’s prophetic vision, or in the biblical image of the “limping walk” of Jacob, the paradigmatic Jewish “hero of conversion.”

The original affirmation of the trauma of birth results in the affirmation of all other consecutive traumas, immediately converted into stepping stones of maturation and progress: the loss of the immanent sense of the sacred embodied in the immediacy of plastic representations; the loss of the magical omnipotence, characteristic of the primary process which cannot yet differentiate between phantasy and reality; the loss of unbound sexual ecstasy, where no obstacle bars the entrance back into the cosmic womb; and the loss of immortality, which is the necessary cost of gaining a self-knowledge of one’s separation as a mortal finitude. These traumatic losses, which – thanks to the act of affirmation (“and God saw that it was good”) – turn into *advantages* and, because of that, into *advances*, pave the way *forwards*: they open the very possibility of a proleptic, future-oriented development which breaks from the regressive, circulatory movement characteristic of what Rank calls the “denial of birth.” By giving up on the nostalgia after the prenatal existence in the womb, the Jewish version of monotheism institutes a *break*, a trauma as a positive way of life, which cuts itself loose from the regressive circle and *passes forth* – in the manner of Jacob whom Harold Bloom very aptly calls the “restless crosser.”⁴

Jacob, the first Hebrew hero who broke loose from the determinations of nature, by having challenged his older brother’s right to progeniture and then wrestled victoriously with the Angel of Death, is the original bearer of *trauma turned into a way of life*: his lameness marks the loss which nonetheless does not stop him from “passing forth.” To the contrary, being able to walk away from one’s birth, walk forward, step into the realm of separation must be marked by a limp, the sign of traumatic limitation and curtailment, both, however, fully accepted as a deliberate resignation from the pleromatic life of the “unwounded whole” for the sake of the finite life of a separated fragment. In the figure of Jacob, therefore, Judaism emblematises this new, pronatalistic and proleptic notion of life which radically departs from the “pagan” sense of insatiable vitality; it is no longer the prenatal phantasy of what Hegel calls *das unbeschädigte Leben*, life beyond harm, which constitutes the ideal of a true living, but the harsh reality of the separated, fully born fragment, for ever cut off from the phantastical source

⁴ See BLOOM. On my interpretation of this motif, see also BIELIK-ROBSON.

of unbridled vivacity. Thus, while Christianity, as Hegel himself very perceptively attests in his *Early Theological Writings*, still sports the phantasy of *das unbeschädigte Leben* and *die unverletzte Ganze*, Judaism breaks for good with this pagan matrix and decides to choose the *gegenstrebig*, altogether different direction. For, as Freud famously remarks at the end of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, by quoting one of his favourite German poets,

Wither we cannot fly, we must go limping,
The Scripture saith that limping is not sin.

“Mosaic Distinction”: Beyond Mother and Father

The decision to accept the trauma of birth – as simultaneously trauma and birth – that is, accept, affirm, work-through and internalise it, allows to walk away from the place of one's origin and forget the womb which no longer determines the point of reference of all later existential movement. This act of *displacement*, which shifts Jewish people away from the moment of birth as no longer mesmerising “enigmatic signifier,” marks Judaism as absolutely one of its kind, indeed as a “counter-religion”: unique and peculiar, going against the grain of the “default” mode of human psyche which “naturally” privileges the “birth denial” and hence cannot budge from the spot of *wo es war*, “where *this* happened,” that is, the inexplicable mystery of leaving the prenatal bliss and entering the hostile world. Judaism's psychotheological set-up prevents Jewish psyche from too much libidinal investment in this fateful *wo es war*, by displacing it on what happens now or will happen in the future; it does not foster any symbolical means of *undoing* the trauma of birth.

According to Eric Santner, who uses here Franz Rosenzweig as his springboard, this very refusal to do what other people do, that is, to negate the facticity of being born and keep the pretence *as if* birth never happened, makes Jews distinct in terms of their deep structure of desire. While “pagan” nations attempt to translate the tragic principle of *me phynai* (I wish I'd never been born) into elaborate symbolic edifices whose function is to maintain the illusion of non-nativity and a prolonged existence within a cosmic-national-ethnic-familial womb (however we name those supraindividual totalities forming all-comprehensive “unwounded wholes”), Jews do not strike roots and never invest symbolically in any already given “primary libidinal objects.” Just as they walk away from their place of origin, accepting the futility of any symbolic strategies of “birth denial,” they also do not form attachments to anything that links itself to the moment of birth by a nostalgic metonymy:

Jews, Rosenzweig asserts, do lack the passionate attachment to the things that constitute the primary libidinal “objects” of other historical peoples and nations, attachments that ultimately constitute their vitality and endurance as peoples and nations: land, territory, and architecture; regional and national languages; laws, customs, and institutions founded and augmented in the course of a people’s history. In Rosenzweig’s view, Jewish difference is fundamentally a *difference in the structure of desire*, in the relation to the void around which desire orbits. That the objects of Jewish desire – the land of its longing, for example – are deemed “holy,” means that desire is *infinitized*.

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The infinitisation is the direct result of voiding the desire from its primary, essentially maternal, attachments which are usually formed in the human psyche at the stage still closely resembling or prolonging the oneness of primary narcissism. Primary attachment is *not* a union, for it is only an *attachment* formed by separate objects, but it still preserves the compulsive force of the early narcissistic monism; as such, the primary attachment expresses both separation, which had already happened, and the undoing of separation, which symbolically cancels out the fact of birth and reverts the subject back to the bliss of non-differentiation. Santner implies that the “pagan” solution privileges primary attachments as an illusory (yet symbolically quite real), strategy of “birth denial” and thanks to this secures the psyche a maximum of pleasure, deriving from the imitation of the prenatal existence. He also suggests that Judaism, by not investing in the strategies of reversal and forfeiting the prenatal ideal of pleromatic life, denies “pagan” people their share of *jouissance*. By insisting on breaking the “bonds of love,” which form the primary attachments, Judaism empties the desire, by turning it into a “desert-desire” (as Derrida calls it) which defers and delays its fulfilment into infinity. But this *infinitisation* also means that Judaism, although it uses the Father figure in order to break *all* attachments – God the Stranger tearing his people away from the Egypt, the house of maternal bondage – has no intention to fixate its desire on the paternal name and law. Once it inaugurates the *exodic dynamic*, it also desires to pass *beyond* the figure of the patriarchal sovereignty (as it is indeed attested by all Jewish messianic movements who promise to “get beyond sovereignty,” as in Taubes and, again, Derrida).⁵

⁵ This also explains why Santner, who uses Lacanian conceptuality, quite radically departs from the doctrine of his precursor. Lacan may in fact be most responsible for the cliché firmly associating Judaism with the “religion of the Father”: since his 1963 seminar on the Names-of-the-Father, Lacan consistently connects the “Mosaic distinction” with the intervention of the all-powerful (*shaddai*) and castrating paternal instance which occupies the position of the Real (his primordial name is *Je Suis*, ‘I Am’). As the God who demands sacrifices (Lacan refers here to Abraham and the history of ‘binding of Isaac,’ the *akeda*) he causes the loss of *jouissance* in his subjects who are thus expelled from their own share of joy and, full of anxiety (*angoisse*), pushed on the desert path of symbolic asceticism. And even if in his last seminars –

In consequence, the pleasure becomes infinitely postponed too: it becomes a matter of promise, of the futuristic *not-yet*. But it also means: no pleasure *now*. This “reversal tendency” voices a severe prohibition of the illusory joys flowing from the fake strategies of “birth denial”: a ban on *jouissance* which no “pagan” psyche can ever forgive. Such would be the psychotheological explanation of the anti-Judaic stance and its “natural” persistence despite all the knowledge of the violent consequences it had produced in the course of history. The Judaic rejection of “birth denial” results in the immediate denial of joy, which inevitably causes rebellion in the pleasure-oriented “pagan” mind.

The “Pagan” Objection: Lyotard

No one expressed his objections against this prohibition stronger and clearer than Jean-Francois Lyotard. In his emotional polemic against Emmanuel Lévinas, “The Figure Foreclosed,” Lyotard accuses Lévinas, and *pars pro toto* the whole of Jewish tradition, of propagating a psychotic attitude towards reality, based on the foreclosure of the maternal figure of nature. Jews, says Lyotard, are psychotic because they cannot reconcile themselves with natural necessities of life; by not being able to come to terms with conditional limitations, they simply ignore and exclude them from thought by means of a typically psychotic manoeuvre which Freud called *die Verwerfung*, “foreclosure.”

Lyotard’s objection, which we may call paradigmatically “pagan” (and he would have nothing against it to be sure) boils down to just one criticism: it reverses the accusation of a “false pretence,” by implying that it is not “pagan,” but Jewish mind that attempts to erase the memory of birth and then go on *pretending* that it never had happened. In Judaism, therefore, we do not encounter anything like a positive affirmation of the trauma of birth but merely a *double denial*: by pretending that they never proceeded from the maternal womb, Jews also deny the existential necessity of the “denial of birth.” They simply refuse

most of all *Encore* – Lacan shifts towards a more relaxed vision of the *grand Autre*, now also deficient and barred from the absolute joy, the role of the Father as such will not change: it will still consist in procuring the constitutive *loss* and *lack*, which determines the subjective condition, only in a less efficient and threatening manner. Santner’s revision of the Lacanian lore counteracts the nostalgic thrust of Lacan’s thinking, by emphasising the reversal in which *losses* convert into *gains*, that is, lost attachments pave way to desire which, precisely because it is detached from its primary objects, can become infinitised. The Lacanian nostalgic thrust, therefore, in which the subject forever mourns the lost fullness of life, is turned here into an *exodic* tendency in which life seeks a different type of happiness, no longer modelled on the enjoyment of maternal body. See LACAN, *Le séminaire* and LACAN, *Des noms* 2005. On the Lacanian interpretation of Judaism as the severe paternal religion, see also HANDELMANN.

to engage with the traumatic separation from the womb and this leads directly to psychosis. There is nothing *new* here, no novelty of promise oriented towards a future, only the psychotic blockage and destruction of the *old*: the preexisting, age-proof and universally efficient ancient ways of the “pagan” mediation, which Lyotard associates with the more liveable psychic attitude, that is, neurosis. For, contrary to psychosis, which moves violently on the basis of foreclosure (*Verwerfung*), neurosis moves more subtly on the basis of repression (*Verdrängung*), which has more capacity to negotiate with the repressed content: “The latter represses, or in other words symbolizes, the instinctual representative; the former excludes it, and rejects it through foreclosure” (LYOTARD 77). Yet, in Lyotard’s account, both psychosis, projected by him on Jewish religion, and neurosis, represented by “paganism,” share the same point of orientation which is the “trauma of birth”: the moment of separation from the maternal body which is then reinterpreted retrogressively as a complete submission to the Father issuing in *castration*, the loss of vitality issuing from being cut off from the pleromatic source of all life. For, “where does the site of frustration lie, if not with the mother?” (77). The eternal problem with Jews is that they “deny *that*,” desperately trying to erase what simply cannot be erased, which also happens to be the characteristic of the Western mode of rationality, based on the Jewish psychotic denial:

We can see in this configuration an erasure of the female element, a denial of castration, in other words foreclosure... This is the kind of madness into which rationality plunges us.

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The point of Lyotard’s fervently “pagan” critique is that Judaism merely forecloses the context of birth from the womb, giving it no thought or consideration. The greatest trauma of human life, giving us the inexhaustible food for constant reelaborations and *nachträglich* figurations, becomes ignored and thus made inactive, yet Judaism gives *nothing* instead: all life comes from the Mother, whereas Father only gives castration, limitation, death. It is, therefore, the “religion of the Father” as pure Thanatos which feeds parasitically on the “loss of objects” (or what Santner calls “primary attachments”) that are subsequently replaced by only one “pseudo-object” in the form of the Torah: Judaism is a “discourse without things” (LYOTARD 82) which in the end produces a “civilisation of non-mediated discourse and power” (85), where “the voice of the Father” commands absolute fanatical obedience.

Lyotard sees Judaism as steeped in nihilism and negativity from which there is no escape. Yet, what eludes him in his accusatory fervour is the positive stake of this enormous effort of *decathexis*, which tears subject away from the “natural” object of his desire, the Mother-Nature, in order to push desire on the way forward, towards “infinitisation.” In Lyotard’s interpretation, this traumatic

break takes the form of a pure rejection, only thinly disguised by the attachment to “pseudo-objects.” While I would rather say that Judaism fully affirms the trauma of birth and gets done with it once and for all, in such a way that it no longer bothers and disturbs the flow of human desire, ready to reach for other goals – Lyotard insists on Judaism’s ineptness manifesting itself in a psychotic incapacity to deal with the most challenging mystery of birth. What I would like to see as Judaism’s mature achievement in not investing too much libidinal energy in the “enigma of natality” – Lyotard perceives as Judaism’s poverty, inadequacy, even madness of extreme privation. For him, Jewish religion, by treating mother and nature *as if* they never existed, has nothing to say to us about the only issue that should consume all our speculative efforts: the trauma of being born, of becoming separate, the subsequent danger of breaking “natural” ties with mother, and, finally, the attempt to undo this “original sin” by trying to return to the unwounded whole of nature.

In response to this alleged inadequacy, Lyotard launches an apology of pagan polytheism which, according to him, provides a much better chance of working-through the traumatic relationship with nature, so fiercely denied by Jewish monotheism (together with all pleasure):

The pleasure principle is given free reign in Homerism, but not in the Moses religion... Does it not signify the exclusion of the mother and the disavowal of castration? The *Vernichtung* of the figurative is also a *Verneinung* of the maternal.

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Jewish iconoclasm, waging war on figures and images, is thus a part of the psychotic movement of foreclosure – “the rejection without symbolism” (103) – which, instead of solving the problem, pretends it never existed in the first place.⁶ Pagan iconophilia, on the other hand, expresses an enormous effort of symbolisation the goal of which is to repair the traumatic break caused by the moment of birth. This reparation does not aim at the factual but merely virtual undoing of the trauma: the “pagan” man does not actually regress to the pre-castrational and blissfully incestuous relation with the maternal body, but also does not give it up as his highest ideal of happiness, which he tries to achieve *en effigie*. No wonder, therefore, that for Lyotard the most perfect embodiment of “pagan religiosity” which plays out this neurotic ritual of

⁶ This is also how Lyotard elaborates on the fundamental Christian accusation against the Jews, which Freud so vigilantly diagnosed in *Moses and Monotheism*. Unlike the mediating and positively neurotic Christians, Jews will never be able to remember that they had killed their Founding Father: “Parricide is disavowed because castration has been foreclosed; why would one have to kill the father if it were as though the threat of castration had never existed?” (LYOTARD 103).

breaking and repairing, of conflict and reconciliation, is realised by Hegel: the most “erotic” philosophical thought which resigns on oneness and plenitude on the level of experiential immediacy, but regains it on the symbolic level of Absolute Knowledge. The neurotic strategy of sublimation, which Lyotard endorses fully as the most productive civilisational force, is possible only when the repressed content – the return to the fullness of the prenatal existence in the womb – is both repressed in its direct form and then reinstated in its all so numerous symbolic avatars. Contrary to this, Jewish monotheism remains culturally barren, because, by foreclosing the Mother Figure, it also dries up the vital sources of energy without which no sublimatory process can ever take off:

Detachment from reality is, then, essentially a detachment from myth, and this confirms the above analyses: neurosis has to be classified as a form of myth, as, that is, a form of integration of libido and reality; but detachment from reality, which already has been identified as one of the features of psychosis, implies that the ego gives up its compromise functions and allies itself with formations of the libido against the outside world.

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By contrast to this psychotic “stuckness,” isolation and paralysis, the Hegelian dialectic is “the expanded form of the neurotic symptom known as compromise formation” (95). For the symbolic reconciliation – the second chance of a happy return to the maternal union offered by sublimation – is indeed a question of a wise compromise shared by myth, dialectic, and neurosis. At the same time, it is completely absent from the fanatically uncompromised Jewish mind.

For, everything that is, is nature – and everything that counts, is mother. If human being wants to strike roots in reality, he must take on this most significant agon of his life – or simply perish into non-existence, like the eternally elusive Wandering Jew. Those who do not pay their due homage to Isis – this most exemplary Egyptian many-breasted “terrible mother-imago” who proudly announces that “I am everything that exists” – fall out from what Adorno ominously called *der Bannkreis des Daseins*, the very “circuit of being.”⁷

⁷ An analogous critique of Jewish monotheism was proposed by Odo Marquard, the German equivalent of Jean-François Lyotard, who also pioneered the critique of modernity under the auspices of the return to polytheism. The only Jewish voice which addressed directly Marquard’s (but indirectly also Lyotard’s) “pagan” critique of Judaism came from Jacob Taubes in his essay from the 1970s, “On the Current State of Polytheism,” which says more or less what I have been saying here. See most of all MARQUARD, *Der Lob* and Marquard, “Aufgeklärter Polytheismus,” as well as TAUBES.

* * *

The reason why this “Jewish” model causes such fierce opposition, is not because it is rare, particular, inimitable, “chosen.” Quite to the contrary, it is opposed precisely because of its universality: the factual affirmation of birth as the beginning of life proper is as universal as the symbolic reworking of the trauma of birth seen as the violent end of the prenatal blissful existence. What Rank calls “conversion” – and what Jewish tradition indeed confirms as a moment of *tshuva*, “turn,” *Umkehr* – is a transformation within the psyche which may occur anytime, as a universally accessible alternative to the “maternal neurosis.” Yet, we also have to be aware of psychoanalysis’ own limitations which force Rank to define this *turn* as a “gradual substitution of the mother by the form of the father” (RANK 122). While indeed turning away from the maternal ambivalence might require a help from the paternal side, this switch of loyalties and obediences does not constitute the very gist of that “conversion,” which can be properly understood only as an event of liberation. The psychotheological act of Exodus – of walking away from the Egyptian swamps of the natalistic enigma – does not mean to fall under the sway of the Father Figure. This is but a transitory phase on the path of the psychic evolution which leads towards the *radical decathexis* of the “time and place of origin”: mother as well as father, and their tiringly inscrutable “family romance.”

This is precisely what Santner calls a “violent reorganisation of our drives” (65). This rearrangement completely gives up on *any* backward-looking nostalgia and formats the drives strictly according to the vector of futurity. If, as Otto Rank claims, “the birth trauma is the ultimate biological basis of the psychical” (RANK xiii), then the Jewish model offers one of the most fundamental interpretations of what it means to be human; by elaborating on the biology of birth, which in case of human beings always seems premature and because of that traumatic, it provides its own anthropogenic model which stands in a stark opposition to the “pagan” nostalgic solution, relying on the reparatory power of symbolic compensation. Its sober factual affirmation of birth – as the positive trauma of separation inaugurating life proper – delivers a canvas for a psychotheological agon which repeats itself in perpetuity with every single individual being born.

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