

Preamble

Ressusciter, naître ou renâître, c'est, je crois, la même chose.

—Jules Michelet, *Lettres inédites à Alfred
Dumesnil et Eugène Noël* (1841–1871)

Nur Wiedergeburt heilt einen so Zerrütteten.

—Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Der Turm*

I

What follows is an essay on the idea and use of “renaissance” in modern Jewish thought. Its conceptual presupposition is that “renaissance” acts as a narrative imagination, as a fixed emplotment of the historical experience, and that it both reflects and constitutes a particular way of thinking and writing history. The idea of “renaissance” will thus appear to us as a problem of historical hermeneutics. But as the idea both reflects and constitutes, both represents and postulates, it will appear to us as a *moral* problem as well. The book that is before you began as a critique of “Jewish Renaissance” and “renaissance” itself. It began again by contemplating “renaissance” as a moral and regulative idea.

The immediate historical focus of our study is the German-Jewish experience, including the Habsburg lands, between 1890 and 1938.¹ In the historiography of German Jewry, this extended period has often been characterized as a period of revision, reorientation, and even “reversal” of the overwhelmingly assimilatory trend Enlightenment and Emancipation ushered in only a few generations before.² After two centuries of outward modernization, a process whose inward effects would lead to an ever-growing disjunction between Judaism and its own tradition, there occurred, at the height of Jewish acculturation and assimilation,³ a peculiar movement of “return” to Judaism. To be sure, this “return” had little in common with the homecoming of the “heretic” to Jewish law, and seldom produced a *baal teshuvah* (penitent) in the traditional sense, but it nevertheless adopted for itself a language of “repair,” “retrieval,” “remembering,” and “renewal,” which by the

turn of the century crystallized in a widely used concept of “Jewish Renaissance.” Introduced, if not coined, by the Jewish thinker Martin Buber in an essay of 1901, the Jewish Renaissance defined itself as a total transformation of the human being, a transformation so radical that it dismissed all prior programs of reform and restoration, calling instead for a veritable “rebirth,” or as Buber wrote in 1903:

We are speaking of the Jewish Renaissance. By this we understand the peculiar and basically inexplicable phenomenon of the progressive rejuvenation of the Jewish people in language, customs, and art. We justifiably call it “renaissance” because it resembles—in the transfer of human fate to national fate—the great period that we call Renaissance above all others, because it is a rebirth, a renewal of the entire human being like this Renaissance, and not a return to old ideas and life forms; [it is] the path from semi-being to being, from vegetation to productivity, from the dialectical petrification of scholasticism to a broad and soulful perception of nature, from mediaeval asceticism to a warm, flowing feeling of life, from the constraints of narrow-minded communities to the freedom of the personality, the way from volcanic, formless cultural potential to a harmonious, beautifully formed cultural product.⁴

Buber’s programmatic description, which reflected the German-Jewish Renaissance in its first phase (the second would be during the Weimar period), claimed to be more than “mere” national revival: It called for a comprehensive self-transformation of Jewish culture and “existence” rooted firmly in romanticist, modernist, and thoroughly aestheticizing sensibilities, but rooted no less in a passionate admiration for the spirit of the Italian Renaissance. Indeed, what Buber expected for the new renaissance of Judaism was akin to what he believed the “old” Renaissance had mastered for its own age: A “return” that meant radical innovation; a spontaneous “rebirth” to a “new life” that promised freedom from decline and inward decay. In this respect, the Jewish Renaissance echoed and expanded the call for *techiya* (rebirth) that had come from the Hebrew Renaissance in eastern Europe; and it echoed no less the development of “cultural” or “spiritual” Zionism, as whose cousin—and corrective—it often posed.⁵ But it also echoed a broader longing for a “new renaissance” that was common among European intellectuals at

the *fin-de-siècle* and during the three remarkable decades to follow. Cut short eventually by the rise of a “renaissance” of another kind, the German-Jewish Renaissance, as the however imaginary German-Jewish “symbiosis” itself,⁶ came to a halt in 1938, after having functioned as a form of intellectual resistance, or denial, since 1933.⁷ If one is tempted to occasionally speak of a “renaissance” of Jewish culture in postwar Europe, East and West, then it only testifies to the perseverance of the pattern of thought we call “renaissance.”

To examine this pattern of thought, this “idea,”⁸ whose essential and paradoxical component is indeed the return to a “new self,” shall be the purpose of the present essay. Historically, we will argue that what emerges as the “Jewish Renaissance” is the expression of a renaissance consciousness that was emblematic of an entire generation of intellectuals and artists, and that would remain emblematic of an entire philosophical tradition marked by an overwhelming sense of “crisis” and unease with “progress.”⁹ The question of “return,” to the mind of the present author, is *the* question of twentieth-century European thought—whether “liberal” or “conservative,” secular or religious, Jewish or Christian—and perhaps the question of every generation perceiving itself to be a generation of crisis and transition. Our ambition is to establish the idea of Jewish Renaissance as *coextensive* with the development of Jewish and German thought and to suggest that, in turn, German and Jewish thought and literature were profoundly shaped by the idea of “renaissance.” But while, in the Germanic jargon, this idea slipped inevitable into the perils of a new Romanticism, the Jewish Renaissance, as I intend to show, was born from a deep sense of “unadulterated” classicism, to which it would ultimately return.

Conceptually, we will argue that the quest for return, for *Umkehr*, *Kehre*, *Wende*, or *teshuvah*, is a quest not for a going-back, nor for an ideal “Once,” but the quest for a *conquest* of the past qua past; that it is the distance renaissances postulate that shapes their encounter with “tradition,” and that it is the autonomy of turning that shapes the ethics of their return. Concerned less with what once was, and expressing little interest in a “golden age” and even less respect for the “contents of tradition,” renaissances may well function as modes of cultural “anamnesis,” but not as mere “recollections” of tradition or revivals of a

“usable past.” Stephen Watson, who has analyzed with great virtuosity the concept of “tradition,” alerts us to the seeming paradox that renaissances not only do not repeat but, in fact, “defy simple repetition or *mimesis*.”¹⁰ Rather than retrieving an ancient lost world, and rather than assimilating themselves to the recovered past, renaissances *institute* a past to be recovered as new and different from the present time. “The Renaissance,” Watson writes, “. . . explicitly relies on the experience of distance and estrangement, and it explicitly affirms the ‘between’ which its *innovationi* invoke in the *renovatio* of the past.”¹¹ This “between” between innovation and renovation, distance and familiarity, will be the locus and, indeed, recurring dislocation of our study on being-in-renaissance. Its affirmation will test both our sense of “tradition” as that which connects us with the past and “renovation” as that which separates us from it. “The discovery of antiquity in the Renaissance,” as Hannah Arendt once put it in a poignant parenthetical statement, “was a first attempt to break the fetters of tradition, and by going to the sources themselves to establish a past over which tradition would have no hold.”¹² To establish a past without the grasp of tradition (which is not the same as a past *without* tradition), to recover an innocence of being first again, or as Arendt writes in another place, “prehistoric innocence of the beginning,”¹³ may be regarded the *Leitmotiv* of all revolutionary consciousness, including that of renaissance. Yet, most revolutions, as Karl Marx famously noted in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, are also fearful of their innocence and in need of beginnings other than their own: “The tradition of dead generations weighs heavily like a phantom on the minds of the living. And if they seem engaged in turning themselves and all things around, in creating what has not yet been—precisely in these epochs of revolutionary crisis, they begin to anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service.”¹⁴ Thus the “art of foundation,” for Hannah Arendt, lies in the overcoming of the “perplexities inherent in every beginning.” Every foundation tends to be an act of “refoundation,” as every new tends to be an “improved restatement of the old,” not because it honors the past, but because it fears the future and the “abyss of pure spontaneity” that accompanies the desire for new beginnings. The revolutionary “between” of renaissance reflects the “between” of human anxiety: “Man lives in this in-between,” writes Arendt, “and what he calls the present is a

life-long fight against the dead weight of the past, driving him forward with hope, and the fear of a future (whose only certainty is death), driving him backward toward ‘the quiet of the past’ with nostalgia for and remembrance of the only reality he can be sure of.”¹⁵ What is alarming of the modern ego, as Jacques Barzun wrote in 1943, is “that it is walking forward with its head turned back in fear and longing.”¹⁶ Whether alarming or not, to renaissance, repeating the past means difference, and yet also the desire to be “oneself again.” In renaissance, the fear of new beginnings is also a need for authorization, a conscious response to and recalling of the traces—inherited or invented—of the past. Renaissance, contrary to Marx’s ideal revolution, that has “stripped off all superstitions regarding the past” in order “to begin with itself,”¹⁷ is a revolution with memory. This, and nothing less, the idea of “renaissance” claims for itself: A return that is also a beginning.

II

The idiom of renaissance relishes the irresistible mystique of resurrection and rebirth. “Rebirth,” as the phenomenologist José Sánchez de Murillo writes, drawing on the “organic” philosophy of Franz von Baader, “is not the transition into a different (being) but the opening up of one’s own, wherein being has to root itself.”¹⁸ Rebirth, or the second beginning, thus becomes, for Sánchez, more than “restoration” and more than “mere” beginning: It becomes the “origination of self-hood” (*Hervorgang der Eigenheit*) and, in fact, that which permits continuity, a permanence, as von Baader imagined, through “continuous renaissance” (*beständige Renascenz*).¹⁹

This desire for “permanence,” one could argue, as well as the imagination of renaissance itself, is of undeniably “romantic,” and therefore, as some may think, “un-Jewish” character.²⁰ But behind this romantic foil, which will, with remarkable obstinacy, inform the ideas of return and renaissance to our day, lies more than a sensation of nostalgia and yearning for what a devout von Baader called religious “*Lichtgeburt*.” The “second birth,” for von Baader, was also the birth as task (*aufgegeben*), the birth that would surpass and *defy* the given (*gegeben*) first.²¹ As

such, the second, “unnatural,” birth announced a protest against perishability, pastness, and irreversible time, a protest, whose phantasm was eternal life, but whose moral idea gave birth to the idea of atonement.

The conceptual correlation between “atonement” and “rebirth” will meander through the idea of both individual and collective renaissance. Max Scheler, writing immediately after the end of World War I, spoke of an act of *Gesamtreue* (collective repentance), an “atoning change of conscience” (*reneuvelle Sinneswandlung*) that would, in a quiet, introspective revolution, but in a revolution nonetheless, invert the orders of political and cultural power, bringing about “national rebirth” as an act of moral regeneration.²² Renaissance, for Scheler, represented the “sociological form” of individual repentance.

Our assessment of renaissance, then, will follow in one regard the notions of “invented traditions,” “reinvention” of the past, or imagination of community, which are commonplace in the scholarship of nationalism and cultural revivals, and which capture well the fictional character of foundations and beginnings—but it will, in another regard, differ from this accepted notion to present the idea of “renaissance” not merely as the (re-)construction of imaginary “authenticity,” nor as a “cult of origins” which, according to Julia Kristeva, must inevitably produce “hatred of those others who do not share my origins,”²³ but also as a philosophical, at times even moral, revision of the collective and individual self. What we mean by “atonement” is an act of reversal that, like memory itself, repeats forward and sideward, and inward and outward, breaking through the cycle of sameness that—allegedly at least—the platonic anamnesis had spun, and breaking, at the same time, through the fixed one-timeness of history. Renaissances repeat precisely in order *not* to be the same with the repeated past, but to complete and “atone” for it: They repeat, as we shall see in Ernst Bloch, in order to “surpass” and “overhaul” (*überholen*) and “heal something” (*etwas gutzumachen*).²⁴ Their repetition is a corrective, yet not an abolishment, of historical time.

The question of atoning return, which is inherent in all renaissances, thus becomes a question that puts in question the process of modernity itself. Renaissances, as we will maintain, both modernize and resist modernity. Their call for return is the afterthought to modernity’s self-affirmation. However, we will argue more than that: That renaiss-

sances, as we understand them, reflect not only the consciousness we call modernity but also modernity's secret *conscience*. Reading the Jewish Renaissance, then, will be the unraveling of a history that is itself thinking and task: The history of a renaissance that paired the rejuvenation of its national self with the regeneration of a new humanism, offering a new conscience to the modernity it so imperturbably and tragically fought to keep alive.

III

What prompted, in the history of modern Judaism, such a movement of return and renaissance? Most historians agree that the principal impulse for this phenomenon came from the rapid swelling of political and cultural anti-Semitism in the great urban centers of Europe, which made it increasingly difficult to maintain confidence in the prospects of integration and assimilation. With their loyalty and "natural" ability to assimilate questioned by their Christian critics, many Jews retreated into a position of "self-defense" and newly discovered pride. But more often than not, this manner of response produced, though outwardly not ineffective, little more than a form of being Jewish in spite of anti-Semitism, a "*Trotzjudentum*" concerned less with cultural innovation than with making a statement of defiance.²⁵ While fully tangible, then, the existence of "cultured" anti-Semitism could not by itself account for the reversal that would become the "Jewish Renaissance." But it did, nonetheless, evoke a "turning point in Jewish self-perception," that would contribute to a heightened reflexivity of "Jewishness."²⁶

This heightened reflexivity, as more recent studies have shown, was profoundly shaped by the visible influx of Jews from eastern Europe, still rooted in the relatively traditional milieus of Russia, Rumania, or Galicia and migrating, from the 1880s on, to the larger cities of the Habsburg and Wilhelmine empires. The infusion of modern metropolitan life with ostensibly "premodern" culture seems to have had a strangely revitalizing effect on German Jews caught between defiance and assimilation. Though by no means universally welcome, but rather shunned by most of their Western coreligionists, Jews from the East

experienced something like a “new appreciation,” as Jack Wertheimer once put it, by Jewish intellectuals in the West, who found in the “old” ways of life an imaginary symbol of self-recognition that could compensate for their own alienation from traditional Judaism.²⁷ In encountering their very own “Other,” many Jews of defiance, themselves secular and uncomfortable with their heritage, were given new tools to forge difference and distinctiveness (*Eigenart*).

Shulamit Volkov, in a now-classic essay, has situated this phenomenon in what she calls the “dynamics of dissimulation.” Paradoxically, as Volkov argues, it was precisely the most “modern,” the most assimilated and most integrated, generation of German Jews that began to revitalize and reassert its Jewishness from the 1890s onward in a search for the old authentic “soul,” which intuitively gravitated toward myth, folklore, and the “backward” East—but Volkov views dissimulation also as a phenomenon already *inherent* in the “inner dynamics,” or perhaps dialectics, of assimilation. Thus, the unique context of the fin-de-siècle provided no more than a stimulus for a reversal that was already given in the process of assimilation and modernization itself. “A generation of Jews,” Volkov writes, “who were relatively free from the anxiety of social climbing was beginning to look inward.”²⁸ Reaching the limits of assimilation, which were primarily, but not only, the outward limits of modern anti-Semitism, German Jews of the intellectual elite found themselves “promptly halting at the brink,” at a point, as Volkov continues, that enabled them to “turn backward and inward, seeking a new definition for one’s identity, and often also a new self-respect.”²⁹ In this turning “backward and inward”—*Umkehr* and *Einkehr*, as the German Jewish literature will frequently put it—the idea of renaissance approaches its moral correlate: radical repentance.

IV

Renaissance begins as a “protest against one’s own time,”³⁰ that is also a protest against one’s place and a protest against oneself. Benjamin

Harshav, in an artful essay on the “modern Jewish revolution,” re-framed this protest in three deictic negations: “Not here, Not like now, Not as we are.”³¹ Revolutions, he maintains, surely negate old forms of existence, but from their negations also emerge corresponding “axes of orientation,” which traverse, in multiple directions, the “inside” and the “outside” of revolutionary consciousness.³² “Renaissance,” one might argue with Harshav, represents one such axis, a negation that is also reorientation, transforming the threefold protest against the present into a reclamation of distance as that which is not present, yet still within reach.

Renaissance is a protest also against history: Its fundamental temporality refuses itself to the modern differentiation, or temporalization, of time. Renaissance resists the openness of future and the closedness of the past. Its protest is one of recovery that empowers—by the sheer act of reclaiming—the recoverer. Immune to the uncertainty of the “not-yet” and freed from the certainty of the “already,” the recoverer can claim a distant “once” in which all temporal horizons are synchronized. Renaissance is the reclamation of a *simultaneity of distant times*. It is the desire for simultaneous access to the otherwise separated planes of time. It is the desire for a New without the terror of newness and the longing for an Old without the pressure of the past.

Renaissance is a desire. Writing on how the French historian Jules Michelet “invented” the Renaissance in 1840, Lucien Febvre describes the romantic historian’s “thirst” for a new life: “He is thirsty, dreadfully thirsty, dying of thirst. And he cries ‘Water!’ just as Rabelais’ heroes do. He is so much in need of rejuvenation, refreshment and renewal!”³³—until, suddenly, the “whole of Italy and its joy in living a beautiful, exciting and disinterested life” is opened up to him, and the word “Renaissance” springs from his lips, “transformed, regenerated,” as a “total renewal of life—well-being, hope.” Thus Michelet invented an historical concept to answer, as Febvre beautifully shows, the “needs of his history,” which were also his religious, deeply mystical and, ultimately, erotic needs, his needs for “rebirth” and true love at last. From his needs a concept was born, an intellectual category that, as Febvre writes, would soon “enslave” its users with the force and “tyranny” of

machines made of steel: "History is a strongbox that is too well guarded, too firmly locked and belted. Once something has been put in it for safe keeping it never gets out."³⁴

From its romantic inceptions in nineteenth century France to its present-day incarnations the concept of "renaissance," along with its ideological derivatives of "renewal" and "rebirth," has been locked and belted in a strongbox that belongs both to history and to what Febvre called our "*ateliers cérébraux*"—to our mental workshops. Renaissance, as this book will argue, is both a periodic concept and a *figura* of thought, a persistent pattern of thinking, a *Denkweise*, or a mode of consciousness. We cannot think about renaissance without wondering what it means to think *in* renaissance.

V

Thinking in Renaissance, then, will be our first exercise. We must look not only at what is forged in our mental workshops but also at *how* it is forged. Accordingly, we will first meet "renaissance" in the abstract, as an "ideal" construct born from feelings and desires that can seldom be separated from their religious and poetic origins. Renaissance is the most fundamental desire for a new birth and a new life—the desire for immortality neither "after" nor "beyond" historical time, but in a historical time that is transpired by the possibility of repetition. Repetition, whose nonidentity is presupposed, articulates the modern desire to overcome the finality of historical time. Thus, Pico della Mirandola, while honoring the "straight line" as the mode of reaching perfection in accordance with one's own nature, celebrated "circular motion" as the "most express image of the true felicity, through which a creature returns to the beginning from which it proceeded."³⁵ And thus Franz Rosenzweig defines redemption as "the end, before which all that has begun sinks back into its beginning."³⁶

Renaissance is the story that makes possible the immanence of after-life. In our interpretation, this story of desire for immanent rebirth will be stripped to what we propose to be its narrative elements—to its

most simple grammatical rootwords: beginning and beginning-*anew*. The desire for a rebirth that is—as most renaissances will insist—both rebirth and creating *anew*, means to us a desire for new beginnings that both reclaim and repudiate beginnings from the past. The new beginning is no mere repetition of the old, but a beginning in itself. Beginning and beginning-*again* belong to one and the same grammar of beginnings. To the extent that this grammar becomes the ordering principle in a world that must remain anarchic, or unbegun, without thresholds where one thing ends and another begins, beginnings and beginnings-*again* are the rootwords in a narrative order from which is derived what would be absent otherwise: meaning.

As narrative incisions into the orderless flux of things, beginnings are also middles: It is at the beginning that things turn from old to new, that time turns from one tense to another. Thus, the third rootword in our grammar of beginnings, which is the grammar of the desire we call “renaissance,” will be turning. Turning is the midpoint that disjoins and conjoins ever *anew* the story of renaissance. Turning introduces ever *anew* the curvilinear path of mythic time to the “curse” of modern historicity, keeping alive the profound bifurcation of the linear and circular which, for Karl Löwith, animates the modern mind in its insatiable quest for a history that makes sense to us.³⁷

VI

It is in the rootword of turning that the concept of history is pierced by the unhistorical, *counter*-historical, concept of atonement. In atonement is hidden the possibility of “turning return” (*teshuvah*, *metanoia*), a repairing going back that defies all temporal order. The penitent, as Adin Steinsaltz put it in his popular book on *teshuvah*, has the actual ability historians can only fantasize about: to “return . . . to the past, one’s own, or one’s ancestors.”³⁸ What so emerges Steinsaltz calls a “new connectedness,” which is deeper the greater the distance to be traveled by the returnee. Return, in this manner, empowers the penitent with a sense of defiant control over the devouring mouth of time. Return

protests the pastness of the past. Once this return is truly answered by the voice that is pardon, the past ceases indeed to be past: "Active in a stronger sense than forgetting," Emmanuel Levinas writes about this phenomenon, "pardon acts upon the past, somehow repeats the event, purifying it."³⁹ The past, in a word, ceases to be past not by its negation or undoing but by its affirmation and purifying redoing. It is neither forgotten, nor remembered, but relived and "redeemed."

The redemptive quality of distance and memory will accompany us throughout all pages of this study. Our use of "memory" and "history" takes for granted their narrative interdependence, and it is with some reluctance that we take part in a discourse that must reckon with concepts such as "antihistoricism" or "counter-history." Our simple triad of rootwords cuts through these distinctions with a certain degree of deliberate naiveté. In fact, if there is a recurrent motif to our grammar, then it would be that beginning, beginning-again, and turning are rooted both inside and outside of history: that their simultaneity at once creates and resists historical emplotment, articulating neither historicism nor antihistoricism but an historicism of a particular kind.

VII

Acting in the *mode* of simultaneity, renaissances are seldom concerned with historic specificity or events *in illo tempore*, or the "commemoration of beginnings" in the past.⁴⁰ What renaissances, in our view, commemorate are not "beginnings" but the *act and attitude of beginning* itself: not origins but originating. To renaissance, the past is not enough; it is in the beginning, in beginning as a mode of being and self-awareness, that the temporal horizons of past, present, and future become loose and open ended. Beginnings are powerful tools of synchronization, and renaissances, by beginning-again the beginning, defy the plot of history in their ability to access events in a simultaneous order or, to speak with Herder, "total view." Thus renaissances can "act upon the past" without being bound by it. Only here can the repetition take place that is—by the truth of imagination—a "renewal."

VIII

Creating the possibility for “renewal,” beginning is a narrative strategy that has both reparative effects and moral implications. William McLoughlin has argued that cultural reawakenings are by no means merely pathological but can work, rather, in “therapeutic” and “cathartic” ways.⁴¹ John Hutchinson went further to compare, not unlike Scheler, the phenomenon of cultural reawakenings to forms of “moral regeneration.” Distinguishing political from cultural nationalism, Hutchinson views this moral regeneration as an “integrative” return to the “creative life-principle of the nation.”⁴² As “moral innovators,” Hutchinson’s cultural nationalists are conscious of the regenerative power of conflict, crisis, and profound ambivalence. They admire tradition but reject the narrow boundaries of traditionalism. They admire modernity but disavow the self-effacing course it seems to necessitate. Cultural nationalism thus typically serves as a corrective of both radical ethnocentrism and radical assimilation. If it remains in this corrective in-between, cultural nationalism emerges, for Hutchinson, as the “good” kind of nationalism that enables “backward” cultures, as he puts it, to modernize themselves without relinquishing what they consider to be their collective heritage and destiny.

The historian, of course, will know that the “good” kind of nationalism is exceedingly rare and that the myth of regeneration belongs, more often than not, to totalitarian thought.⁴³ Yet, I would like to suggest, in what follows, that we can think of the idea of renaissance also as a moral possibility; that it conforms to the very ambivalence Hutchinson has attached to cultural nationalism, an ambivalence that is precisely in the simultaneity of tradition and modernity, in the synchronization of old and new, or simply in the conscious old-newness renaissances seek to engender. Neither conservative nor liberal by common terms, neither living in tradition nor rejecting it, and favoring neither return nor progress in the simple sense of the word, renaissances are the mode of thought for those in “between.” In the imagination of renaissance becomes possible what in the factual world is unthinkable: a new beginning; a second life; a going back into the past as possibility; an atonement that actually seems to repair the world.

IX

In our study, renaissances are treated as powerful social imaginations, whose grammatical rootwords are in truth modulations of the one and same principal ideology we call “beginning.” Hence, the primary path we follow is none other than the path of a *critique of ideology*⁴⁴—but this does not render renaissances mere illusions or expressions of “false consciousness.” Just as in the defiance of factuality atonement emerges as an unprecedented moral force, an imperative that refuses to accept the past, and no less the Self, as a *fait accompli* while becoming moral precisely on account of its refusal, so renaissances act as collective resistances to the irreversibility of time, resisting what is present, past, and not yet here. It is in the simultaneity of its rootwords, which loosely correspond to the self-images of modernity, tradition, and crisis, that the idea of renaissance opens indeed the possibility of repair, atonement, and beginning anew. The moral possibility of renaissances depends on the simultaneous presence of its triad and on its ability to continuously act as its own corrective. Paradoxically, then, what is the conceptual weakness of renaissances, their completely imaginary character of return, their empty jargon of authenticity, their figment of renewal, their infinity of crisis, their fantasy of resurrection, their conscious counterfactuality, is also the ground of their self-empowerment, self-actualization, and “moral innovation.”

X

The Jewish Renaissance will serve as the historical image of our conceptual mirror. Like the idea of renaissance itself, the Jewish Renaissance will reveal itself only in its ideal traits, without complete justice to its jumble of divergent views. Our simple grammar of rootwords will assist us in reconstructing the Jewish Renaissance as a triad of beginning, beginning-again, and most pertinently, turning—each of them ideological elements that will reappear in the concepts of history, memory, and aesthetics. We will argue that to the Jewish Renaissance, the idea of “return” meant both less and more than a “going-back”; that its

recovery and return were not “territorializations” of the mind effecting “closure,” as Sidra Ezrahi suggested in her fine study on the Jewish imagination of homecoming,⁴⁵ but, to the contrary, openings and affirmations of elsewhere; and finally, that the Jewish Renaissance navigated a truly “triadic” in-between, less by reclaiming a “usable past” than by a “remembering” of tradition that understood itself, as Hans-Georg Gadamer would later put it, as the reentering into a conscious stream of passing-on. Following neither the ideology of anti-modernism nor of modernism, and emulating neither the model of reform nor the model of religious return to Jewish law, the Jewish Renaissance experimented with a retrieval not of specific contents, nor of specific obligations, but of a specific mode of retrieving, a “putting oneself-into” (*er-innern*) tradition from the distance of modernity. Thus the Jewish Renaissance came to justify itself through the reparative role of distance and disjunction, through what Karl Löwith, borrowing from Jakob Burckhardt, termed the “conscious continuity” of Renaissance, and what Martin Buber called the “passion of passing-on.”⁴⁶ In its last analysis, the Jewish Renaissance represented no return to Judaism but an ever-renewed turning toward a Judaism that had to remain without any other imperative than the imperative of return itself.

This notwithstanding, the Jewish Renaissance found itself persistently in pursuit of a classical ideal that was often clouded, even deeply invested, in Nietzschean Atticism,⁴⁷ but which ultimately yearned toward a renaissance of the German classical tradition. Conceiving itself as a “true” heir to the spirit of the Italian Renaissance, the Jewish Renaissance, as I shall argue, continued to hold fast—despite its romantic and not-seldom “völkish” language—to what it imagined as the ideals of enlightenment and humanism. Even at its most “romantic,” and by inversion, most “oriental” self-expression,⁴⁸ the Jewish Renaissance could not, or perhaps refused to, annul its roots in the letters of the *Quattrocento* and the Weimar *Klassik*: It was the renaissance of the last *Humanisten*.⁴⁹

Finally, the Jewish Renaissance was able to ground itself in a view of Jewish history that was deeply infused—even in its modern articulations—by the idea of “resurrection.” Whether an intuitively “Jewish” idea or not,⁵⁰ resurrection, as this study will argue, has

functioned as a recurrent, perhaps even prevalent, narrative trope and form of narrative apperception in the writing of Jewish history from prophetic to present times. It has functioned as its mythic and moral pivot. To be sure, not all Jewish historiography is resurrectionist in its orientation, and it is certainly evident that most scholarly histories of the recent decades have consciously avoided older images of resurrection and rebirth and even struck an all but apocalyptic tone. “[T]he old unity of Jewry,” as the Israeli historian David Vital concluded in 1990, “however fragile, however problematic, essentially a function of the old sense and, yes, the old reality of nationhood, lies shattered today, almost beyond repair.”⁵¹ At the same time, however, Jewish history, not as a scholarly discipline, or at least not necessarily so, but as a collective consciousness, as what German thinkers used to call *Geschichtlichkeit* (historicity), seems to suggest the opposite: that if Jewish history teaches anything to its “waning nation,” then it is that nothing is “beyond repair,” that its people, strangely “ever-dying,” as Simon Rawidowicz put it in a famous essay of 1948,⁵² has also the strange capacity to revitalize itself. As the late Emil Fackenheim put it in 1982: “If the real Jewish people, while often without peace, were rarely without vibrant life, it is because of the ever-renewing, ever-rejuvenating power of *Teshuvah*.”⁵³ Couched in a language that belongs to the ideology of renaissance, to the sacred fantasy of repenting rebirth, the idea of Jewish history as a history of ever new beginnings has so created what we shall call an historicism of a particular kind, a fixed narrative plot in the semantics of restoration, whose purpose is not only the desire for meaning but, equally so, the postulation of a single imperative: to begin anew.

XI

That the idea of a Jewish Renaissance is rooted already in the concept of a Jewish history, but that it is also rooted in a characteristic *figura* of thought, which we have called “thinking in renaissance,” is the recurrent theme of this study. It establishes a conceptual continuity between

Jewish Renaissance and Jewish history, which takes the form of a correlation. It is this correlation between writing and thinking, the simultaneity of the semantics of restoration and the grammar of beginnings, that also warrants a specific form of text—a form that is itself a correlation of its parts. Because there is no order to writing and thinking other than the order of back and forth, the parts of this book are arranged as two faces of a folio page, front and back, verso and recto, which may, in fact, be interchanged, for each is each other's introduction and conclusion, foreshadowing and afterlife. Hence, the reader, whose interests gravitate toward the "historical," will begin this study at its front and read "Verso," Chapters One–Two–Three, whereas the reader, whose interests lie in the "conceptual" will begin the book from its back and read "Recto," Chapters One–Two–Three. There might be a third reader, the reader who prefers to plunge *in medias res*, and this reader may indeed begin in the middle of it all, at the axis of the book, and read, depending on what interests prevail, "Verso," Chapter One and "Recto," Chapter Three, or vice versa.

To the reader of this study, such simultaneity may at first be disorienting. Still more disorienting might be that we have made an effort to build this book on concepts and ideas rather than the thinkers thinking them. Great names, which commonly give order to our discipline, are treated as mere signposts in a landscape that is shaped not by individuals but by the elusive dwelling places of thought: by the betweenness that ideas tend to effortlessly traverse. I am, of course, an insufficient surveyor of this landscape, but I did take the liberty to stretch at times the spaces in between and to suspend, matter-of-factly, the uncanny excitement we often experience when we discover parallels of thought between Jewish thinkers and their French, German, or deeply Christian counterparts. For the purpose of this study, we take such parallels and "elective affinities" for granted, for the idea of renaissance cuts across time and culture, attaching itself in similar ways to individuals of entirely different extraction. I shall leave it to the judgment of the reader, which parallels are exciting and uncanny, and which ones are not—as I leave it to the judgment of the reader, which names belong to individuals of integrity and which ones do not.

XII

In the end, this book remains what it claims to be but cannot call itself because of its immodest associations in the field of Renaissance: an essay; a trying-out of ideas in a specific cultural context, a reading and thinking, a synthesizing of far-apart ends, that is less than a history but, hopefully, more than not a history. Our simple question remains what the term “renaissance” meant to the “Jewish Renaissance”; what it meant for this generation to be *in* renaissance, to “return,” “turn,” and “begin anew.” We merely ask how the related concepts of “rebirth,” “restoration,” or “rejuvenation” traversed and formed the landscapes of German and Jewish thought, whose dried up riverbeds still channel the currents of Jewish thought today.

If there is value to this question, then it cannot be exhausted in the period of time that serves as its historical backcloth, nor in a focus that remains centered on Judaism. To the contrary, what renders renaissances so powerful and so enduring is the recurrence and cultural malleability of their idea. “Don’t take away the Renaissance from us,” Johan Huizinga mocks the romantic dreamers of cultural rebirth. “We cannot live without it. It has become the expression of an attitude of life for us. We want to live in it and from it whenever we feel the urge to do so.”⁵⁴ The desire to live in the idea, and from it, at all times is the ground for the ever-newness of Renaissance. There is no fixed place and no fixed age to its idiom. Renaissances repeat themselves, and frequently refer to each other, in historically very different contexts. From the Italian *rinascimento* to the romantic renaissances of Stendhal and Michelet, to the aesthetic renaissance of late Victorian England, to the Harlem and Irish renaissances of the 1920s,⁵⁵ the idea of renaissance retains its suggestive power of cultural introspection and innovation. When in the year 2000, more than a century after the short-lived German Jewish Renaissance took hold, an American publication championed a new “Jewish Renaissance Agenda,” which would replace the older model of “continuity” with an unscripted process of “rebirth,” a “renewed encounter with Jewish tradition,” a “flowering of an old shoot,” and, ultimately, with a message of *tikkun olam* (repairing of the world);⁵⁶ and when a group of pre-

eminent contemporary Jewish thinkers defines Jewish postmodernism as a “kind of *teshuvah*,” “repair,” and “return,” as a “turning back to tradition,” that resembles the “prophetic call for a moral/spiritual turning,”⁵⁷ then we can appreciate how the fantasy of renaissance and its moment of “halting at the brink” continues to travel from generation to generation as an attitude and mode of consciousness and conscience, as a feeling of truthful, repenting “return” that turns crises into new beginnings.