

Introduction

In the epigraph to Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*, a verse from Psalm 45, an imperative voice tells a king to "ride in the cause of truth" (*rehav al devar emet*), as if toward a goal external to him. Better yet, "ride upon the cause of truth." Or perhaps even, "ride upon the word of truth." Truth is the vehicle upon which the rider already sits. His "tongue the pen of an expert scribe," the psalter calls to his heart "astir with gracious words." He declares himself to his king: "You are fairer than all men, your speech is endowed with grace. . . . Gird your sword upon your thigh, O hero, in your splendor and glory; and in your glory win success; ride upon the word of truth and meekness and right and let your right hand lead you to awesome deeds." A thundering passage into twentieth-century religious thought, the psalm embeds truth in a discourse of poetic beauty, declaratory love, miracle and righteousness. In the tempo of Kandinsky's *Lyricaly* (1911) (fig. 2), horse and rider merge into a unified movement of black line and color forms composed of greens, blues, yellows, and blood red. While the picture works in tandem across its leftward plunge, each color remains distinct. The colors ride upon the same truth, the spiritual semblance of material reality as it begins to discombobulate.

The horse and rider in Rosenzweig and Kandinsky blend truth, goodness, and beauty into a permanent sensual source. German expressionism and German Jewish thought were simultaneously metaphysical and anti-metaphysical. Kandinsky invokes "spirit" through paint's physical medium. For Buber and Rosenzweig, an acosmic God has no reality apart from sensual form. God and that which belongs to spirit remain fundamentally other (heteronomous) to world and to "man." In this, they are meta-physical. And yet anti-metaphysical—God's presence and the spiritual in art lie at no ideal end point or "good

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beyond being.” They are already incorporated into the wholeness of being, constituting the vehicle upon which the rider already sits. Revelation and the spiritual in art are irreducibly colored by everyday life and physical sensation. We catch Kandinsky (and with him Buber and Rosenzweig) at that point at which reference and propositional content begin to dissolve. We can still see horse and rider, the face of God, but not for long. Soon there will be nothing left, just the impression left behind by the pure sound of color and linguistic tempo.

The attention that I want to call to the affinity between early twentieth-century German Jewish philosophy and the history of early German modernism is meant to accomplish two ends. It brings new philosophical perspectives with which to reframe modern religious thought and the problem of metaphysics. Art and aesthetic theory pull Jewish philosophy away from a simple focus on God, text, and community by recasting it as “form,” “presence,” “pathos,” time,” “space” and “eros.” Aesthetics provides the live wire that to this day animates the modern Judaism reflected in the Buber-Rosenzweig oeuvre. I have also found that attention to art and style heightens the sense of temporal passage between their time and our own. Buber’s first publications began to appear a century ago. The historical gap separating us from him and Rosenzweig is as long as the gap in time separating them from the early German romantics. Like Kandinsky’s lyrical rider, their texts are stuck in a yawning historical chasm from which they continue to stimulate a terrific sense of movement. Like Blue Rider German expressionism, Buber and Rosenzweig are no longer contemporary. If their work survives the passage from Germany to the United States and Israel, from modernism to postmodernism, from expressionism to neoexpressionism, it will have done so transformed by new hermeneutical circles.

Buber and Rosenzweig

From its inception at the turn of the twentieth century, “the Jewish renaissance” was immersed in the language of plastic expression. One of its most prolific members, Martin Buber (1878–1965), a student at the University of Vienna in philosophy and art history, coined the term in conversation with the Swiss historian Jakob Burkhardt (1818–97),

the Italian renaissance, and contemporary currents in the arts. Buber's published body of work spans the entire first half of the twentieth century. As a public persona, he was the very image of Jewish renewal. A 1901 article for the journal *Ost und West* explicitly links that movement to "forerunners of a great general culture of beauty . . . the artistic feeling that awakens everywhere, the development of modern arts and crafts, the infusion of everyday life with a sense of beauty, the diverse attempts at an aesthetic education for our youth, and the effort to socialize art" (*FB*, 30). The people behind the renaissance of modern Jewish life, including Buber himself, formed part of this larger development and were "electrified by it" (31). As Paul Mendes-Flohr points out, the combination of particular Jewish reaffirmations with general cultural interests formed "one seamless weave."¹

In Buber's early work, leading up to World War I, the vogue for Nietzsche that was then current and the flowing contours of German-speaking art nouveau fused with Zionism, Jewish art, and Hasidism. *The Tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav* (1906) and then *Legends of the Baal Shem* (1908) earned Buber early literary fame. *Ecstatic Confessions* (1909) and *Daniel* (1912) further increased his reputation in the world of German letters. *Erlebnis*—experience—is fundamental to all these early works. The essence of pure experience grasped intuitively by the whole self, it extends human being beyond the relative limits and finite concepts of mental cognition. *Erlebnis* reflects the root power in the break of myth and mysticism from the rigid form of inert religion and bourgeois convention. The absolute and unconditional are made real through Dionysian passion and Apollonian form-creation: creative, organic acts at the physical center of the chaos of brute sensation. Jewish religiosity and renewal are a youth style, a *Jugendstil*, lent art's lush tonal shape and sensual texture.

In the wake of World War I, Buber looked past the stylized individual subject to highlight the life of relationship between multiple subjects. His greatest single masterpiece remains *I and Thou* (1923), the basic tenets of which he was to modify but never to abandon. A theoretical lens upon which to conceive the relation between God, person, and human community, it was the key to his mature thought on everything from Zionism, Hasidism, the Hebrew Bible and its translation, Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine, philosophical anthropology, works of

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art, and the contemporary “eclipse of God.” Complicating the unified shape of *Erlebnis*, the text’s profoundly dualistic worldview embodies the clashing color combinations in expressionistic poetry and painting. Human intersubjectivity affirms the polymorphous I-YOU encounter. Resting upon the claim that no isolated “I” exists apart from relationship to an other, revelation transforms each figure into an ultimate and mysterious center of value whose presence eludes the concepts of instrumental language. The heteronomous revelation of YOUR presence calls ME into an open-ended relationship, a living pattern, that defies sense, logic, and proportion, whereas the I-IT relationship assumes the fixed form, the density and duration of realist painting, of objects that one can measure and manipulate.

Rosenzweig (1886–1929) was one of Buber’s first critics and major collaborators. Obscuring basic lines of agreement that they came to share regarding revelation and redemption, the differences between them are at first glance easy to overstate. They concern Buber’s early mysticism, his alleged antinomianism, the exact character of the IT world, and the status of Jewish law. If a dionysian image of the hasid and the drama of Zionism first drew Buber into Jewish life, Rosenzweig was drawn to the formal character of revelation and ritual. Pressed hard by his beloved friend Eugen Rosenstock and cousins Hans and Rudolf Ehrenberg to convert from Judaism to Christianity as they themselves had done, he decided to do so as a Jew, not as a “pagan.” According to legend, however, a visit to an eastern European *shtetl* in Berlin on Yom Kippur in 1913 so overwhelmed the young Rosenzweig that he sent word back, in a well-known letter to Rudolf Ehrenberg, that he was going to remain a Jew. In doing so, he left behind the laissez-faire form of middle-class German Jewish assimilation and the inert Judaism of his parents’ generation. He pursued intensive commitments to learning and observance at the Freie jüdische Lehrhaus in Frankfurt, an adult education program that he directed until his untimely death in 1929 after a long bout with Lou Gehrig’s disease.

At once physical and meta-physical, the amalgamation of visible and invisible elements contributes to the structure of Rosenzweig’s most important work, *The Star of Redemption* (1921). Its most basic insight is that the truth that appears to human beings in this world is multiform. At first, the “elements” of God, world, and “man,” which

are to compose that truth, constitute autonomous components, mere figments of thought. Each one is irreducible to the others. No single figure can be said to comprise the All, to exhaust reality. Terrified by death, the human subject inhabits a broken semblance of a world—self-enclosed fragments symbolized by Mt. Olympus, the Greek polis, classical sculpture, and tragic theater. The “course” through which these silent elements then open out to one another is made real by the acoustic media of creation, revelation, and redemption. But they disappear from view. Parallel to epic, lyric, and dramatic speech, their language intensifies spiritual life by rendering it into the invisible shape of poetry. Finally, the forms of Jewish and Christian cult constellate into a metacosmos, in which all six points—the triadic form God-world-“man” and the triadic form creation-revelation-redemption—assemble into an integrated star-shaped gestalt. By the end of the text, the now visible manifestation of God’s face, a palpable image of absolute truth, confronts the soul at death’s border and ushers it back into life.

Meta-physical pictures saturate this peculiar philosophical thought. On the combination of triangles (Δ) (∇) that compose the “star of redemption” (\star) Rosenzweig explained in a 1918 letter to his lover Margrit (Gritli) Rosenstock-Huessy, “I think in figures” (*GB*, 124). As he was to claim later, the miracle is not, as Heidegger would have it, that something “is,” but rather that “there is yet something that has form.” The movement of time in “the real world” congeals into an image or a group of images that stand apart from time. About what God, world, and “man” are, we know nothing, but how they *look* in a system of revelation, “that we can know exactly.” Historical flux (“the flow of events”) “projects gleaming pictures onto heaven, above the temporal world and they remain.” Reversing the axiological order in traditional metaphysics, Rosenzweig goes on to say about these pictures: “They are not archetypes. On the contrary, they would not exist did not the stream of reality continue to break forth out of its there invisible-mysterious sources.” The “invisible mysteries,” past, present, and future—that is, time itself—“become image-like in these images, and the steady course of life devolves into recurring form” (*NT*, 92–93).

For both Buber and Rosenzweig, “religion” fell short of revelation from either of two angles. On the one hand, revelation is still platonic. Pure *Erlebnis*, an I-YOU encounter, and the commandment of love

underscore a palpable otherness that transcends the objective organization of things and mere subjective states of consciousness. Religion pales before revelation, unable to measure up to that which is always incommensurable to human structures of consciousness and culture. On the other hand, the beliefs and practices of religion are rejected because they are set apart from the full range of physical being. In his later work, Buber argued that rather than render reality absolute, revelation made reality more real and less fantastic. Religion must reflect “the *whole* existence of the real man in the real world of God” or else it is no better than art, ethics, and science (*ABH*, 110–11). Rosenzweig agreed: “Only we, the best of us, live entirely sober, under God, but without ‘religion.’” Pagan rites turn creation and its host into gods whereas revelation restores the world to its elemental order. Heaven, earth, and water do not cease being heaven, earth, and water. Revelation “makes the world unreligious again” (*BT*, 767–68).

Expressed positively, rejecting religion for the “real world of God” entails a revelation that is both transcendent and immanent. Revelation simultaneously points beyond the human, even as it remains embedded within it. Rosenzweig took his cue from the biblical Song of Songs to declare: “Love simply cannot be ‘purely human’ . . . by speaking, love already becomes superhuman, for the sensuality of the word is brimful with its divine supersense. Like speech itself, love is sensual-supersensual” (*SR*, 201). Buber understood the Hebrew word *ruah* (wind/spirit) to make a similar point. Neither physical nor metaphysical, it means not one of two meanings but both together and undivided. *Ruah* constitutes a natural process, a surging, a *Geist*-ing, a wind surge that points to its divine origin in a spirit surge, a God-storm that shakes and animates the human person (*ST*, 86–87). The critique of “religion” and the turn to revelation were rhetorically brought to bear against nineteenth-century bourgeois religion, namely, the “pseudo-ethical” rationalism of Reform Judaism and the “pseudo-judicial” observance of Orthodox Judaism.

With Kandinsky and other avant-garde artists, Buber and Rosenzweig shared a lively antipathy in respect to another form of nineteenth-century culture: the canon of art for art’s sake (*l’art pour l’art*). Against the “pure aesthetics” of museums, books, and theaters, their anti-aesthetic was “completely free of the typical embellishments [*üblichen Verschönerungen*]” (*BT*, 849). As Rosenzweig once observed, translating

a tale about God's revelation is more challenging than telling the tale of Hansel and Gretel. In the latter case, the story only has to be beautiful, while in telling tales about God's revelation, "it is not enough that it is beautiful, but rather it must also be true." At the surface level, translating revelation only seems to have nothing to do with art. Even without embellishment, however, the translation is still aesthetic. It just belongs to a different order of beauty. Revelation is not impassive to shape and form. Rosenzweig slyly added: "It cannot be indifferent to [God] what kind of tales His children tell about him, much less the name with which they name Him" (1042).

In the history of modern art, the rhetoric of anti-aesthetics signals the passage of one style into another. Like "religion," the "aesthetic" is narrow and unreal, too pretty and too precious; it creates an artificial division between art and life that emergent avant-gardes seek to overcome with a new system of artifice. Rosenzweig recognized that the rejection of neoromantic ornament and embellishment, the critique of rarified and beautiful objects, was itself a modern art discourse. The nineteenth century, he wrote his parents in 1916, was "German," that is, Gothic, ornamental, romantic; unlike the twentieth century, which would be "Latin," that is, unromantic, formal, constructive, and unsentimental, as in the work of Thomas Mann, Kafka, and anti-Wagnerian music (*BT*, 204–5). It was expressionism that shaped what Rosenzweig once called, in reference to Hebrew Scripture, his own *unästhetisch-überästhetische ästhetik* (1153). The "unaesthetic" represents the dissonant quality in modern art that is *über*-aesthetic, that is, more than merely aesthetic. Neoromantic art-for-art's-sake aestheticism gave way to the modernism identified by Rosenzweig. In doing so, revelation remained aesthetic but no longer "aesthetic."

The important differences dividing Buber and Rosenzweig around a brace of theoretical and practical problems recede before what they had in common—an unaesthetic-superaesthetic slant to revelation and redemption as they come to press upon human expression. Rosenzweig's initial dislike of Buber belongs to that selfsame history of style. The somewhat older Buber had begun his literary career under the influence of art nouveau, the most advanced style then available across Europe in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Rosenzweig's relative youth saved him from Jugendstil, as it was known in Germany and Austria. He

first began to publish after World War I, when it had already passed from the scene. By the 1920s, he and Buber were in sync both with each other and with the pathos-laden rhythm and sharply drawn dualisms of expressionism. They both thought in terms of multiform and complex patterns. And they both tried to keep pace with the cooler German styles developing in the mid to late 1920s. Their later work grew more and more *sachlich*: objective, matter-of-fact, and realistic. Indeed, the history of early German modernism, from Jugendstil through Neue Sachlichkeit, constitutes a running index to the discourse of “religion” and revelation in early twentieth-century Jewish thought.

Romanticism and Neoromanticism

The increasingly acrid character of early twentieth-century culture was fundamentally at odds with the romantic religion of nature and melancholic *weltschmerz*. Immersed in the dream of the faraway in place and time, the romantic subject is one who shapes the world into a vast hieroglyphic system with himself at its center. He is the absolute self, the poet who can transpose one thing into its opposite, men into stars and stars into men, nature into art and art into religion, or religion into nature and nature into art. In *The Novices of Saïs* by Novalis (1772–1801), the romantic poet divines the once-broken bond between heaven and earth out of his own diction; he masters the great cipher to which everything belongs and in which everything interconnects: eggshells, clouds, crystals, stone formations, ice-covered water, plants, beasts, human beings, and the lights of heaven.² But for Buber, “Authentic religiosity . . . has nothing in common with the dreamings of rapturous [*schwärmerischer*] hearts, or with the self-pleasure of aestheticizing souls, or with the pensive play [*tiefsinnige Spielen*] of a practiced intellectuality” (*OJ*, 93; trans. modified). The expression is anti-romantic. As against “superficial emotionalism,” the collecting of “experiences,” and “prattling about God” (154), Buber’s work bears only a superficial resemblance to the romantic tale of human subjectivity.³

Religious thought as it first took shape in the culture of German modernism was neoromantic, not romantic. It participates in the world of Jugendstil design, the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke and Stefan

George, the dramatic theater of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, paintings by Gustav Klimt, the music of Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler, Wilhelm Dilthey's *Lebensphilosophie*, and the sociology of Georg Simmel. Repelled by the ugliness of modern industrial society, neo-romanticism worked to rejuvenate the conditions of human existence based on the utopian socialism of William Morris and Nietzsche's apotheosis of life and beauty. In the poetry of Rilke, one detects a similar change in relationship to the order of objects. The *New Poems* of 1907 and 1908 attach less value to the romance of self-expression than is the case with Novalis. More attention is paid to the individuated thing, to sculpted angels or swans, an image of the Buddha, the body of a courtesan, the remains of the dead, a bowl of roses. Rabbi Nahman, the Baal Shem Tov, and Daniel exercise the same thinglike status in Buber's early work. Instead of submerging the vast hieroglyph of nature around the subject, neoromantic artists isolated a single, self-contained object, tone, or color over against a blank, flattened surface.⁴

In relation to nature, the neoromantic work creates the opposite visual register to the romanticism of Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1809) (plate 1), in which the romantic subject stares out into a vast three-dimensional abyss with his back to the viewer. Receding into a distance that dwarfs the monk, the line between heaven and earth is blurred in a black belt of rain beneath the massive blue orb pressing down from above. As Robert Rosenblum remarks, "The mysteries of religion . . . left the rituals of church and synagogue and had been relocated in the natural world."⁵ In contrast, the neoromantic approach to nature is anti-naturalistic. The naked boy in E. M. Lilien's *The Creation of the Poet* (ca. 1900) (plate 2), the lush floral decoration, and four angels superimposed upon the black surface are abstracted out of a two-dimensional surface. Lilien's *Passah* (1903) (plate 3) combines in a more radical fashion the blank volumes from which the stylized figures obtrude: pyramids in the shape of Egyptian statuary, a doleful and suffering Jew wrapped in thorns, and a distant sun inscribed with the Hebrew word "Zion." Objects are drawn out of nature, not into it.

The inversion of romantic into neoromantic consciousness marks a wayward line of historical, theoretical, and stylistic continuity. As traced by Rosenblum, it extends from Friedrich and Philippe Otto

Runge (1777–1810), through Kandinsky and the Blue Rider to the postwar abstract expressionism of Rothko and Pollock. In Rosenblum's estimation, Friedrich's vast seascape is "daringly empty, devoid of objects, devoid of . . . narrative incident" and thus anticipates abstract art.⁶ Rosenblum's otherwise persuasive analysis underplays the rhetorical violence that propelled this "northern romantic tradition" into the twentieth century. A host of strained links tie the anti-romanticism of German expressionism to the romanticism its proponents were more likely to ridicule than not. The conceit that a moment in time can reveal eternity, the critique of Enlightenment reason and middle-class society, the weight given to the individual fragment, the disdain for instrumentalist language, the grip of myth, music, and poetic language, alongside the intense coupling of love and death are perennial romantic topoi in twentieth-century art, poetry, and religion. But this does not make the culture of early German modernism "romantic." When an art falls out of fashion, it does so piecemeal, never all at once.

Distinguishing between "form-elements," "form relationships," and "expressive quality," Meyer Schapiro's analysis of style is an important gauge of the complicated relationship between romanticism and early modernism. By "form-elements," Schapiro means an individual motif or content, while "form-relations" and "expressive quality" refer to the system of their organization and the tone it takes.⁷ A single romantic form-element can thereby survive the rejection of those more systematic relationships and tonal qualities that are the *sine qua non* of German romanticism, for example, the relation to nature in hieroglyphic arrangements and sentimental expression. Style constitutes that more deliberate ordering, disordering, and reordering of the surface appearance that sets a subject or an object within or apart from its environment. Early twentieth-century cultural expression emerged out of distinct environments formed by the first impact of mass society, advanced capitalism, and world war. Romantic and neoromantic impulses belong to this field of reference, which quickly gave way, to a more roughly drawn set of contours. By the time *I and Thou* and *The Star of Redemption* were published in the early 1920s, revelation had begun to look more like expressionism.

Expressionism

At war with itself, the expressionism that burst onto the scene between 1905 and the early 1920s maintained a complex religious profile. The art historian Gustav Hartlaub saw in it the early herald of a dionysian Christianity, a divine essence irreducibly bound up with flesh, a resurrection that represented no otherworldly hatred of being (*Daseinsverachtung*), but rather rejuvenated human will and the sanctification of this world.⁸ Works by the northern expressionist painters Max Beckmann, Ernst Nolde, Karl Schmidt-Rottluf, and Ludwig Meidner were said to realize an unprettified and anti-sentimental picture of corporeal being consumed by spirit. Their art is surreal, but not alien to reality.⁹ Hartlaub realized that expressionist art was not itself religious, but at best only prereligious. Arguing against the very idea that there is such a thing as “religious style,” he maintained that the most important component of religious art is religious conviction (*Gesinnung*) and religious content (*Gegenstand*), that is, nonpainterly content drawn from literary sources. Hence the antipathy in his analysis to Kandinsky, a critique that heightens the tension within expressionism between dematerialized forms of nonobjective (*gegenstandlos*) art and figurative representation.¹⁰

Expressionism was an uneasy hybrid, combining four basic elements. (1) The critique of impressionism and surface reality: “His sensibility is very close to mine,” Klee wrote, comparing himself to Rilke, “except that I now press on more towards the center, whereas his preparation tends to be skin-deep. He is still an Impressionist, while I have only memories left in this area. . . . The perfect elegance of his appearance is an enigma to me. How are such things achieved?” (*DPK*, 317). (2) Presence and the present: the four sons in Jakob Steinhardt’s Haggadah inhabit the war-torn landscape of modern Europe; the wicked son wears the spiked helmet worn by German soldiers during World War I (plate 10). The exodus from Egypt with its story of catastrophe and redemption relates a twentieth-century reality. (3) Dialogue, encounter, spiritual transformation, and the subjective in tandem with a suprasubjective element: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner describes a person who “sits across from us and we talk, and suddenly there arises this intangible something which one could

call mystery. It gives to his features his innate personality and yet at the same time lifts those features beyond the personal. . . . And yet this portrait, as close as it is to his real self, is a paraphrase of the great mystery . . . a part of that spirituality or feeling which pervades the whole world.”¹¹ (4) Hot color and burning pathos: Meidner cried to God to calm his unruly soul, but his best work shows the opposite inclination: wildly staring and distorted self-portraits and cafe scenes, exploding cityscapes, frenzied prophets and sibyls (plate 11). The short literary works he penned express both despair and faith, along with ecstatic hymns to God, paint, poetry, and international brotherhood.

Aside from Buber and Rosenzweig, the lion’s share of attention in this study goes to Kandinsky, Klee, and Franz Marc, because their own theoretical writings lend verbal expression to the spiritual in art, that non-material element in art that transcends its materiality; and because their texts are more varied and sophisticated than Meidner’s confessional outbursts, less likely to play themselves out or to parody than Max Pechstein’s creative credo, “Work! Ecstasy! Smash your brains!”¹² Kandinsky published the famous *Blue Rider Almanach* with Marc, as well as the classic *On the Spiritual in Art*, prior to World War I. Klee’s diaries, especially from his 1914 trip to Tunisia, give word to the mystery of creation and to the discovery of color. Marc’s collected writings take up the problem of suffering and the promise of redemption. After the war, Kandinsky and Klee continued to produce important theoretical texts prior to and during their stay at the Bauhaus, including Klee’s “Creative Credo,” a lecture delivered at Jena on modern art, and voluminous pedagogical notes. Kandinsky’s *Point and Line to Plane* (1926) speaks to the abiding spiritual presence in his most abstract compositional work. An intense written output, it confirms Hartlaub’s claim about the literary character of religious and prereligious art.¹³

Scenes saturated by Jugendstil, French symbolism, and Russian folklore direct Kandinsky’s first period in Munich. They take place in fairy-tale settings, with horsemen riding through mottled scenes from Old Russia, colorful costumes, village fairs, and country beauties. A diffuse religiosity saturates *Riding Couple* (1907) (plate 9). Two costumed lovers mounted upon a cloaked horse ride before a meandering river and a small, walled city of Russian Orthodox domes. The

softly dappled coloring unifies the picture. Orange and yellow above, blue and red below intensify the neoromantic mood. Kandinsky's second period reflects the heyday of prewar Blue Rider expressionism. *Composition V* (1911) (fig. 4) and *Composition VI* reveal the semblance of horsemen with horns and trumpets, hills and mountains, angels, reclining lovers, Cossacks, spears, lances, and apocalyptic scenes of the Last Judgment. Not immediately visible, the figures blur into overlapping fields of clashing color tones. A third period perfected at the Bauhaus after the war produced an art devoid of any overt representational context. Past the overtly religious pathos of color-coded symbolism, *Composition VIII* (1923) (plate 17) is a geometrical construction whose sole spiritual content is form itself.

At once worldly and otherworldly, the image of physical reality in Klee's work was no less metaphysical. Color squares in *Memory of a Garden* (1914) (fig. 3) and horizontal strips in *Runner at the Goal* (1921) (plate 12) create ordered inorganic patterns that cast the individuated figure: arms and legs akimbo, angels, acrobats, and actors, plants and architectural features. As Marcel Franciscono explains, the abstract and figurative elements in this pictorial universe are interdependent. Uncomprehending parts of an unfathomable pattern, the individual figure is not autonomous. It does not command itself. Animating the entire system is a never-named creative, incessantly form-giving power. Apart from the garden's obvious beauty, there is nothing warm to this force—or about Klee's view of nature. "What my art probably lacks," he wrote "is a kind of passionate humanity. I don't love animals and every sort of creature with an earthly warmth . . . I tend to dissolve the whole of creation and am then on a footing of brotherliness to my neighbor, to all things earthly. I possess. The earth-idea gives way to the world-idea. My love is distant and religious" (*DPK*, 345).¹⁴

Klee meant to distinguish his own work from that of Marc, but the gap between them was not so vast. The main figure and flattened landscape in *Horse in a Landscape* (1910) (plate 13) are just as unnatural as *Memory of a Garden* or *Runner at the Goal*. The reds and yellow in Marc's palette are electric. They intensify the curving neck and tail and the moving fluid mass over which the horse looks. Marc was adamant. His work had nothing to do with naturalism, but rather lies in the horse and its construction, its inner animal life, and the coursing blood

beneath the visible surface (S, 98). Marc broke with this line in 1912. He was dead by the end of the war. Already anticipating the apocalypse of war under the influence of cubism, the gentler organic rhythm was replaced by the geometric ordering of pictorial objects. Sharp, otherworldly shards of light and color slice diagonally through doom in the dark forest torn apart in *The Fate of the Animals* (1913) (plate 14).¹⁵ Ecstatic pantheism gave way to a pessimism whose spiritual disposition was soon to die a sudden death in Weimar modernism.

Postexpressionism

As the literary critic Wolfgang Rohe remarks, no other literary movement has been so quickly shown to its grave as expressionism. In the plastic arts as well, one finds throughout the 1920s constant reference to the crisis of expressionism, the end of expressionism, the death of expressionism.¹⁶ Wilhelm Worringer, whose *Abstraction and Empathy* (1907) had done so much to validate the turn to abstract and “primitive” art, was to call it empty and dried out, “decorative chic.”¹⁷ In “Expressionism Is Dying,” Yvan Goll declared in 1921: “The spirit is a hoax in this age of profiteering. . . . The ecstatic mouth becomes bitter, very bitter.” Rejecting the sentimentality of expressionism, Goll spoke to a “new power [that] seems to be coming over us: one of brain-machinery. . . . Why reach for heaven. *Heaven is also earth*, as the aviator knows.”¹⁸ Even Hartlaub soured on the possibility of a new religious art, having coined the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* in 1925 to characterize the new objectivity in postwar painting. Of expressionism, he said: “Any ‘movement’ bound up as it is with one generation, ages with that generation, stepping into the background at some point, perhaps later to be rejuvenated under different conditions.”¹⁹

Uncompromisingly anti-metaphysical, the varied forms of what the art historian Dennis Crockett calls “post-Expressionism” advanced a purely material conception of art and reality. The tubes, triangles, and cubes in late Bauhaus design embody principles of rational construction. The clarity brought to function along with biting social critique and satire go to the creation of *Neue Sachlichkeit* art, the rise of German cinema and new graphic design, the development of photography and

montage, the origins of the Frankfurt School and Russian constructivism. Hitherto, the tension between romanticism, neoromanticism, and expressionism had encouraged new forms of spiritual expression. The towering figures of twentieth-century Jewish and Christian thought, Buber, Rosenzweig, Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, Max Scheler, and Rudolf Otto made their greatest contributions to the study of religion to the period between 1910 and 1920. In contrast, the precision that was now brought to bear upon the visible, the public, and the here and now was toxic to religion. There was no reason to reach for heaven in this age of profiteering.²⁰

While Kandinsky, Klee, Buber, and Rosenzweig continued to create some of their finest work well into the decade, they grew out of touch with the new reality. But it is Walter Benjamin who leaves the most dispirited impression. In Benjamin's work, fully realized commitments to the contemporary aesthetic of surrealism, photomontage, and film sit side by side with unhappy nostalgia for mystic and cultic expression. The new objectivity made no allowance for the melancholy illuminations of messianism, auras, and angels. Politically, the brave world of Weimar modernism was caught in the tough middle between fascism and communism. In a conversation with Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht clearly had his interlocutor in mind when he called Franz Kafka "a Jew-boy . . . a mere bubble on the glittering quagmire of Prague culture. . . . The images are good of course. But the rest is pure mystification. It's nonsense. You have to ignore it. . . . Depth is a separate dimension, it's just depth—and there's nothing whatsoever to be seen in it."²¹

If postexpressionism enacts the exile of religion and metaphysics from modern society, then Martin Heidegger was its philosophical Nebuchadnezzar. *Being and Time* (1927) constitutes a tour de force against Platonic metaphysics, the subject/object dichotomy, and mass consciousness, with the visible human proposed as the best platform from which to recover the problem of being. The text is animated by a split personality. Its first part demonstrates great sensitivity to ontic phenomena, to the daily equipmentality of objects at hand to human being in the world. In comparison, the temporal analytic in the second part remains closed in, its image of "authentic" human *Dasein* preoccupied with *jemeinigkeit*, the condition of "mineness," the question of my own being, my precious singularity, my care first for myself and

then for others, my guilt before the infinity of foreclosed possibilities, and the imminence of my own death. The problem of the other continues to go unresolved in Heidegger's existential analysis of *Dasein*. "*Being and Time* opens the question even as it evades it," Christopher Fynsk notes.²²

As read by Jacques Derrida, spirit haunted Heidegger, although Derrida admits that it has no real place in the existential analytic of *Dasein*.²³ Its discourse came out into the open, first in the notorious 1933 rectorship address and in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, and then most notably in a postwar essay on the expressionist poet Georg Trakl (d. 1912). Anti-metaphysical, the perception of spirit is neither not foreign to nor set apart from spatial and temporal being: "Es ist die Seele ein Fremdes auf Erden" ("Yes, the soul is a stranger upon the earth"). Derrida clarifies: "The soul is a 'stranger' does not signify that one must take it to be imprisoned, exiled, tumbled into the terrestrial here below, fallen into body doomed to the corruption of what is lacking in Being and in truth is not." He explains: "[T]he soul only *seeks* the earth, it does not flee it. The soul is a stranger because it does not yet inhabit the earth."²⁴ To give shape to this earth-bound spirit, Heidegger turned in his later work to the poetry of Rilke and Trakl, that is, back to Jugendstil and expressionism. Spirit sought a home in the world after World War II, eluding the new sobriety of postexpressionism and the closed-in conception of *Being and Time*.

By then it was too late. The enduring problematic in Heidegger's work over which Derrida tries to glide lies in the identification of spirit and fire. There is no mediating space around the fire, no air-breath-*ruah-spiritus-pneuma*, no dialectical gap between earth and spirit, no pause to the pyrotechnics of Being. Heidegger lost any critical traction with which he might have otherwise turned to the world by turning away from it at the precise historical moment when he needed to do so. Ensnared at the University of Freiburg during World War II, at ease in a one-dimensional cosmos, he compares unfavorably to Klee and Kandinsky, who fled to Switzerland and Paris, and to Buber who stayed in Germany until right before it was too late. Simultaneously world-friendly and world-foreign, the work of revelation and the spiritual in art occupies a more ambiguous position than Heideggerian ontology. Fire continues to this day to contaminate Heidegger's thought,

a body of work in which spirit found a not uncomfortable home in Nazi Germany. He was a type of thinker who, Buber believed, “has become incapable of apprehending a reality absolutely independent of himself and of having a relation with it—in capable moreover of imaginatively perceiving this reality and representing it in images, since it eludes direct contemplation” (*EG*, 14).

Postmodernism

The grim picture of modern secularism presented by Buber in his critique of Heidegger, Sartre, and Jung in *The Eclipse of God* (1952), his last major work, hardly accounts for his own broad readership after the war. At least in the United States, it obscures the influence of liberal Christian thought exercised by Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Rahner, Thomas Merton, and Martin Luther King Jr., the continuing attraction of Eastern religions popularized by D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, and the metaphysical meanderings that echo in the abstract expressionism of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. The Jewish thought of Mordecai Kaplan, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Joseph Soloveitchik, Emil Fackenheim, Steven Schwarzschild, Arthur Cohen, Will Herberg, and Robert Gordis testifies to an intellectual vitality that was coterminous with the rise of institutional religious life, church and synagogue construction in high modernist, international architectural styles, the religious signature of an American suburban sprawl that neither Buber nor Rosenzweig would have been able to read.

The spread of postmodern culture into the 1960s and 1970s leads us further and further away from postwar modernism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, German expressionism, and art nouveau into “the society of spectacle.” In deconstructing “the difference,” postmodernism in art, architecture, philosophy, and religion has carved out a place between extreme forms of secularism and religious belief. Rather than restrict religious imagery, the late writings of Derrida and the art and architecture of Anselm Kiefer, Andres Serrano, Shirin Neshat, and Daniel Liebeskind seem to revel in it. If contemporary aesthetics undercuts those forms of dogmatic faith alive in the culture at large and the pieties still at work in Buber and Rosenzweig, it also upends the secular orthodoxies with

which religion is rejected out of hand. Instead of building distinctions based on a binary logic or fixing religious reference to a nonreligious sediment (sociological and psychological), postmodernism has loosened up the discursive boundaries between fact and fantasy, real and fake, secular and sacred, natural and supernatural. Religion thus retains a hold on the contemporary imagination.

The ten human figures in Michal Rovner's *Merging P#1* (1997) (plate 20) blend into a single black blurry silhouette, their heads part of the grainy yellow color field into which they merge. Original Polaroid shots are rephotographed and infused with unnatural color to magnify the distance between the image and its original subject. Like loops in electronic music, the same is intensified into a monotony that borders onto something else.²⁵ No longer subject to the illusion of immediacy, the process of technological reproduction lifts vision out across a series of mediated displacements. Benjamin had been too quick to see in mechanical reproduction the loss of aura, that "unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be," the "natural distance" that the painter maintains in his work.²⁶ As he himself perceived, "The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject."²⁷

If the language of "creation," "revelation," and "redemption," language that was integral to Buber, Rosenzweig, and German expressionism, still has a place in a contemporary work of art like Rovner's, it does so vexed by questions about the spiritual significance of aesthetic form. The naïve magic and thick, yellow substance that stick to the spiritual in art have always lent themselves to strained interpretive possibilities that are perhaps unique to religious discourse. *Merging P#1* conjures the ambiguous situation of shadowy borders and liminal flight. Earthbound and unbound, mutant figures wander in spaceless space. Nissan Perez detects the unreal and nondescript "immaterial presence of bodies," hovering in suspense on the edge of something unnamed and unspeakable, the destination of bodies "into light transcending to an unknown, new condition."²⁸ Drawn to tai chi and Taoism, art and art criticism enter the dubious domain of technology and the New Age. At least one critic has remarked against the "pandering heavy-duty symbolism" and the "polished, almost commercial quality" of Rovner's

art.²⁹ Kandinsky, Klee, and Marc believed in the invisible. Do Rovner and Perez? A lighter touch might have made the symbolism *more* open to a tonic skepticism, a counterimage and counterrhetoric by which to render the spiritual in art less incredible.

Jewish Thought

Left behind in the rapid-fire succession of styles in early German modernism, Buber and Rosenzweig remained fundamentally at odds with the “new realism” that began to worm its way into their work in the mid to late 1920s. Emerging out of Jugendstil art and letters, Buber’s name appears prominently at the end of Hartlaub’s *Kunst und Religion* (1919) and in Hermann Bahr’s monograph *Expressionismus* (1916). Rosenzweig’s private transition from Jugendstil to expressionism has been less observed. In a 1928 letter to Willy Haas about his response to a questionnaire attempting to document the importance of Stefan George for the contemporary scene, Rosenzweig indicates the more important influence of Rilke upon him in 1910, of Werfel in 1918, and of Buber since 1922 (*BT*, 1191). Expressionism was to him “a pressing down upon the nerves,” associated with the image of judgment. Commenting upon Kafka’s story “The Judgment,” he dubbed expressionism the aesthetic caricature of the religious person, comparing, as so many were to do at the time, impressionism to the natural scientist (335). Toward the end of his life, Rosenzweig distanced himself from the ultrarational style by declaring this allegiance: “I am myself, forsooth, already of yesterday, 1918, not 1928, ‘Expressionism,’ not *Neue Sachlichkeit*” (1191).

By the end of this study, we shall be better able to assess Buber and Rosenzweig’s place in contemporary aesthetics, but I would like to say this much now. Thanks to a dedicated coterie of readers, Buber and Rosenzweig have survived the death of expressionism and entered into new postmodern environments. These environs are image-rich, awash in photography, installation art, digital design, and virtual realities. In this environment, revelation and the spiritual in art recycle, recycle, and turn into rhetoric. Artful appeals to immediate encounter call attention away from any external referent back to the artifice of their internal

construction. At the same time, popular and increasingly conservative religion adapts very well to artificial environments, to technology and to the appearance of fakes, copies, and other simulacra in ways that outpace the capacity of left-wing and liberal religionists. As for Buber and Rosenzweig: to paraphrase Brecht, the images are (still) good. The image of encounter and evanescent presence finds a place in the archives and spectacles of contemporary culture. In the artificial light cast by this culture, Buber and Rosenzweig continue to open up new worlds for their readers, artificial worlds in which “something” that looks like “spirit” continues to make itself present.

Once upon a time, philosophical thought in the West promised a way out of spectacle. I mean, of course, the parable of the cave in Plato’s *Republic*. With no direct access to the sun outside, the prisoners who dwell in the cave are captives to sense impression and surreal imagination. They mistake for real the shadows that flicker upon the walls. Having torn himself from this captivity, the philosopher learns to enjoy the direct apprehension of the good after painful acclimation to life outside the cave. Having expelled poetry and the mimetic arts from the ideal republic, the philosopher in his cognition proceeds from shadows, to reflections, to objects, to starlight and moonlight, and then to a blinding vision of the sun at the apex of its course. The parable trades upon the interplay across a complex set of dualisms—truth/image, subject/object, inside/outside, substance/attribute, eternity/time, mind/body. It performs a back and forth motion between the real world of ideal cognition and the everyday world, assured in its conceit that the dialectics of pure reason can momentarily rip itself from the sensual confines that restrict its operation.³⁰

The rabbis offer a counterimage of a cave, their own conceit, that anticipates the metaphysics of Buber and Rosenzweig. Commenting on the verse “And Moses spoke to YHWH” (Exod. 33:12), the rabbis ask, “To what may the thing be compared? To a cave placed by the edge of the sea whose water fills it. From here on, water from the sea is delivered to the cave and water from the cave returns to the sea. So it was that ‘YHWH said to Moses’ and ‘Moses said to YHWH’” (*Tanhuma, Ki Tissa* 14). Trading upon the motion between divine and human utterance, between outside and inside, the rabbinic parable is one in which human consciousness encounters truth inside its own limit. Inverting

the move made by Platonic philosophy from inside to outside, revelation moves deeper into the confines of sensation and the imagination represented by the cave. Water in the cave (the voice of Moses) remains distinct from the seawater outside (the voice of God). But the two waters mingle. In this motion between inside and outside, Jewish thought does not seek to separate the formal shape of revelation from liquid sensation.