

## INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

**The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.** Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

# UMI

A Bell & Howell Information Company  
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA  
313/761-4700 800/521-0600



A

KABBALAH, POETRY AND CRITICISM  
The Jewish Mystical Tradition  
in the Poetry of William Butler Yeats  
and Edmond Jabès

by

Judith Tawil

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate  
Faculty in Comparative Literature in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.  
The City University of New York

1996

**UMI Number: 9630514**

**Copyright 1996 by  
Tawil, Miriam Judith**

**All rights reserved.**

---

**UMI Microform 9630514  
Copyright 1996, by UMI Company. All rights reserved.**

**This microform edition is protected against unauthorized  
copying under Title 17, United States Code.**

---

**UMI**  
**300 North Zeeb Road**  
**Ann Arbor, MI 48103**

©1996

Judith Tawil

All Rights Reserved

This manuscript has been read and  
accepted for the Graduate Faculty  
In Comparative Literature in  
satisfaction of the dissertation  
requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

April 25, 1996  
Date

Hanna Charney  
Prof. Hanna Charney  
Chairman of Examining Committee

April 25, 1996  
Date

Vincent Crapanzano  
Prof. Vincent Crapanzano  
Executive Officer

Prof. Vincent Crapanzano  
Supervisory committee

Prof. Mary Ann Caws  
Supervisory committee

The City University of New York

For  
Bob, Raphael and Ari

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the three professors of my Dissertation Committee; each had important influence on my work. The questions about language that frames this study were first posed in Professor's Crapanzano's class on Literature and Contemporary Thought. In a sense, this dissertation is an exploration and amplification of these issues. I was first introduced to the writings of Edmond Jabès by Professor Caws and for this I am indebted to her. Most of all, I would like to thank Professor Charney for her encouragement and insight. She was always generous with her time and patience. I only wish I were able to follow her advice more fully.

Finally, on the personal level, I would like to thank my entire family. Three people in particular deserve a special thank you, my mother, Norma Hedaya, for her increasing emotional support, and my father, Abraham Hedaya, for his interest in Kabbalah and the writing of Gershon Scholem. Most important of all, I want to thank my husband, Bob Tawil, for his patience, understanding and his love.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE . . . . .	i
COPYRIGHT PAGE . . . . .	ii
APPROVAL PAGE . . . . .	iii
DEDICATION . . . . .	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . .	v
 CHAPTER	
I. Introduction . . . . .	1
II. Yeats and Kabbalah: The Way of the Lightning Flash .	34
III. Yeats and the Symbol . . . . .	89
IV. The Sublime . . . . .	134
V. The Book of Edmond Jabès . . . . .	202
VI. From Kabbalah to Bloom . . . . .	267
VII. Conclusion . . . . .	309
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	318

CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

*In the beginning is hermeneutics. But the shared necessity of exegesis, the interpretive imperative, is interpreted differently by the rabbi and the poet. The difference between the horizon of the original text and exegetic writing makes the difference between the rabbi and poet irreducible ... . The original opening of interpretation essentially signifies that there will always be rabbis and poets. And two interpretations of interpretation.*

*Jacques Derrida*

Language, in relation to poetry, can be conceived in two valid ways, as I have learned, slowly and reluctantly. Either one can believe in a magical theory of all language, as the Kabbalists, many poets, and Walter Benjamin did, or else one must yield to a thorough-going linguistic nihilism, which in its most refined form is the mode now called deconstruction. But these two ways turn into one another at their outward limits.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Harold Bloom, one of our canniest critics of poetry, situates the crossover between literature and

---

<sup>1</sup>Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form," Deconstruction and Criticism. (New York: New Continuum 1988) p. 4.

Kabbalah. The possibility that the linguistic nihilism of deconstruction and the linguistic narcissism of poets and occultists turn into one another has propelled this study. Bloom questions whether there is a difference between an absolute randomness of language and the totally over-determined magical absolute of Kabbalah.

Of all systems of mystical belief, Kabbalah is the most language-oriented. For the Kabbalist, it is through language, and writing in particular, that one gains a knowledge of God. According to Gershom Scholem, Kabbalism is distinguished by an "unusually positive" attitude toward language. While the Rabbis differed on almost everything else, they were united in regarding language as more than an instrument for communication between human beings. Hebrew, for the Kabbalists, reflected the spiritual nature of the world. The language of man thus reflects the creative language of God. "All creation ... is, from the point of view of God, nothing but an expression of the hidden self that begins and ends by giving itself a name, the holy name of God, the perpetual act of creation."<sup>2</sup> Thus language can express the pure thought of God and the Kabbalistic theory of letters can lead to the attainment of "spiritual reality" through divine language.

---

<sup>2</sup>Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. (New York: Schocken Books, 1974) p. 17.

Geoffrey Hartman notes that if language were God-given, we would have linguistic stability, but this stability is attainable only where language is purified of referential meaning and becomes "pure speech" as in ritual and magic.<sup>3</sup> For the Kabbalists, linguistic stability rests on theological certainty. But if one cannot accept the theological basis, one opens language to epistemological and semantic instability, emphasizing the incompatibility between meaning and intent, between what is stated and the rhetorical mode of statement.

Why then study Kabbalah, particularly in relation to poetry? Part of the answer rests in the fact that certain aspects of Kabbalah force us to look outside of western poetics to how language works in poetry. It represents language at the extreme, in a "concentration" of the sublime. By using Kabbalah as an example of the sublime, we open up questions of the boundaries of the aesthetic. We are also able to examine whether this aspect of language is an example of the performative mode of rhetoric or if it is an opening to a rigorously definable area of philosophic discourse.

The poetry of William Butler Yeats will be studied in relation to the Kabbalah for several reasons. He was deeply

---

<sup>3</sup>Geoffrey Hartman, "Looking Back at Paul de Man," Reading de Man Reading. ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Gidzich. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1989) p. 210.

involved in the study of the occult, and used Kabbalah in the "content" of his work. The material from the esoteric texts provided him with images from Anima Mundi, the vast storehouse of the collective-consciousness of mankind. Moreover, it provided him with a justification of his use of symbols as he found that in both Kabbalah and poetry, there is an emphasis on the symbol making powers of language. Yeats is a poet who worked in the fullness of language, who sought to bridge ontological differences through his use of transcendent metaphors. Yet he maintained an uneasy tension between a belief in the spirit and a profound skepticism, between an ascetic anti-naturalism and the need to ground his work in the physical world. It was from this tension that the dynamism of his late poetry emerged.

In contrast to this view, Edmond Jabès is a writer who worked in a language of splintered words always on the brink of falling into nothingness. Yet he too is a poet who wrote under the influence of Kabbalah, because at the heart of this mysticism is a negativity, not only about language, but about God and all creation. If Yeats is a poet of the sublime, Jabès is a poet of the anti-sublime. Jabès will provide us with the opportunity to examine Kabbalah theory in detail.

With Jabès's writing, we are not led to transcend the realm of language to a vision of being, but instead we come to probe the word in order to question "reality". In both

traditional Judaic writing and in Jabès, we find an emphasis, not on imagination but an interpretation, not on theophany, but on textuality. For Jabès, writing turns back on itself to observe its own process; he uses commentary to examine its own method of signification. Here the deconstruction of the text leads us back to God, the trace of all traces, the *Deus Absconditus* of the Kabbalah. And although for Jabès He is the void, "God" is a word which cannot be emptied of meaning. As Eric Gould points out, for Jabès, writing deconstructs transcendence but perpetuates ontology.<sup>4</sup>

The final section of this dissertation will deal with Kabbalah and literary theory. Kabbalah, particularly as explicated by Gershom Scholem, can be seen as a "heretical hermeneutic", to use Susan Handelman's term. Ideas about language, presence, writing, reason, metaphysics can be contrasted with Western ontotheology and Greek *logos*. In this light, we can see much of Jacques Derrida's writing as an outgrowth of this alternative, Judaic mode of thinking.

Kabbalah and deconstruction, starting from totally different directions, converge in a common meeting ground. Harold Bloom sees the Kabbalah as a direct portrayal of the mind-in-creation, as a process of poetic influence and as a map for the problems of interpretation.

---

<sup>4</sup>Eric Gould, "Godtalk," The Sin of the Book (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985) p. 170.

More audaciously than any development in recent French criticism, Kabbalah is a theory that denies the absolute distinction between writing and inspired speech, even as it denies human distinction between presence and absence. Kabbalah speaks of writing before writing (Derrida's 'trace'), but also of speech before speech, even as it denies human distinctions between presence and absence.<sup>5</sup>

Modern criticism is haunted by the text. If the "Book of Books" has lost its status as divine, the text has taken its place. And Kabbalah, as a mode of exegesis has moved to the center, since it is at once traditional and transgressive, secular and theological, Rabbinic and gnostic. The absence of the book of God has opened out the reading of all texts. As Derrida explains: "This lost certainty, this absolute of divine writing, the absence of the Jewish God does not solely and vaguely define something like 'modernity'. As the absence and the haunting of the divine sign, it regulates all modern criticism and aesthetics."<sup>6</sup>

A brief summary of Kabbalah is in order to provide background for this study.<sup>7</sup> Gershom Scholem defines "Kabbalah" as the most commonly used term for the esoteric

---

<sup>5</sup>Harold Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism. (New York: Continuum, 1984) p. 52.

<sup>6</sup>Jacques Derrida. "Force and Signification," Writing and Difference trans. Alan Bass. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 10.

<sup>7</sup>For a more detailed history, see Gershon Scholem Kabbalah. (New York: Meridian Books, 1978).

teachings of Jewish mysticism from the Middle Ages of the twelfth century onward. The term itself means something handed down by tradition. It has its roots in the esoteric movement in Judaism that evolved at the end of the period of the Second Temple. Scholem points to sources in the esoteric and theosophical currents among the Jews of Palestine and Egypt at the time of the birth of Christianity. Gnostic and Neoplatonic tendencies characterize the early Kabbalah. This early phase of Jewish mysticism centered on apocalyptic writing, such as the Book of Enoch and two biblical texts, the first chapter of Genesis and the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel. These esoteric meditations were Rabbinic Gnostic speculation on the pleroma, or the divine unfallen realm. However, these early writings are not really considered to be Kabbalah.

The true origin of the Kabbalah is usually traced to a book which appeared eight centuries later, the *Sefer Yezirah* (Book of Creation). This was the work that introduced in rudimentary form notions of the *Sefirot*, the divine emanations by which all reality is structured. The next text of importance is the Book Bahir which is the earliest example of the Kabbalah style of parable and figurative language. This late 12th or early 13th century text was based on ancient midrashim and served as a link between "ancient Kabbalah" and the Kabbalistic movement of the 13th century. This text helped prove that the Kabbalah was not

the invention of two or three sages from Maimonides' generation, but used a real tradition from the time of the *Gaonim* and *Amoraim*.

The full flowering of Kabbalah occurred in the South of France in the 13th century and quickly spread to Spain. The masterpiece of this period was the *Sefer Ha Zohar* (Book of Splendor 1280-1286) which contemporary scholarship generally attributes to Moses de Leon. This extremely long, pseudoepigraphic work was organized as a commentary upon Scripture and was presented as an ancient Midrash. There has been a great deal of speculation about the authorship of the *Zohar*, but it is felt that it is not a literary forgery, but rather, a legitimate category of religious literature where pseudonymity confers both anonymity and legitimacy. Alone among Kabbalistic texts, the *Sefer Ha Zohar* ranked as a canonical text with the Bible and the Talmud for many centuries. To this day it remains the classical example of Jewish mystical writing.<sup>8</sup>

An important Kabbalist from the same period (1240 - 1292) was Abraham Abulafia. He presented a form of meditation in which techniques of letter combination and number mysticism produced aesthetic states. (As will be seen, his work had an influence on the works of Edmond Jabès.)

---

<sup>8</sup>For a complete analysis of the *Zohar*, see Gershom Scholem, Major Trends pp. 156-244.

The classical Kabbalah begins with a Neoplatonic vision of God. He is without end, *Ein-Sof*, unknowable and unrepresentable who manifests himself as "nothing", *ayin*. Because Genesis said that God created out of nothing, Kabbalah interpreted the literal statement, and claimed that God being *ayin*, created out of this *ayin*, thus created the world out of himself. Here rhetoric subversion caused a reversal of cause and effect. In Neoplatonism, Plotinus postulates emanation as a process out from God, but Kabbalah changes that, and makes it a process that takes place within God. However, what is most critical in this transformation is that the theory of emanation is also a theory of language. Scholem maintains that "the God who manifests Himself is the God who expresses himself."<sup>9</sup> Thus the *Sefirot* are language, attributes of God that need to be described by his various names. Bloom therefore sees the *Sefirot* as tropes or turns of language that substitute for God. The Zohar identities the *Sefirot* with the substance of God; they are one and the same. Thus we are left with the formula that God and language are one and the same.

There was a profound change in the Kabbalah with the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. The Kabbalah was no longer a set of esoteric texts, but became "public property". The new Kabbalah opened the sacred texts to "the sorrows of time and history." They were a response to

---

<sup>9</sup>As quoted in Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism p. 25.

historical catastrophe as they attempted to accommodate new religious insights of a troubled time to an already canonized tradition. The two prominent writers from this period were Moses Cordovero (1522-70) and his pupil Isaac Luria. It is the Lurianic form of Kabbalah that has the most impact on this study.

Before Luria, creation was seen as a progressive process, moving outward in one direction, from God through the *Sefirot* to man. For Luria, however, creation was a regressive process in which an abyss can separate one stage from another and in which catastrophe was the central event. There is a triple rhythm to reality for Luria, a contraction, a breaking apart and a mending. This triple process is named *tzimtzum*, *shevirah ha-kelim* and *tikkun*.

The word *tzimtzum* originally meant a holding-in-of-the-breath, but Luria transformed it into an idea of limitation. God contracts or enters into himself, thereby making a space for creation. Luria envisioned a contraction within God in the *Sefirah* of *Din*, rigor. This power of rigor remained in the space cleared for creation, called *tehiru*. There it mixed with God's self-withdrawn light called *reshimu*. It is from this mixture that the world is formed as God sent out a single letter, the *yod*, the first letter of the Tetragrammaton, YHWH. This *yod* is the active principle in creation, while the *reshimu* is the passive principle.

The first form that emanation assumed after the *tzimtzum* is that of Adam Kadmon ("primordial man").<sup>10</sup> From his head, tremendous lights shone forth aligning themselves in complex patterns. Some assumed the form of letters or other aspects of the Torah, thus joining two essentially different symbolisms - namely, that of light and of language and writing. All the lights of the *Sefirot* were given vessels, themselves made of thicker light, in which they were arranged.

At this point there occurred the *shevirah ha-kelim* or the "breaking of the vessels" as the light was too strong to be contained by the vessels. One by one they broke, their pieces falling. From the shards, the *Kelippot*, or dark forces, took on substance. These shards were also the source of gross matter. With the shattering of the vessels, everything fell out of its intended order, nothing was in its right place. We find at the source of creation a cosmic catastrophe, but one that can be interpreted as resulting from too a strong force of writing, stronger than the text could sustain. Bloom finds that God's Name was too strong for his words, and that the breaking of the vessels was an act of substitution in which an original pattern yielded to a more chaotic pattern. Luria saw the whole function of

---

<sup>10</sup>See Scholem Kabbalah for an amplification of these basic ideas, pp. 128-144.

creation as a vast catharsis of God himself, a "sublimation in which His terrible rigor might find some peace."<sup>11</sup>

Following the catastrophe of creation, Luria posits the doctrine of *tikkun*, of restoration and restitution. This process of restoration takes place through the agency of *parzufim* or "faces", but what is significant is that acts of mankind affect the *parzufim*. Human acts of restitution such as meditation and prayer, lift up and liberate the fallen sparks of God from their imprisonment in the *kelippot*. Thus the contemplative activity of man is an act of redemption, not only for the historic exile of a people, but for all of creation.

All of Kabbalah can be seen as a desire for an end to Exile. It gives suffering a meaning by an interpretation of Scripture that depends on the *Sefirot* as its figuration. Bloom sees the *Sefirot* as an incarnation of the desire for difference and equates this desire for difference as the motive for metaphor, indeed, for the life affirming motive for poetry. "If we concede that all religion is the apotropaic litany against the dangers of nature, we may also say that all poetry is an apotropaic litany defending against death. From our perspective, religion is spilled poetry. Kabbalah seems to me unique among religious systems of interpretation in that it is, simply, already poetry,

---

<sup>11</sup>Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism, p. 41.

scarcely needing translation into the realms of the aesthetic."<sup>12</sup>

In his essay "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah", Gershom Scholem makes the connection between Kabbalah and poetry. He asks "what can be the worth of language in a world from which God has withdrawn?" This is the question posed by those who still believe

that they can hear the echo of the vanished word of the creation in the immanence of the world. This is a question to which, in our times, only the poets presumably have the answer. For poets do not share the doubt that most mystics have in regard to language. And poets have one link with the masters of the Kabbalah, even when they reject Kabbalistic theological formulation as being still too emphatic. This link is their belief in language as an absolute, which is as if constantly flung open by dialectics. It is their belief in the mystery of language which has to become audible.<sup>13</sup>

This link between poetry and Kabbalah is based on the confidence of the creative powers of language. Kabbalah, alone among mystical theologies, is relevant to critical theory because of its interpretative freedom and its stress on language.

Kabbalah and poetry share a perspective about the ontological status of language, about the being of language

---

<sup>12</sup>Bloom, p. 52.

<sup>13</sup>Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of Kabbalah," Diogenes 90 (1972), p. 194, hencefore to be numbered in the text.

and the being of the world. Two basic concepts of literary language have been defined, the "hermetic" and the "orphyic". We can define the hermetic by its deviation from communicative discourse as it turns away from the world and back upon itself into a realm of forms. Thus it is an interlinguistic structure with little reference the worldly communication. Language becomes its own transcendence. (The French Symbolist tradition of the 19th century would be an example of the hermetic tradition.).

By contrast, the orphyic tradition exalts poetic speech as a creative power based on the assumption of an ideal unity of word and being. Like the creative word of God which established the human and natural world, it makes all signification possible. As Gerald Bruns points out, hermetic language turns away from the world and voids it for the work of art, while the orphyic tradition turns toward the world.<sup>14</sup> In the hermetic tradition, words become realities in themselves and constitute their own transcendent world. In the orphyic tradition, words aspire to a condition where word and world are one. Kabbalah combines both these traditions, as words, particularly the name of God, become the totality of the world, yet, as in the orphyic tradition, Kabbalah maintains the identity of word and reality.

---

<sup>14</sup>Gerald Bruns, Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) pp. 1-2.

The most thorough going analysis of Kabbalistic views of language can be found in Gershom Scholem's "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of Kabbalah." Scholem begins with the premise that in Kabbalah, God makes himself heard through the medium of human speech and is able to do this thanks to the symbolic nature of language. The Kabbalist mystic looked to language as revelation. This is all the more striking because ancient Jewish sacrament and ritual are silent; the Israelite priest is totally mute. He does not speak a single word in any of his duties. The ritual of the Hebrew priest consists only of agenda, acts. The ritual, however, is punctuated by an invocation of the name of God (this invocation is separate from the actual ritual itself). The practice stands in marked distinction to the cults of other ancient religions with the centrality of their cultural image. This willful silence seems to be an act of conscious opposition to the rituals of the other peoples of the Near East and the underscores the importance that the word occupies in Jewish religion. The word is imbued with so much force and operates with such magic effect that it is to be avoided at all costs.

As Scholem notes, the name is a real, non-fictional quantity with an element of potency attaching to it. The name is identical with the nature and essence of what is named by it, with an acute concentration of magic surrounding it. There is a passage in Deuteronomy in which

a divergence was drawn up between a transcendent God himself and his name, with the result that the name itself becomes the quintessence of the sacred, intangible and ineffable. There is a paradoxical development in that the name by which God calls himself and is used in invocation withdraws from human hearing and becomes unpronounceable. After the destruction of the Temple, the name was withdrawn into the realm of the ineffable.

There attaches to the divine name a messianic meaning as the name itself announces the oneness of God. From the second century A.D. onwards, the Tetragram, which had become ineffable, was labeled with a term which was a contradiction in meaning and function. The term, *shem ha-meforash* means "made known" and "explicitly explained" or, on the contrary, "separate" and "hidden". The same term designates the formal name and the mysterious and hidden name.

The name of God is the *agens* of creation, as the name is a concentration of divine powers. The creative word of God produces heaven and earth ("By the word of the Lord were the heavens made" - Psalms 37:6). We thus have a coincidence of word and name, a fact which was of central importance in the development of the mystique of language in Judaism. By virtue of this identification, the word which communicates something and imparts some information becomes a name which issues no information save itself. When the name becomes word, it becomes the language of God. This

dual character of the divine word as name has a considerable importance in the linguistic doctrine of the Kabbalah.

In the earliest text of Kabbalah, the *Sefer Yetsira*, there is the first speculation on the alphabet. The twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet compose everything which is created. The alphabet is the original source, not only of language, but also, of all being. "Thus it is that all creation and all speech are born of one name." (75) Not only the Tetragram, but the alphabet series itself constitutes this mystical name. This concept becomes the basis for much of the classical thesis of Kabbalah, namely, that the Torah consists not only of the divine names, but, as a whole, constitutes the "one and only great name of God". This argument signifies that in the Torah, God has revealed his transcendental being in and through Creation. Creation represents the "concentrated power of God himself, and this power is expressed in the name." (79).

As the Kabbalah developed, the letters of the alphabet became configurations of divine energies which are grounded in the Sefiroth. There is a process of de-refinement and an intensified crystalization, as they correspond to condensed levels of creation. All creation refers symbolically to the law which governs the world of the *Sefiroth*. As Scholem notes, in this world in which everything is reflected, all is transparent, and in this transparency, everything takes on a symbolic meaning. For the Kabbalists, the Sefiroth and

the letters are manifestations of two symbolic structures which were equally arranged - the symbolism of light and the symbolism of language. Therefore the movement in which creation comes about can be explained in terms of a linguistic movement.

There is a contemporary aspect to much of the Kabbalistic linguistic mysticism. For the Kabbalists, every act of speaking is at the same time an act of writing, just as all writing is potential speech. Scholem notes that for the philologist, writing is secondary, whereas for the Kabbalist it is the center of the mysteries of speech. Beyond the spoken word of creation lies unspoken reflection, pure thought in which the nameless is lodged. "In the continuous act of the language of creation, the godhead is the only infinite speaker, but at the same time he is the archetypal writer, who impresses his word deep into his created works." (168).

In a passage which anticipates Derrida's ideas about writing, Scholem illustrates why the Kabbalist insisted that writing precedes speech. He cites the work of Israel Saruk, a Kabbalist of the Lurianic school, who finds that the linguistic movement which has its source in God, proceeds from the fact that a joy or sense of delight within God evoked a movement in the Ein-Sof. This movement is woven into all linguistic movement; it is a self expression of joy which conveys the mysterious potentiality of all language.

This innermost movement is woven in the substance of *Ein-Sof* itself; is the original Torah, its writing the hidden signature of God. It precedes the act of speech. We therefore find that speech comes into being after writing as the sound evolution of the written.

Because the Kabbalah evolved over several centuries and consisted of many hundreds of texts concerning the name of God, there are many conflicting theories on the subject. At the end of the 13th century, Abraham Abulafia asserted that the four letters *aleph, he, waw, yod* (YHWH) were only a part of the real and original name of God. Because God desired to conceal his name, it was necessary to keep it hidden away and therefore the tetragram of the Torah is an "emergency aid" behind which is hidden the true original name. Abulafia proposes the radical thesis that the true name of God does not even occur in the Torah.

There exist in Kabbalistic writing several variant interpretations on the divine name. Some sources contend that God has a name which is known only to himself, a name which expresses his self-awareness. In opposition to this we find in a majority of texts, including the Zohar, that the *Deus Absconditus* is nameless. Any name which we have represents the "linguistic innerness of the cosmic process". (p. 175) The divine word implies the idea of cosmic guidance, and therefore "as long as it seemed expedient to the Kabbalists, linguistic mysticism could be interpreted as

a metaphorical expression of generally theological conceptions and could be adjusted to them." (p. 175)

For the Kabbalist, the language of man is a reflection of the divine language, and coincides with the language in revelation. Concerning this, Scholem notes that Friedrich Schlegel remarked that philosophers should be grammarians. He then goes on to say that one cannot say this of the Kabbalists. The "inner word" or divine language for these mystics does not involve any grammar. It consist solely of names, and the task of rediscovering the name is, in essence, the concern which lies behind the Kabbalistic concept of prayer.

The "absence of grammar" has wide implications in Western thought. According to Nietzsche, the unifying basis of Western philosophy is the very grammar by which it thinks.

The strange family resemblance of all Indian, Greek, and German philosophizing is explained easily enough. Where there is a affinity of languages, it cannot fail, owing to the common philosophy of grammar - I mean, owing to the unconscious domination and guidance by similar grammatical functions - that everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development and sequence of philosophical systems; just as the way seems barred against certain other possibilities of world-interpretation.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche Beyond Good and Evil #20 as quoted in David Allison, The New Nietzsche (Cambridge Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1990) p. xii.

Nietzsche rightly asserts that grammatical functions determine the terms of thought as well as the rules for thought. As David Allison notes, subject, predicate, affirmation and negation will permit the development of a double axiomatic set (such as identity and causality). Such a mode of thought favors binary opposition and gives rise to concepts of unity, specific difference, time and space, subject and substance along with the notion of self, soul, ego, God.<sup>16</sup>

The Kabbalistic suppression of grammar thus points to a different mode of thought, an alternative hermeneutic. This alternate philosophy will be the subject of the sixth chapter of this dissertation. Much of it will coincide with post-structuralist thought, the primacy of writing, textuality and interpretation. It is important to see Kabbalah as the apotheosis of an alternative hermeneutic which stands in marked contrast to much of Western thought.

It would seem at first glance that this would place the Kabbalists in diametrical opposition to Derrida who speaks of the "unpenetrated" certainty that Being is a Grammar. The implication of this is enormous in Derrida's work. However his concern is for the primacy of writing as well as for grammatology and is not merely a rejection of nomination. Derrida adds that the world is in all its parts a cryptogram to be reconstituted through poetic inscription

---

<sup>16</sup>David Allison p. xxii.

and "that everything belongs to the book before being and in order to come into the world".<sup>17</sup> With the return to the book, Derrida and the Kabbalists are no longer in opposition. Indeed for a Kabbalist like Abulafia, writing becomes the source of creation.

Creation, revelation and prophecy are all phenomena of language. Creation is the result of divine writing in which the writing forms the matter of creation. In revelation and prophecy, the divine word penetrates the language of man and endows it with insight into the interdependence of things. At creation, God's signature penetrates things, and "the mystery that lies at the basis of the 'host' (of all things) is the letter, and every letter is a sign (symbol) and indication of the creation." (p. 185)

Scholem stresses throughout his work that the name of God is the original source of all language. This name has no "meaning" in the usual sense of the term, that is, it has no concrete signification. "The meaninglessness of the name of God indicates its situation in the very central point of the revelation, at the basis of which it lies." (p. 194). As Scholem notes, the fact that God expresses Himself, even if his utterance is beyond human insight, is more important than any meaning that might be conveyed. For the Kabbalists, the Torah is an absolute, and, however deep one

---

<sup>17</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," Writing and Difference, p. 77.

might penetrate, one can only approximate the absolute 'meaningless' of divine revelation.

As noted, the Hebrew phrase for the Tetragrammaton, *shem ha-meforash* can mean both "explicit" and "hidden-separate." Thus the expression for the name of God suggests that language itself is equivocal. Through the process of revelation, the hidden name becomes a communicable word and thereby the source of all meaning, yet all the while revelation remains a "meaningless experience". Only when the name of God is translated into human language does it become comprehensible. The divine name is not a communication which provides comprehension; it becomes a comprehensible communication only in a mediated form.

Scholem gives his clearest expression concerning the enigma of revelation in a letter to Walter Benjamin dated September 20, 1934.

You ask what I understand by the 'nothingness of revelation'? I understand by it a state in which — revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has validity but no significance. A state in which the wealth of meaning is lost and what is in the process of appearing (for revelation is such a process) still does not disappear, even though it is reduced to the zero point of its own content, so to speak.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in Robert Alter, Necessary Angels: Traditions and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin and Scholem (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) p. 108.

In his essay "Revelation and Tradition", Scholem states that the Kabbalistic idea or tradition is founded on the dialectical tension of a paradox, "it is precisely the absoluteness that effects the unending reflections in the contingencies of fulfillment." (p. 22) Scholem offers nothingness precisely where one would expect the definite and definable.

Mediation is thus the key to revelation, which, according to Scholem, was absolute, meaning-bestowing, but itself meaningless. It becomes explicable only through the relation to time, to the Tradition. The absolute word of God would be destructive if it were undialectical and unmediated. There is no concrete unmediated word.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, at the center of Scholem's study of Kabbalah is the "nothingness of revelation", the impossibility of fulfilling any absolute word.

The notion of "the nothingness of revelation" takes on added importance when studied against the notion of the Sublime. Revelation, which in many respects is the theological equivalent of the sublime, does not in itself have meaning. The Kantian sublime is also a moment of discontinuity of meaning, a moment of disarticulation. Both offer a sense of the overflow of meaning, yet in themselves are beyond measure and reason. We find a loss of meaning, a

---

<sup>19</sup>Gershom Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism," The Messianic Idea in Judaism. (New York: Schocken Books, 1971) p. 291.

falling away of limits both at the moment of revelation and in the sublime. The sublime will be studied in the fourth chapter of this dissertation. Here I would simply like to call attention to the similarity in structure and effect between Kabbalistic revelation and the sublime. The idea of the "nothingness of revelation" brings us back to the initial question of this dissertation, namely, the relationship between a magical notion of language and a linguistic nihilism.

When in their correspondence Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin speak of "something more", "something else", an "abyss" or "depth" in language that both mystics and poets explore, are they pointing to a nihilistic void or the depth of divine mystery? The void can be the negative abyss of all meaning as a writer like de Man argues, or it can be a realm beyond human grasp or articulation which nonetheless contains the powers of redemption. Moreover, as Susan Handelman notes, Scholem equates that which is beyond *expression* as that which is beyond all *meaning*.<sup>20</sup>

One reason he makes this equation is connected to another of Scholem's fundamental assumptions: that the mystical *experience* is formless and therefore can assume many different forms. This necessitates a "symbolic" mode of thought. As Scholem explains in On the Kabbalah and Its

---

<sup>20</sup>Susan Handelman, Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem and Levinas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1991) pp. 84-88.

Symbolism, symbols are the primary means to describe an indescribable reality. Yet Scholem maintains that the symbols do describe; they are a means of grasping a fragmentary truth. Scholem contends that while the "ultimate" truth is beyond all human attempts to contain it, language may address and evoke this truth. Because the source of language is divine, it is the intersection of the divine and the human. Language, as the medium of truth, is also the mediation of truth.

Another connection between the nothing of revelation and the Sublime rests on negation. This juxtaposition of poetic knowledge and the sublime centers on ideas of the Negative and negation. Harold Bloom equates Gnosticism with poetic knowledge, finding it a knowing which transcends both the epistemology of tropes and the cognitive aspects of rhetoric. Gnosis, for Bloom, is a persuasive rhetoric, a language of desire, or in Freudian terms, a repressive discourse. It is also "a chapter in the history of the Sublime."

Bloom asserts that belated poetry and Gnosticism are the manifestations of negative theology. He finds in them "a linguistic and psychic cunning that truly can be equated with what Romanticism called the Imagination."<sup>21</sup> The Gnostic elements are very pronounced in the Kabbalah as are

---

<sup>21</sup>Harold Bloom, Agon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) p. 15.

aspects of negative theology. Kabbalah offers a theory of catastrophe-creation, the withdrawal of God, God as infinite nothingness. Even traditional Rabbinic Judaism can be seen from a point of negativity. The philosopher Maimonides asserts a negativity at the heart of religion because of the unknowability of God.<sup>22</sup> Because God cannot be known, we can only interpret his attributes negatively, that is, by what he is not. Here negative theology is not grounded on ontological principle, but rather, is related to language. Kenneth Burke notes that:

The paradox of the negative is simply this. Quite as the word 'tree' is verbal and the thing is non-verbal, so all words for the non-verbal, must, by the very nature of the case, discuss the realm of the non-verbal in term of what it is not.<sup>23</sup>

Bloom couples gnostic insight with artistic creation because he feels that both begin with the inaugurating realization that all of Creation and all of the Fall are one unified event, and that this event belongs to the inner life of God, not of man. Poetic knowledge has more in common with Gnosis than it does with philosophy. Both are modes of antithetical knowledge, a knowledge both negative and evasive (which is why Yeats is a Kabbalistic and gnostic poet).

---

<sup>22</sup>Jose Faur, Golden Doves with Silver Dots (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) p. 65.

<sup>23</sup>Kenneth Burke, The Rhetoric of Religion (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) p. 18.

Yeats commented that a man could embody the truth, but not know it, an inverted Gnostic formulation according to Bloom. Hans Jonas has worked out the connection between Gnosticism and the Heideggerian revision of both epistemology and ontology.<sup>24</sup> Heidegger's writing has provided much of the background for Deconstruction, which, Bloom finds, has touched its limits in tracing a poem's "genuine epistemology or negative moments".<sup>25</sup> It has left us at the end-point of critical dilemma, the limits of interpretability.

Gnosis deals with knowing, perceiving directly with the mind. "The 'what' of knowledge", Hans Jonas states, "contains the explanation of its own origin, communication and promised effect".<sup>26</sup> Bloom finds the language here to be of the poetic sublime rather than of philosophy. For the Gnostic, the fall which is a fall within the Godhead, opens up a new sublime, a negative creation in the abyss, resulting in a negative cosmos.

In Gnosticism, the demiurgical creation was an undialectical catastrophe, dualistic, and not of a systematic nature. In the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, creation is monistic yet at the same time dialectical. His concept

---

<sup>24</sup>See Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963) pp. 320-340.

<sup>25</sup>Bloom, Agon, p. 56.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Bloom, Agon, p. 57.

of *Tsimtsum* is a concentration of God away from a point, not at a point. Bloom finds in this movement the "deconstructive" spirit of Kabbalah, and declares that it constituted the most negative of all the Gnostic theologies. It is this very negativism that attracts Bloom to Kabbalah. He sees it as setting the pattern even now for all those linguistic problematics that hedge or enclose any available notions of transcendence. Bloom contends that we read poems largely in terms of their negative moments. From his perspective "anti-mimetic and mimetic theories of creation merely repeat the ancient differences between Stoic and Platonic accounts, a difference that pragmatically makes little difference, as both the antimimetic and mimetic theories of aesthetic representation yield themselves up to the tyranny of time, to one or another rhetoric of temporality.<sup>27</sup>

Bloom stresses the negative because, following Freud, he finds that our instinctual life is agnostic and self-destructive; that our most authentic moments are moments of negation, contraction and repression. And in poetry, the most creative moment, the sublime moment, is also negative.

We will turn first to the poetry of William Butler Yeats, who, as a poet working within the occult tradition, with strong Gnostic tendencies, and as one of the last questors of the sublime, best brings together many of the

---

<sup>27</sup>Bloom, *Agon*, p. 89.

dominant themes of this dissertation. "Whether as sublime master of the concrete universe, demonic adversary of genuine romantic visionaries, or seductive forerunner of the vertiginous interplay of self-subverting tropes, Yeats has repeatedly appeared as a representative case in point."<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup>Daniel O'Hara, "Yeats in Theory", Post-Structuralist Readings of English Poetry, ed. Richard Machin and Christopher Norris, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p. 349.

## CHAPTER 2

Yeats and Kabbalah: The Way of  
the Lightning Flash

In a letter to John O'Leary, William Butler Yeats wrote, "The mystical life is the center of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write...It bears the same relation to my work as the philosophy of Goodwin held to the work of Shelley."<sup>1</sup> Throughout his long career, Yeats never retreated from this position. The mystical life was inextricably related to writing poetry and for Yeats, the mystical life was greatly shaped by the study of Kabbalah.

The question of Yeats and Kabbalah must first be established through a brief biographical study showing his involvement in various hermetic societies which were devoted to a study of the occult. Only after establishing this relationship is it possible to evaluate its importance for the poetry; and only after explicating several of the poems and examining A Vision, can we determine the importance of occult studies in Yeats's elaborate personal mythology. Numerous passages in Yeats's autobiography attest to the importance these studies had for him. But once one

---

<sup>1</sup>William Butler Yeats, Letters to John O'Leary and His Sister ed. Allan Wade (New York: MacMillan, 1952) p. 14.

establishes this ostensible relationship, it still remains necessary to evaluate its importance in the poetry.

It can be stated at the outset that an adequate, albeit incomplete appreciation of Yeats's poetry can be reached without awareness of the occult background. It is not necessary to a surface study of the poems. If mysticism was rarely the substance of Yeats's poetry, it often provided the machinery. John Butler Yeats wrote to his son about the role of mysticism in Blake's poetry. As Helen Vendler contends, what he said applies equally well to the question of his son's poetry and its relation to mysticism:

You need not be a believer in his mysticism to enjoy his poem, 'Oh Rose, thou art sick!' The substance of his poetry is himself, revolting and desiring. His mysticism was a make - believe, a sort of working hypothesis as good as another. He could write about it in his prose and contentiously assert his belief. When he wrote his poems it dropped into the background, and it did not matter whether you believed it or not . . . In his poetry, it was only a device, a kind of stage scenery, and a delight to understand and think about, and yet all the time a something apart, that helped but was never more than a help.<sup>2</sup>

Mysticism, however plays a significant role in Yeats's work. The involvement with Kabbalah and the occult "enabled" his poetry, providing a justification for his work. It validated for him that all the achievements of the

---

<sup>2</sup>Helen Vendler, Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963) p. 3.

imagination, and his poetry in particular, offered access to the "truth." Yeats considered himself a voice of what he believed to be a great renaissance, namely the revolt of the soul against the intellect. The Occult down-played the role of reason and logic while extolling the strength of the imagination. And most importantly, Kabbalah proceeded through symbols and Yeats saw the symbol at the center of his poetry. If the structure of Yeats's personal mythology can be down-played, the body of thought on which it depends, namely, the Kabbalah and the occult, cannot be overlooked. They provide the epistemological framework that operated through symbols and enabled Yeats to approach the sublime.

Yeats's involvement in occult studies often causes discomfort for the "serious" critic, but Yeats was adamant about its importance to his work. In a letter to Sturge Moore he wrote:

I feel that an imaginative writer whose work draws him to philosophy must attach himself to some great historic school. My dreams and much psychic phenomena force me into a certain little-trodden way, but I must not go too far from the main European track . . .<sup>3</sup>

Throughout his life, Yeats engaged in a revolt against all rationalist theories of perception that authenticate our apprehension of the physical world by reducing the mind to a cipher. In particular, he rebelled against the philosophy

---

<sup>3</sup>Richard Ellman, The Identity of Yeats (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) p. 3.

of John Locke and all who based their empiricism on his work. This led him to a study of Eastern philosophy (especially the Samkaric philosophy of Mohini Chatterji) spiritualism, magic, the occult and Kabbalah. One can trace a lifelong interest in the subject, beginning with the Theosophy of Blavatsky, the Kabbalism and the magic of MacGregor Mathers, and extending to the automatic writing which resulted in A Vision. As Richard Ellman noted:

These activities have understandably made everyone uneasy. It would be more comfortable if the outstanding poet of our time hobnobbed with, say, Thomas Henry Huxley, instead of Helena Petrova Blavatsky or Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers . . . But he has not obliged us and a number of critics have therefore attacked him for failing to attach himself to a more decent and gentlemanly creed.<sup>4</sup>

These critics will have to contend with Yeats's assertion that 'the mystical life' was at the center of his work. "But occultism is a big center, a much bigger one than is generally acknowledged. . . Yeats found in occultism, and in mysticism generally, a point of view which had the virtue of warring with accepted beliefs, and of warring enthusiastically and authoritatively."<sup>5</sup>

Like many other young men of his time, Yeats found that established religion and science could not answer the questions he found most important, namely those concerning

---

<sup>4</sup>Ellman p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Ellman p. 3.

his soul. With his friend A.E., George Russell, he became interested in esoteric readings. In 1885 they both helped found the Dublin Hermetic Society whose aim was the study of magic, mysticism and Eastern religion. In 1887, Yeats joined Mme. Blavatsky's Theosophical Society and remained a member for three years until his expulsion in 1890. Most of the theosophists' belief was based on Indian thought, mainly Vedantism. It propounded a message of asceticism and renunciation which Yeats eventually rejected. He found Blavatsky's book Isis Unveiled, based on Puranic or mythological Hinduism, a system of thought congenial to him with its stress on the similarity of all religions.<sup>6</sup> It was here that Yeats was introduced to the Smaragdine (Emerald) tablet which stated that "What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is similar to that which is below."<sup>7</sup> This is a seminal idea for Yeats and, as I hope to explain, will provide him with a working hypothesis for his use of symbolism.

Blavatsky's second work, The Secret Doctrine combined ideas of Hermetism and Hinduism. In this work, she maintained that there is an "undefinable unity between the individual soul and the universal oversoul; there is a universal law of periodicity, of polarity and all is in

---

<sup>6</sup>Mary Catherine Flannery, Yeats and Magic: The Earlier Works, (Great Britain: Colin Smythe, 1978) p. 23.

<sup>7</sup>H. P. Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled (California Theosophy Co., 1925) p. 507.

constant flux, and reflux; and every soul must make the 'obligatory pilgrimage'... through the Cycle and Incarnation in accordance with Cyclic and Karmic Law."<sup>8</sup> Yeats accepted these and many of the main tenets of Theosophy, but he could not accept the vows of obedience. Accordingly, in August 1890, Yeats was asked to resign.

At about the same time Yeats joined another occult group, a Mystical Celtic Order, The Golden Dawn, and remained an active member for twenty years, and an occasional member until 1926. This group, headed at first by MacGregor Mathers, shared many of the theosophists' beliefs, but in addition stressed the study of Kabbalah. This order combined various strands of occult studies into Hermetism: Chaldeanism and Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Jewish Gnosticism, Christian Gnosticism, Johannine Christianity, Medieval alchemy, Rosicrucianism and most importantly, Kabbalism.

The cosmology of Kabbalah appealed to Yeats, coming to it as he did after his study of the abstract philosophy of Samkara of Mohini Chatterji. The basis of Samkaric thought is a denial of matter; God is what the world is not. The World is illusion and is a barrier between the human soul and God. This stands in sharp contrast to the Kabbalah which teaches that the world of elements emanated from God. Thus instead of a world of transcendence (of Samkara) we

---

<sup>8</sup>Flannery, p. 24.

have a world of immanence. As *Kether* was in *Malkuth*, so matter was in spirit and spirit in matter; the reality of the world could be accepted.<sup>9</sup>

After his study of Indian thought, Yeats struggled to escape from the abstraction and nihilism and Kabbalah offered him a way. Yeats's concrete poetic mind readily grasped its scheme of balanced opposites and mysterious symbolism. It gave him a deeper insight to Blake for whom the world of illusions was as real as the world of reality. Kabbalah offered to Yeats a "proof" of the reality of imagination. Mathers had taught Yeats how to evoke visions with the help of symbols painted on cards.<sup>10</sup> With the help of Kabbalah, Yeats was able to demonstrate the truth of imagination.

Yeats felt that one need not simply believe in the reality of a vision; it could be perceived as vividly as the solid world. Yeats took such image to be "thought - created." He tells of an incident on a train when a thought created smell actually affected the nose. This led to the suggestion that such an image could also be touched, leading to the belief in the objective existence of the world of dreams or illusions. Yeats later came to identify this world of dreams with *Anima Mundi*. In *Per Amica Silentia*

---

<sup>9</sup>Harbands Rai Bachchan, *W.B. Yeats and Occultism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963) p. 90.

<sup>10</sup>See William Butler Yeats, *Autobiography* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1965) p. 229ff; p. 316ff.

Lunae, and in the lengthy correspondence he carried on with T. Sturge Moore, Yeats emphasized the reality of this world of imagination and affirmed our ability to communicate with it by means of symbols.

Mathers' book, The Kabbalah Unveiled provided Yeats with a systematic study of Kabbalah. The book was a translation of portions of the Zohar. Other texts that Yeats had access to were by Pico della Mirandola who formulated a Christian interpretation to Kabbalah, and Knor Von Rosenroth, translator of the oldest fragments of Zohar from the original Aramaic into Latin. Yeats also read both Isaac Luria and Moses Cordovero with their "allegedly Adam - Abraham - or Moses - received system of tracking down Old Testament analogical meanings in connection with the true cosmogony, true nature of man, and true means of salvation; all posited on the conviction that the world of matter mirrors the world of intelligence, with God and the universe forming a perfect whole. On that tree Moses de Leon who wrote down the Zohar was in a sense flower."<sup>11</sup>

According to Virginia Moore, Yeats got most of his kabbalistic knowledge from two officials of his order, MacGregor Mathers and William Wynn Westcott. It was coroner Westcott who in 1888 gave a series of lectures which were later published as An Introduction to the Kabbalah. As

---

<sup>11</sup>Virginia Moore, The Unicorn; William Butler Yeats's Search for Reality (New York: MacMillan, 1954) p. 114.

Yeats notes in his Autobiography that "there was a London coroner in those days, learned in the cabbala."<sup>12</sup> Yeats often consulted Westcott about the Kabbalah and its mystical number and letter symbolism. Westcott maintained that the origins of Kabbalah are lost in antiquity and derives its name QBLH from QBL meaning "to receive."

He discusses the oldest treatise, the Sephir Yetzirah or Book of Formation which he himself translated, and the famous Zohar, which Yeats read, before he sets forth the 'theoretical' and 'practical Cabala.' The central doctrine, he says, is that of the ten Sephiroth or Emanations of God: a system of correspondence. Each human soul belongs to the highest of four worlds, that of Adam Kadmon, or Archetypal Man, from which the other three worlds successively evolved. Parallels exist between stars, world, human body, and - strangely - the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet; the latter being divided into triad, *heptad*, and *dodecad*, because they fall naturally into threes. All of which, says Westcott, laid a foundation for medieval magic, the hidden purpose of which was the soul's development.<sup>13</sup>

Mathers, whom Yeats called "a learned but unscholarly man" offered Yeats a symbolic system. The poet credits him with much; and "though he did not show me the truth, he did what he professed, and showed me a way to it."<sup>14</sup> As

---

<sup>12</sup>Yeats, Autobiography, p. 400.

<sup>13</sup>Moore p. 114.

<sup>14</sup>Yeats, Autobiography, p, 576.

important as the system Mathers taught was his fulfilling for Yeats the role of archetypal magician.

Yeats consciously employed the term 'magic' and he made a distinction between being a mystic and a magician - the mystic being one who passively submits to a system while the magician controls the system. Yeats felt that "all poets share some of the power of the magician and the greater the poet the more conscious he will be for the links between magic and poetry."<sup>15</sup> Raine defines magic as an evocation of the numinous and whether encountered in a dream, vision or ritual, the experience itself is its own mode of knowledge. Yeats felt that these visions have an objective reality in their own world and could be communicated.

The link between magic and poetry comes about through a meditation that centers on a symbol or mandala. As Yeats read through the Tai I Chin Hua Tsung Chih, or The Secret of the Golden Flower, a book of Chinese Yoga, he found confirmed that the rituals of magic and the writing of poetry issue from the same source, namely, "uniting the conscious and unconscious within oneself and thus [opening] oneself to a whole knowledge."<sup>16</sup>

In his book on Blake, Yeats elaborates upon this connection as he asserts that the chief difference between

---

<sup>15</sup>Flannery p. 5.

<sup>16</sup>Flannery p. 7.

the metaphors of poetry and the symbols of mysticism is that the latter are woven together into a complete system.<sup>17</sup>

Writing about Yeats's mystical studies, George Mills Harper found that for Yeats the search for meaning in the chaos and multiplicity of nature required a system.

The discipline of the magical examinations represented a search for truth, a striving for union with the ideal in the invisible world. In the broadest sense all Yeats's creative energies were devoted to this religious quest. In the context of this quest, his poetry was but one means of invoking the magical powers of the invisible. It was a concrete device for the ordering of his thought and therefore of existence itself.<sup>18</sup>

Over and over again Yeats maintained that there was an unseverable link between his study of magic and the writing of poetry. His most emphatic statement occurs in a letter of Aug., 1892, written to John O'Leary.

Now as to Magic. It is surely absurd to hold me "weak" or otherwise because I choose to persist in a study which I decided deliberately four or five years ago to make next to my poetry, the more important pursuit of my life. . . . If I had not made magic my constant study I would not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would the Countess Kathleen ever have come to exist.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup>Flannery p. 48.

<sup>18</sup>George Mills Harper, Yeats's Golden Dawn (United Kingdom: Macmillan Press, 1974) p. 74.

<sup>19</sup>Moore p. 190.

Under Mather's influence, Yeats studied various aspects of magic, often of a Kabbalistic nature. One of the more esoteric areas of study was the Tarot. According to Joseph Hone in his Life, Yeats began his interest in Tarot in London in the 1880's. Two members of the Golden Dawn, A.E. Waite and Pamela Coleman-Smith designed and executed a Tarot pack. Allusion to Tarot symbols, the tower wheel, magician and chariot abound in Yeats's work.

Several scholars trace the origins of the Tarot to the Kabbalah. Although the exact origin is unknown, most studies point to an eclectic source in which the Jewish esoteric is prominent.<sup>20</sup> Mathers quotes from Histoire de Magie by Eliphas Levi. "The absolute hieroglyphical science had for its basis an alphabet of which all the gods were letters, all the letters ideas, and all the ideas numbers, and all numbers perfect signs."<sup>21</sup> Levi goes on to associate this Kabbalistic conception of the alphabet with The Book of Toth, thus introducing the Egyptian pantheon into a basically Kabbalistic system. Several Egyptian symbols, namely the 'golden-eyed hawk of the sun', 'the moon-ruled cat' and the great cackler enabled Yeats to introduce esoteric themes in the acceptable form of nature imagery.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>See Kathleen Raine, Yeats, The Tarot and The Golden Dawn. (Dublin, Ireland: The Dolmen Press, 1972).

<sup>21</sup>Raine p. 6.

<sup>22</sup>Raine p. 7.

The study of the Tarot was basic to the Golden Dawn. Kathleen Raine describes the central teaching of this hermetic society as based on Kabbalism (especially the Christian Kabbalism of Dee and Agrippa) with its numerology and complex system of correspondence based on the diagram of the Tree of Life. The Tarot was employed, confirming Eliphas Levi's assertion that these cards were a pictorial form of the Tree of Life. There is a tendency in magical systems to relate everything with everything else - "letters with numbers, with cycles of the months, years and signs of the zodiac, with parts of the body, celestial and infernal hierarchies of angels, with minerals, metals, and all manifested beings, we see that there are many possible correlations between the Tarot and the diagrammatical Tree."<sup>23</sup>

In The Trembling of the Veil, Yeats writes that "the Tree of Life is as a geometrical figure made up of ten circles or spheres called Sephiroth joined by straight lines."<sup>24</sup> There are twenty-two straight lines which join the *Sephiroth* and this number corresponds to the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Divine energy flows through the ten divine names (*Sephiroth*) emanating into form through the four worlds (*Aziluth, deity, Briah, creation; Yetzirah,*

---

<sup>23</sup>Raine p. 17.

<sup>24</sup>Yeats, "The Trembling of the Veil," Autobiography, p. 248.

formation; *Assiah*, action). Thus we find that the symbolic structure of the tree is based on the numbers, four, ten and twenty-two. As Raine points out, the Tarot cards are based on a similar numerology; ten numbered cards and four court cards and twenty-two trumps or keys. We can set up a parallel relationship with the number ten corresponding to the *Sephiroth*, the suits to the four elements and four worlds, and the number twenty two to the "way of the serpent", the path among the *Sephiroth*. The photos in Raine's book, reproduced from Yeats's notebook, consist of illustrations in his own and Georgie Hyde-Lee's hand. These reprints of his Tarot pack make it clear that Yeats was intimately involved with Kabbalah as evidenced by these pictures of the Tree of Life and the Path of the Serpent. The illustrations are often accompanied by a text of Hebrew letters, illustrating their specifically Kabbalistic import. In addition, this influence is corroborated by the Pentacle on the Elemental weapons for the Golden Dawn rituals.

Indeed, all initiatory rites of this hermetic order are infused with Kabbalistic elements. In *The Unicorn*, Virginia Moore provides a detailed account of the rituals of the Golden Dawn. She begins by pointing out its Rosicrucian element, and then goes on to detail the Kabbalistic aspects. She outlines the order of the grades and shows their sephirotic correspondence with some of their symbols taken directly from the *Sepher Yetzirah*. In *The Golden Dawn*, the

*Zelator* progresses through rites based on Kabbalah; proceeding from the root, *Malkuth* to the crown *Kether* until he becomes *Philosophus*. The Pentagram was their symbol for the triumph of spirit over fourfold matter. Yeats studied Hebrew words, the metals associated with the *Sephiroth* and the *Qlippoth*. All the rituals were based on the search for light and the need for balancing opposites in a dualistic world. For twenty five years Yeats was deeply involved in this society that was sworn to secrecy and was immersed in ritual magic and the occult. Moore says of these rites:

All rest heavily upon the Cabala, stressing its great central image of the Tree of Life as formed by the Ten Sephiroth - the Tree up which crawls the Serpent of Nature connecting not touching the *Sephiroth*, and down which, through the *Sephiroth*, shoots the lightning of the Spirit; all 'deal' the twenty-two trump cards of the Tarot, as symbolizing the twenty-two 'paths' on That Tree; all cite the various forms of the Cross - *Fylfot*, Calvary, Greek, *Tau*, Cabalistic, *Ansata*, and Rosicrucian; all make use of the four *kerubim*, four cardinal points, four elementals, and four Enochian Tablets with their 'angelic language'; all summon to a high standard of conduct; all see the Trinity as not only Father, Mother, and 'child', that is, *Kether*, *Binah*, and *Chokmah*, but also as the archetypal idea - 'the threefold creative idea operating in all things.'<sup>25</sup>

A most detailed account of the symbolism of the Order and how it appeared in the poetry can be found in George

---

<sup>25</sup>Moore p.142 - last sentence a quotation from Boehme- (Jakob Boehme, Die drei Principien gottlichen Wesens XXII 25,40 87-100)

Mills Harper's book *Yeats's Golden Dawn*.<sup>26</sup> Yeats was initiated into the Hermetic Order on March 7, 1890 and remained a member of the order under successive changes of name until 1922. He never disavowed the Order, but, in fact, maintained that it was the only satisfactory religious organization of his experience. "Basing its symbolism and ritual upon the metaphysical assumption that 'things below are as things above' and its system of Degrees on the Cabbalistic Tree of Life, the Golden Dawn offered an ideal resolution to a visionary artist who conceived the phenomenal world as merely symbolic of the invisible or real world."<sup>27</sup>

As Yeats studied the Kabbalah, he focused on its 'dogmatic' aspect which aimed at revealing the attributes of God and the emanation of a finite universe from an Infinite God. God, being boundless in nature, was not comprehensible to the limited human intellect. While the Kabbalah denied the possibility of knowing God completely, it did establish a connection between the finite universe and its infinite creator.<sup>28</sup>

The universe was created by a process of emanation through the ten sephiroth. These sephiroth were arranged in their order of emanation in the pattern known as the

---

<sup>26</sup>George Mills Harper p. 27.

<sup>27</sup>Harper p. 148.

<sup>28</sup>Bachchan pp. 88-89.

*Sephirotic* Tree of Life. This Tree is a pattern of contrast and balance with three masculine sephiroth under the right column (The Pillar of Fire), the three female sephiroth under the left column (The Pillar of Water), and four under the middle column, (The Pillar of Mildness). In order to reach God, one had to travel the thirty two paths that joined the Sephiroth, seeking equilibrium at every state.

According to Bachchan, the Sephirotic Tree taught Yeats a fundamental poetic technique. "The antinomy, which has been noticed in a general sense in his life and personality, is present in a highly perfected form in all his best poems, and gives them a special quality of their own."<sup>29</sup>

Looking back in old age, Yeats wrote that he owes this gift to a Kabbalistic ceremony. In a letter to Dorothy Wellesley of Aug. 5, 1936, Yeats wrote:

About the conflict in 'To D. W.', I did not plan it deliberately. That conflict is deep in my subconsciousness, perhaps in everybody's. I dream of clear water, . . . Then comes the reversal. . . Then for weeks I get a symbolism like that in my Byzantium poem or in 'To D.W.' with flame for theme. All this may come from the chance that when I was a young man I was accustomed to a Kabbalistic ceremony where there were two pillars, one symbolic of water and one of fire, the fire mark is  $\Delta$ , the water mark is  $\nabla$ , there are combined to make Solomon's seal  $\nabla$ , The water is sensation, peace

---

<sup>29</sup>Bachchan p. 111.

night, silence, indolence; the fire is  
passion , tension, day, music, energy.<sup>30</sup>

Thus we can see that for Yeats the Kabbalah revealed the antinomy that exists in nature and life and the necessity of achieving a balance. (This is a subject that has received much attention in Yeats scholarship, see Berryman, Design of Opposites and Kermode's The Romantic Image). However, one often finds in Yeats a division into opposites without a final reconciliation. While an equilibrium is occasionally achieved, there is no synthesis or reconciliation. This pattern is so pervasive it results in the dialogic division of his poems ("Ego Dominus Tuus", "Dialogue of Self and Soul".)

Yeats dedicated A Vision, not to his wife, or to Maude Gonne, but to Moira Mathers, the wife of his Kabbalah teacher and member of the Golden Dawn. He commented, "Though much has happened since we copied the Jewish *Schemhamphorasch* with its seventy-two Names of God in Hebrew characters, it was plain that I must dedicate my book to you."<sup>31</sup> While Yeats left the Order, he did not renounce the study that led him to the symbols and ways of thought that enabled him to write "the one history, and that the souls's"

---

<sup>30</sup>William Butler Yeats, Letters on Poetry to Dorothy Wellesy. ed. Kathleen Raine, (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) pp. 94-95.

<sup>31</sup>Yeats - A Vision (1938; New York: MacMillan, 1961) pp. 304-305.

as he calls A Vision. It should be noted that this work begins and ends with reference to Mathers.

The epilogue to A Vision is the poem in which the poet calls up the ghosts of three occultists, the last being MacGregor Mathers. In this poem Yeats praises Mathers as a heroic failure, possessed of a spiritual recklessness in the pursuit of his obsessions.

I call up MacGregor Mathers from his  
grave,  
For in my first hard spring-time we were  
friends,  
Although of late estranged.  
I thought him half a lunatic, half  
knave,  
And told him so, but friendship never  
ends;  
And what if mind seem changed,  
And it seem changed with the mind,  
When thoughts rise up unbid  
On generous things that he did  
And I grow half contended to be blind!

Yeats made his peace with Mathers as the remainder of the poem makes clear and he took what he needed of his system.

Such thought - such thought have I that hold  
it tight  
Till mediation master all its parts,  
.....  
Such thought, that in it bound  
I need no other thing,

Wound in mind's wandering  
As mummies in the mummy-cloth are  
wound.<sup>32</sup>

(V. 474).

---

<sup>32</sup>William Butler Yeats, The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats ed. Peter Alt and Richard Alspach, (New York: MacMillan, 1957).

In the unpublished first draft of his Autobiography, Yeats acknowledged his debt to Mathers and the Golden Dawn. He says, "As I mastered the Kabbalah I discovered that his [Mathers's] geometric symbols were a series which I could classify according to the four elements, and what the ancients called the fifth element, and the sub-division of these. . .I allowed my mind to drift from image to image and these images began to affect my writing, making it more sensuous and more vivid."<sup>33</sup> Yeats expanded the Kabbalistic concept of the four elements into the principle of quaternary which he saw as the basis of the universe, history and the individual soul. In his introduction to the Ellis-Yeats edition of Blake, Yeats states that the conception of the four-fold in man is the very foundation of Blake's symbolic system.

Yeats's unpublished manuscripts of 1889 reveal that he was deeply involved with the concept of quaternary. As Mary Flannery points out, he was learning from new material, material that he did not borrow from Blake, but found that Blake also used. "What Yeats was working out for a Cabbalistic order, what had been introduced to him by Theosophy and magic study, was also the base of a great poet's symbolic structure - at least as Yeats perceived it. He never gave up the concept of quaternary once he had

---

<sup>33</sup>Richard Ellman p. 251.

accepted it; it was to affect not only his philosophy, but also his poetic theory and practice."<sup>34</sup>

This influence can be seen most clearly in A Vision. There, he conceives of history as operating through four faculties, Will, Creative Mind, Mask and Body of Fate. While many critics note that Yeats proceeds through opposition, it is not only an opposition based on duality, but on quaternity. Each of the four elements (or faculties) can be seen as a point of interpenetrating gyres. The interpenetrating gyres are a root symbol in Yeats's work and have received much critical attention. It must be noted that the gyres are contained within another dominant symbol, the sphere.

In Yeats's system, the sphere represents the "unified reality beyond chaotic appearance or the experience of that reality" and the gyres stand for the world of appearance.<sup>35</sup> In this world, "Consciousness is conflict." Yeats's poem "There" illustrates the function of the sphere and gyre.

There all the barrel-hoops are knit,  
There all the serpent-tails are bit,  
There all the gyres converge in one,  
There all the planets drop in the Sun.  
(V. p. 557)

As Ellman notes, the sphere and gyre symbolize conflict, those oppositions which make up existence. They can be seen as man and his daimon, permanence and change, one and many,

---

<sup>34</sup>Flannery p 43.

<sup>35</sup>Ellman p. 153.

objectivity and subjectivity. It represented a Hegelian concept of the world where thesis gives rise to antithesis, yet never rests in a synthesis.<sup>36</sup> The gyre and sphere are important in understanding Yeats because these symbols apply to his verse "which he realized with increasing clarity was guided by the principle of the containment of the utmost passion by the utmost control."<sup>37</sup>

In the 1925 edition of A Vision, Yeats states that the double cone, representing subjectivity and objectivity as intersecting states struggling one against the other, is his fundamental symbol. But Yeats does not rest there, as this state is illusory; only the sphere that swallows the antinomies is real. Virginia Moore points out that the Golden Dawn taught its *Adepti Majori* to project the Tree of Life as if in a solid sphere in which the North Pole coincides with Kether and the South Pole with Malkuth. A sphere is the whole where the contraries are united; it is reality. Yeats hammers it home. Then why the gyres? Because, "as sojourners on the earth we experience the gyres, the whole system being founded upon the belief that

---

<sup>36</sup>Yeats himself noted in A Vision that he had never read Hegel, but saw the world in terms of conflict. He learned from Blake that contraries are positive and that a negation is not a contrary, (p. 72).

<sup>37</sup>Ellman p. 153.

the ultimate reality, symbolized as the Sphere, falls in human consciousness . . . into a series of antinomies.<sup>38</sup>

The sphere and the gyre form the background to Yeats's thinking, but do not often appear overtly in his poetry (an exception would be the late poem "The Gyres" or "The Second Coming" and "Sailing to Byzantium"). The one Kabbalistic symbol which does appear with frequency is the Tree. It is the dominant image in the early 'The Two Trees' and recurs in 'Solomon and the Witch', 'Among School Children', 'Byzantium', 'At Algeciras', and finally, in 'Vacillation'.

The two trees of the poem of that name are the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. F.A.C. Wilson, Kermode and Bloom all trace the trees to songs from Blake's "Poetical Sketches". But Wilson rightly suggests that Yeats did not borrow directly from Blake, but rather used Blake as a confirmation that traditional symbolism could be used in modern poetry, Yeats combined a Celtic symbolism with Buddhist and Kabbalistic imagery. Wilson cites Yeats's use of the book The Migration of Symbols by d'Alviella as a source for the tree-symbolism throughout the world.<sup>39</sup>

The tree, then, was in every sense an archetypal symbol, and Yeats's central source of all those known to him

---

<sup>38</sup>Moore, p. 365. Moore quotes Israel Regardie, The Golden Dawn IV, pp. 231-242. (see footnote 171 Moore p. 469).

<sup>39</sup>F.A.C. Wilson, Yeats's Iconography (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1960) p. 249.

was beyond doubt the Jewish Kabbala, which he imagined (probably wrongly) had also influenced Blake. In his translation of Kabbalah Unveiled, Mathers explains that the typical Kabbalistic representation of the Tree of Life is as an apple tree which grows from the earth to the apex of heaven and bears the sun and the moon for fruit: its image grows within the soul of every man and connects him with God.<sup>40</sup>

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,  
The holy tree is growing there;  
From joy the holy branches start,  
And all the trembling flowers they bear,  
The changing colors of its fruit  
Have covered the stars with merry light,  
(V. p. 134).

That this is the Kabbalistic tree is clear from the fact that it grows within the human heart and has the sun and the moon as its fruit. Wilson suggests that Yeats is describing religious 'joy' where subjective thought subsumes intellect into imagination. He likens this to the process by which God is present within the human mind. This parallels the Kabbalistic symbolism of the 'Way' leading from the human heart by means of Sephirot to union with God. This early poem asserts that through "subjective contemplation ... we can discover the radical law of the universe, that all manifested and all interior life, the stars, the sea, music, spiritual peace, are united in one chain or affirmation;

---

<sup>40</sup>Wilson p. 250.

affirmation of a God who is intrinsically present in the self"<sup>41</sup>

The second verse of the poem presents us with another aspect of the Sephirotic tree. Ellman notes that the this tree has two aspects, one benign, the other, *Qlippoth*, malign. It seems that Ellman has confused *Qlippoth* or *Kelippoth*, the shells or vessels which contained demonic powers, with the tree. It is after breaking of the vessels that the *Shekkhinah*, derived from the ninth and tenths *sefiroth* of the tree, falls into the world. It is an oversimplification to view the tree as divided into two natures, one benign, the other evil. Ellman is only partly correct when he says "Since the Kabbalists consider man to be a microcosm, the double-natured tree is a picture both of the universe and of the human mind, whose faculties, even the lowest, can work for good or ill."<sup>42</sup>

Wilson expands on the role of the *Qlippoth*, seeing them as evil spirits antithetical to Yeats's 'Immortals'. They are the divine ideas in their malevolent aspect, evincing what Jung calls, 'the bipolarity of all archetypes.' Yeats represents the *Qlippoth* as demons who hold up a magic looking glass, as in his novel The Speckled Bird:

- where the Tree of Life presents a distorted and misshapen reflection. This new image is the external temporal

---

<sup>41</sup>Wilson p. 250.

<sup>42</sup>Ellman p. 76.

world as the untutored senses may perceive it, a desolate landscape in which the sense of unity and divine purpose has been lost. Yeats follows Platonism in insisting that this fallen world is nevertheless a distorted mirror-image of the real; the Kabbalists also represent the 'world of evil' as an inverted image of the good.<sup>43</sup>

The "bitter glass" of the second stanza reflects the image of the barren, storm blackened tree.

In Explorations Yeats says that "in the end the creative energy of men depends upon their believing that they have, within themselves, something immortal and imperishable, and that all else is but an image in a looking glass".<sup>44</sup> This reinforces the imagery set up in another poem "To Some I have Talked with by the Fire". Written in the same year as "The Two Trees", it is even more overtly Kabbalistic. Here, Yeats uses the Tree of Life as the source of knowledge of good and evil along with other Kabbalistic symbols such as the all consuming flame and unpronounceable name of God.

Because their blossoming dreams have never bent  
Under the fruit of evil and of good  
And of the embattled flaming multitude  
Who rise, wing above wing, flame above flame  
And, like a storm, cry the Ineffable Name,  
(V. p. 136).

Yeats will again in another poem use the double aspect of the tree to reflect antinomies. In "Vacillation" the

---

<sup>43</sup>Wilson p. 253.

<sup>44</sup>Yeats, Explorations, qtd in Harold Bloom, Yeats (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) p. 372.

image of the Tree of Life is combined with the vision of a burning tree from the Mabinogion

A tree there is that from its topmost bough  
 Is half all glittering flame and half all green  
 Abounding foliage moistened with the dew;  
 And half is half and yet is all the scene;  
 And half and half consume what they renew,  
 And he that Attis' image hangs between  
 That staring fury and the blind lush leaf  
 May know not what he knows, but knows not grief.  
 (V. p. 500).

The Tree of Life image is repeated again in the sixth section of the poem:

From man's blood sodden heart are sprung  
 Those branches of the night and day  
 Where the gaudy moon is hung.

The dual aspect of the tree represents the nature of vacillation which not only means a fluctuation of consciousness but also a side to side movement, as with the gyres. Here vacillation is between heart and soul, personality and character "The body's death and the heart's remorse alike destroy the antinomies upon which Yeats has founded his thought. Man runs between extremities, negations, and so more than divinity lies beyond our antinomies; experience itself does. Many times Yeats has denied death, and cast out remorse in the name of the 'joy' or 'genial spirits' that are so crucial to Romantic creativity. But if the denial and the casting - out vanish in the larger context of life's experience, then what is joy?"<sup>45</sup> In the second section of the poem the burning tree

---

<sup>45</sup>Bloom p. 394.

presents "a blind joy of self - immolating poetic absorption" that is not longer available to Yeats. The poem moves not to a resolution, but to a choice between sanctified and unsanctified imagination. He rejects the "simplicity of fire" and chooses instead the unchristened heart" of Homer who represents the celebration of action.

Additional instances of Kabbalistic tree symbolism occur in The Only Jealousy of Emer where the 'white bird' symbolizes the soul after death as it flies to the Garden of Beatitude and takes its place atop the Tree of Life. This same imagery appears in the lyric "At Algeciras", Yeats's meditation on death. At midnight, the symbolic moment of death, the birds fly to the garden trees only to leave at dawn, the moment of rebirth. Yeats does not leave us in doubt about his sources (for "Algeciras" and "Byzantium") as he quotes the relevant passage from Kabbalah Unveiled in his Ideas of Good and Evil.

In the branches of the Tree the birds lodge and build their nests; that is, the souls and angels have their place, and beneath it those animals which have power seek the shade;. . .for in it [the shade of the tree] every beast of the forest doth walk.<sup>46</sup>

Wilson notes that in the poem "Solomon And The Witch", Yeats's tree symbolism achieved a new subtlety as the apple-tree and bird of reincarnation are presented without their traditional genealogy. "Yeats wrote so obliquely because of

---

<sup>46</sup>F.A.C. Wilson, Yeats Iconography, p. 98, quoting Mather's Kabbalah Unveiled, p. 104.

his firm faith in the collective unconscious . . . and because the Kabbalistic tree of gold and silver, where the birds perch and the sun and moon hang as fruit, seemed to him a peculiarly accessible archetype in that it had its counter part in almost every religion and race."<sup>47</sup>

The Kabbalah develops at length the concept of cosmic cycles, the *shemittoth*. In a book that appeared in 1250 in Catalonia, *Sefer ha Temunah*, The Book of Image, the concept of the cosmic cycles of creation is set forth. Yeats's notion of cosmic return could well have been influenced by Kabbalistic texts as well as his readings in Nietzsche and Buddhism. The successive incarnations of Fergus the King in "Fergus and The Druid" parallels the Buddhist concept of incarnations through the wheel of the hells and heavens.

According to Katherine Raine, Yeats developed the Buddhist Wheel into the gyre. Then she states, "To the same symbol we must assign the 'gyring spiring, Way of the Serpent' which in the Cabbalistic Tree of Life passes in succession through the mansions or stations of the twenty two paths of the Tarot ... The spires of that serpent must certainly be one among the many sources of Yeats's image of the wheel, not as a circular, but as a spiral revolution, the gyres"<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup>Wilson p. 284.

<sup>48</sup>Raine p. 23.

We must make a brief digression by way of the serpent at this point before returning to our poem. In The Trembling of the Veil Yeats tells of the development of certain images which recur in his poems. He decided to test his imaginative powers by repeating to himself the names associated with the moon in the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. After several nights, he had a vivid dream of a centaur and a beautiful naked woman who stands on a pedestal and shoots an arrow at a star. Soon thereafter he was sent a story by Fiona Macleod, The Archer, in which someone has a vision of a woman shooting an arrow at the sky. A short while later, a pupil of Mathers recounts that her child cried that he had seen a woman shooting an arrow into the sky and had killed God. When Yeats returned to London, he consulted Westcott, who explained these symbols as belonging to the Christian Kabbalah. "The centaur is the elemental spirit and the woman the divine spirit of the path *Samekh*, and the golden heart is central point upon the cabbalistic Tree of Life and corresponds to the *Sephiroth Tippereth*." (A. p. 249) Yeats writes of his growing excitement as he begins to understand the full significance of his image:

The "Tree of Life" is a geometrical figure made up of ten circles or spheres called *Sephiroth* joined by straight lines. Once men must have thought of it as like some great tree covered with its fruit and its foliage, but at some period, in the thirteenth century perhaps, touched by the mathematical genius of Arabia in all likelihood, it had lost its natural form. The *Sephiroth Tippereth*, attributed to the sun, is joined to the *Sephiroth Yessod*, attributed to the moon, by a

straight line called the path *Samekh*, and this line is attributed to the constellation Sagittarius . . . . He reminded me that the cabbalistic tree has a green serpent winding through it which represents the path of nature of instinct, and that the path *Samekh* is part of the long straight line that goes up through the center of the tree, and that is interpreted as the path of deliberate effort. (A. p. 250).

Yeats felt that he had attained a "wisdom older than the serpent". Those who had seen the image (of the woman shooting an arrow at a star) would attain wisdom through the study of magic, the "deliberate effort" as Yeats interpreted it. What had appeared as a fleeting image in Yeats's work had behind it an involved background in his occult studies.

If the 'Way of the Serpent' is the 'gyring, spring way, the 'Way of the Arrow' of the Kabbalistic Tree is the direct way of ascent by sacrifice, which goes up the center of the Tree. This direct path passes from *Malkuth* to *Keter* by way of the *Sephira Tiphereth*. All the dying gods, Dionysus, Attis, Balder and the Hanged Man of The Tarot, are under this potency. In the poem "The Phases of the Moon", Yeats traces the journey along the wheel of rebirth and names the direct way of release from the cycle.

The burning bow that once could shoot an arrow  
Out of the up and down, the wagon - wheel  
Of beauty's cruelty and wisdom's chatter.

This poem is the most overtly Kabbalistic of Yeats's work. The cyclic nature of life is represented by the renewing cycles of the moon, itself a Kabbalistic concept. Within

each cycle, the moon is divided into twenty eight phases, the stress on numerology again a Kabbalistic element.

Twenty-and-eight the phases of the moon,  
The full and the moon's dark and all the crescents,  
Twenty-and-eight, and yet but six-and-twenty  
The cradles that a man must needs be rocked in:  
For there's no human life at the full or the dark.  
(V. p. 373).

The significant numbers in Kabbalah are twenty two, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and four, the four worlds. This adds up to twenty six, a number Yeats considered significant because there could be no life in the first or last phase. Bloom, in an anxiety of influence, sees only Blake in Yeats's poem, and represses any occult overtones.

For Yeats, the Wheel must turn around again always, so phase 28 is the Fool, deformity of mind, a last warning before the darkness of a terrible god, Phase 1. This is the complex irony of the close of The Phases of the Moon. The laughter of Aherne, at the expense of Yeats, is a hollowness, for the finder of more images, the poet, never expects to find anything but endless cycle, the spinning of the Great Wheel by the Gnostic composite god of history, deity of a meaningless death (for who, in Yeats's systematics, can die?) and an absurd life (for who, in Yeats's kind of heroic vision, can live meaningfully?)<sup>49</sup>

In the Tarot pack the Tower is the Tower of Babel struck by the lightning of divine wrath, portending catastrophe and ruin. This emblem contains the zig-zag 'lightning flash' of the Kabbalistic Tree and is assigned "in Cabbalistic terms, to the divine anger whose descending lightning is, with the meander of the serpent and the direct

---

<sup>49</sup>Bloom p. 206.

upward path of the arrow, the third 'way' on the *Sephirotical* Tree of God, the way of the descent of divine power in contrast with the ascending spiral of the Serpent."<sup>50</sup>

Yeats considered all the three 'ways' of the tree: the 'gyring, spiring' way of the Serpent, by which the Fool makes his way, the straight path of the arrow' by which hero or saint may ascend from earth to heaven. The third way, the way of the lightning-flash, lays in ruin "man's constructed edifices of knowledge or of civilization, comes down from heaven to earth."<sup>51</sup> Yeats wrote openly of the three ways, having himself traveled each of them. He says:

We seek reality with the slow toil of our weakness and are smitten from the boundless and the unforeseen. Only when we are saint or sage, and renounce experience itself, can we, in imagery of the Christian Cabbala, leave the sudden lightening and the path of the serpent and become the bowman who aims his arrow at the center of the sun.<sup>52</sup>

The Way of the Serpent, 'those great ignorant leafy ways' of the tree, belong to nature. Yeats wrote "In so far as man is like all other men, the inflow finds him upon the winding path, and in so far as he is a saint or sage, upon

---

<sup>50</sup>Raine p. 51.

<sup>51</sup>Raine p. 53.

<sup>52</sup>F.A.C. Wilson, Yeats and Tradition (New York: MacMilan, 1958) p. 173.

the straight path." For himself, Yeats chose the path of Daimion, the lightning-flash of inspiration.

His descending power is neither the winding nor the straight line, but the zig-zag, illuminating the passive and active properties, the tree's two sorts of fruit: it is the sudden lightning, for all his acts of power are instantaneous, we perceive in a pulsation of the artery, and after slowly decline.<sup>53</sup>

From the tower of the lightning flash, we move to the tower of the imagination in Yeats's poem of that name. Here, Kabbalistic symbols are transfigured into monuments of imagination in anticipation of the impossibility of sublimity. As "imagination, ear and eye" cannot be content with abstract things, it seeks no resolution, but a vision which rejects "all self-pity and all imagination - destroying remorse."<sup>54</sup> In the final section of the poem, Yeats writes:

And I declare my faith  
I mock Plotinus' thought  
And cry in Plato's teeth,  
Death and life were not  
Till man made up the whole,  
Made lock, stock and barrel  
Out of his bitter soul,  
Aye, sun and moon and star, all.  
And further add to that  
That, being dead, we rise,  
Dream and so create  
Translunar Paradise.

(V. 415)

---

<sup>53</sup>Raine p. 54.

<sup>54</sup>Bloom, Yeats, p. 350.

As the poet goes down into darkness, the act of dying "suggests only another fictive covering woven by the poet himself."<sup>55</sup> It is the act of imagination that creates, "death and life were not/ Till man made up the whole." The primary sun and the antithetical moon are transformed through the human mind into Translunar Paradise. What is most striking is that this act of mind comes after death; we die, rise and dream. These are the dreams from Spiritus Mundi. In one of the rare acts of fusion in Yeats, the two sides of the dialectic join for the poet

O may the moon and sunlight seem  
One inextricable beam,  
For if I triumph I must make men mad.  
(V. 411)

The poet who is "mad" has the power to "desolidify the world, un-Locke it.", return it to a primitive and undifferentiated mental substance in which the lunar and solar are joined. The poem ends celebrating an imaginative conception of death.

F.A.C. Wilson contends that Yeats belonged to a tradition of "heterodox mysticism" and that a knowledge of the convention was necessary for a full understanding of his poetry. He therefore traces many symbols back to the Kabbalah. In The Death of Cuchulain, the bird is used as a symbol for the purified soul.<sup>56</sup> His use of imagery in "News

---

<sup>55</sup>Bloom, Yeats p. 352.

<sup>56</sup>F.A.C. Wilson, Yeats and Tradition p. 173.

for the Delphic Oracle" is more complex. There, the "golden codgers" are from the golden race of immortals and the gold - silver antithesis is from alchemy.

There all the golden codgers lay,  
There the silver dew,  
And the great water sighed for love,  
And the wind sighed too  
(V. 611)

The fusion of silver and gold is the knitting together of solar and lunar, a sign of perfection. The wind-water antithesis functions in a similar manner. "Yeats's 'great water' is the sea of life, now becalmed as it laps around the Isles of the Blessed; but water and wind are also Kabbalistic symbols for the masculine and feminine principles, which are here presented as being in perfect harmony, their opposition resolved."<sup>57</sup> Dew is "the manna that is prepared for the just in the world to come", and Wilson adds that in the period when Yeats was closely studying the Kabbalah, he described Fand in heaven as walking through "flaming dew".<sup>58</sup>

The poem "Byzantium" can be seen in part as a poem about the poets use of imagery and symbols. Both the bird and the tree in this poem are Kabbalistic symbols as Yeats himself acknowledges (I.G.E., p. 40)

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork  
More miracle than bird or handiwork  
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,

---

<sup>57</sup>Wilson, Yeats and Tradition p. 219.

<sup>58</sup>Wilson, quoting from The Secret Rose p. 77.

Can like the cocks of Hades crow,  
(V. 497)

In this poem of purgatorial process, the bird is the purified soul. Just as in Kabbalah, Yeats symbolizes life as a tree at whose apex the purified soul is placed and beneath which the bestial shapes of the rebel angels stalk through the forest of generation:

In the branches of the tree the birds  
lodge and build their nests; the souls  
or angels have their place: and beneath  
it those animals which have the power  
seek the shade. . .for in it every beast  
of the forest doth walk.<sup>59</sup>

Thus Yeats's bird, planted on the top bough of the tree "can like the cocks of Hades crow". Wilson points out that the cock of Hades is the bird of Hermes, the shepherd of the dead. This bird perched at the very top of the tree of Life is a recurring detail in the ritual of the Golden Dawn. The cock of Hermes was a rebirth symbol, so that the soul, even as it arrives at the "starlit golden bough" must accept the necessity of rebirth in the world.

The garden, well and shell are symbols from the Kabbalah which recur in Yeats's poetry. It should be noted that many of these symbols are present in other systems and other cultures. For Yeats, this only confirmed that there was a universality to symbols, coming as they did from the anima mundi. An example of this is a convention found in both Kabbalistic and Indian theology In "Solomon and the

---

<sup>59</sup>Wilson p. 38.

Witch", Yeats advances the doctrine that "man and woman, at the climax of 'perfect love', become 'images' of the original world parents, the divine father and the celestial matrix, the belief that divinity contains both male and female elements, and that the first creation took place by an act analogous to sexual union, as of course to be found in. . .both Kabbalistic and Indian theology."<sup>60</sup> This is the subject of both 'Ribh Denounces Patrick and 'Solomon and the Witch' Yeats himself wrote:

In the Tantric philosophy, a man and a woman, when in sexual union, transfigure each other's images into the masculine and feminine character of God . . . The man seeks the divine Self as present in the wife, the wife the divine Self as present in the man.<sup>61</sup>

In the poem 'Ribh denounces Patrick' Yeats rejects the Christian concept of the Trinity while accepting Kabbalistic conception. Ribh denounces as absurd: the all masculine Christian trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost

An abstract Greek absurdity has crazed the  
man-  
Recall that masculine Trinity. Man, woman,  
child  
(a daughter or a son),  
That's how all natural or supernatural  
stories run.  
(V. 556)

---

<sup>60</sup>Mathers, Kabbalah Unveiled p. 104 quoted in Wilson p. 238.

<sup>61</sup>Yeats, Essays and Introductions, (New York: MacMillan, 1961, p. 130.

This is the Kabbalistic trinity of father, mother and son. Harbans Bachchan, in his book W.B. Yeats and Occultism gives an excellent analysis of this poem, interspersing passages from Mathers The Kabbalah Unveiled with the appropriate lines of the poem. He quotes at length:

Among these Sephiroth, jointly and severally, we find the development of the person and attributes of God. Of these some are male and some female. Now for some reason or other..., the translators of the Bible have carefully crowded out of existence and smothered up every reference to the fact that the Deity is both masculine and feminine. They have translated a feminine plural by a masculine singular in the case of the word Elohim ... How could Adam be made in the image of the *Elohim*, male and female, unless the *Elohim* were male and female also? The word *Elohim* is a plural formed from the feminine singular ALH, *Eloh*, by adding IM to the word. But inasmuch as IM is usually the termination of the masculine plural and is here added to a feminine noun, it gives to the word Elohim the sense of a female potency united to a masculine idea, and thereby capable of producing an offspring. Now, we hear much of the Father and the Son, but we hear nothing of the Mother in the ordinary religions of the day. But in the *Qabalah* we find that the Ancient of Days conforms Himself simultaneously into Father and the Mother, and thus begets the Son.<sup>62</sup>

Mathers argues, and Yeats apparently agrees, that 'natural' offspring are only from the union of male and female, never from a double male. And if this holds true for natural begetting, it must follow for the 'supernatural'.

---

<sup>62</sup>Wilson, Yeats Iconography p. 165, quoting Mathers, The Kabbalah Unveiled pp. 21-22.

Natural and supernatural with the self-  
 same ring are wed.  
 As man, as beast, as an ephemeral fly  
 begets, Godhead begets Godhead,  
 For things below are copies, the Great  
 Smaragdine Tablet said.  
 (V. 556)

Bachchan quotes several other passages from Mathers and relates them to the above quotation from "Ribh in Ecstasy". These lines have much importance in our understanding of Yeats's work because they relate not only to his ideas on Godhead, but also to the concept of correspondence, which, as will be seen, has great bearing on his ideas about language and reality. Mathers writes:

Compare the precept in the Smaragdine tablet of Hermes Trismegistus: 'That which is below is like that which is above, for the performance of the miracles of the one substance.' This is the fundamental principle of all the ancient mystical doctrines, whether qabalistical, mythgological, alchemical, or magical; and in this formula all are contained. As is God, so is the universe; as is the creator of the Supernal Man, so is the created the inferior man; as Macrocosm, so Microcosm; as eternity, so life.<sup>63</sup>

Transformed by Yeats, this passage becomes:

Yet all must copy copies, all increase their kind;  
 When the conflagration of their passion sinks, damped  
 by the body or mind,  
 That juggling nature mounts her coil in their embraces  
 twined.  
 (V. 556).

---

<sup>63</sup>MacGregor Mathers, The Kabbalah Unveiled (London: Arcana, New York: Viking, 1991) pp. 21-22.

This process of production and reproduction is heavily indebted to Mathers. Again to quote: "There is reproduction as well in divinity and sanctity as among terrestrial living creatures and man; for by the reptile forms souls are symbolized."<sup>64</sup> This quotation may also be the source for the comparison of the coil, or reptile, which is the cause of 'multiplicity', with 'God that is but three.'":

The mirror-scaled serpent is multiplicity,  
But all that runs in couples, on earth, in flood or  
air,  
share God that is but three,  
And could beget or bear themselves could they but love  
as He.

(V. p. 556)

Ribh's concept of God as Three comes straight from the Kabbalah:

And these are ChKMH, Wisdom, Father;  
BINH, Understanding, Mother; and DOTH,  
Baath, Knowledge<sup>65</sup>

Mathers asserts that "'El Daoth is Tetragrammation' - the cabbalistic name of God, three in one, that could 'beget' and 'bear' and be born at the same time"<sup>66</sup> This confirms that for Yeats "Godhead in sexual spasm begot/Godhead." So important is this concept to Yeats's thinking that it appears in both "Ribh Denounces Patrick" and "Ribh in Ecstasy" in almost identical form. Yeats stresses the

---

<sup>64</sup>Mathers pp. 83-84.

<sup>65</sup>Mathers p. 52.

<sup>66</sup>Bachchan p. 167.

analogy between temporal love and divine intercourse, close but not perfectly parallel.

Human intercourse fails to be the intercourse of angels. Yeats borrows from Swedenborg:

There is no touching here, nor touching  
                                   there,  
 Nor straining joy, but whole is joined to  
                                   whole,  
 For the intercourse of angels is a light  
 Where for its moment both seem lost, consumed.  
 (V. 555)

Another of the differences between human and divine love is that there is no offspring in divine union. Offspring, the "noisy filthy thing" of the "Dolls" are a sign of multiplicity. Both works of art and children point out the failure of the creative and sexual process to achieve divine simplicity. Yeats, writing about the "Supernatural Songs" to Olivia Shakespeare, said that "We beget and bear because of the incompleteness of our love." (Letters 824)

When the sexual union is perfect, there would be no offspring, but rather, the begetting and bearing of oneself.

God's intercourse is eternally in process and eternally completed: God is and remains but three. In Cabbalistic and Platonic terms, the male and female perpetually combine to produce the androgyny. . .He and She have united to beget a third who consists of themselves. No further proliferation is necessary or even possible. There is no before or after, no alternation of desire and exhaustion. Nothing is needed to spur them on or save them from oblivion: God is eternally self-begotten...If each could truly find the

divine self through his or her  
intercourse with the other, each would  
find his or her Daimon's matching  
masculine or feminine counterpart to  
make up the permanent androgynous  
self.<sup>67</sup>

Harold Bloom contends that in A Vision, the Great Wheel can best be regarded as a system of personal and poetic influence. Here the antithetical quest is for beauty, then through beauty, not to truth, but to the "soul's" own sublimity. Bloom traces the last stages of this quest for Yeats along parallel courses, "through sexual love and the writing of poetry, until the poet learns the tragedy of sexual love, which is the perpetual and solipsistic virginity of the soul and the tragedy of a poetic career, which is that a poet is in the condition of other men - he can incarnate the truth, but he cannot know it."<sup>68</sup> It is in the area of sexual love and psychological virginity that Yeats is (rather unexpectedly) influenced by Kabbalah.

In a conversation with John Sparrow at Oxford in 1931, Yeats claimed that "the tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul."<sup>69</sup> Yeats made his statement to illustrate the difficulty of two becoming a unity. "Sexual intercourse is an attempt to solve the

---

<sup>67</sup>Bachchan p. 167.

<sup>68</sup>Bloom, Yeats p. 253.

<sup>69</sup>Yeats, qtd in Kathleen Cavanaugh, Love and Forgiveness in Yeats's Poetry (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1986) p. 139.

eternal antinomy, doomed to failure because it takes place only on one side of the gulf. The gulf is that which separates the one and the many, or if you like, God and man."<sup>70</sup>

In some of Yeats's poetry, however, there is an attempt to overcome this separation in hieros gamos, the sacred marriage between God and a human. In the poems of Crazy Jane, Leda, Sheba, "A Woman Young and Old" and "The Three Bushes", we find Kabbalistic imagery involving intercourse, strange night and God's love. The union of hieros gamos usually involves intercourse within temple precincts between a young woman and a surrogate for the god, either stranger or priest. The woman was then considered a psychological virgin as she could never be "owned by a man or consumed by love because she had experienced the virginity of her soul."<sup>71</sup>

In The Hebrew Goddess, Raphael Patai traces the development of this concept from ancient Near Eastern religions, Inanna in Sumer, Ishtar in Akkad, and Anath in Canaan. The cult of the virgin goddess was repressed in patriarchal, monotheistic Judaism, yet in the Zohar we find reference to *Matronit* or *Shekinah* who retained her virginity while being the lover of gods and men.

---

<sup>70</sup>Cavanaugh p. 139.

<sup>71</sup>Cavanugh p. 17.

Her virginity is spoken of in the Zohar in both figurative expressions and direct statements. The Biblical verse about the 'red heifer, faultless, wherein is no blemish, and upon which never came a yoke, is applied to her and explained that the forces of Evil could never overpower the Matronit.<sup>72</sup>

But in sharp contrast and direct contradiction to the virginal aspect of the *Shekhinah*, we find that she not only is the lover of the King who is her husband, but also with Satan, other gods, Biblical heroes and many men. "Yet, and this again is a feature she has in common with ancient Near Eastern love-goddesses, no blame is attached to her because of any of these sundry unions. A goddess behaves in accordance with her divine nature, and the human laws of sexual morality simply do not apply to her. This is the common attitude that finds expression in both the ancient Near Eastern and the Kabbalistic myths."<sup>73</sup>

Yeats placed great importance on the role of sexuality in his poetry and was deliberate in the ways it was made to function. In "The Chambermaids First Song" of "The Three Bushes", the lover falls asleep on the chambermaid's breast. Yeats connects this sleep with the failure to solve the antinomy, as he writes in A Vision (both the poem and the prose work were written the same year.) "The marriage bed is the symbol of the solved antinomy, and were more than a

---

<sup>72</sup>Raphael Patai, The Hebrew Goddess (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1990) p. 140.

<sup>73</sup>Patai p. 141.

symbol could a man there lose and keep his identity, but he falls asleep. That sleep is the sleep of death." (V. 52) Yet in a passage just before this, Yeats writes "Death cannot solve the antinomy: death and life are its expression, we come at birth into a multitude and after death would perish into the One did not a witch of Endor call us back." (p. 52)

Yeats uses sexuality as a metaphor for the creative process and designates sexual life as analogous to antithetical life. In "The Cones of Sexual Love" he writes "All antithetical life, for primary life has but a single movement, is seen as if it were a form of sexual life. It becomes vital through conflict and happy through harmonization, and without either is self-consumed." (Vision p 173). As early as in "Discoveries" (1906) Yeats equates the artist with the antithetical and contrasts him with the primary man (the saint.). For the antithetical man, sexuality is seen as conflict, as two competing gyres, yet each is necessary to the other, for without each they are self-consumed.

The poems "Solomon and Sheba" and "Solomon and the Witch" are Yeats's clearest exploration of sexual intercourse. The union of Solomon of Sheba is presented as an hieros gamos. Their intercourse took place in "the forbidden grove" as parallel to the sacred marriage which generally took place in the temple or its surrounding

garden. The moon is always invoked in the ancient marriage "since the rite was performed in honor of the moon, originally a male god and believed to be the real husband of all women."<sup>74</sup> Solomon invoked the "blessed moon [that] gave Sheba to her Solomon." The moon in later mythology was considered female and the association with the dark side of the moon may account for Yeats's calling Sheba a "witch".

In these two poems, Cavanaugh notes that Yeats draws his symbolism from the Kabbalistic versions of the hieros gamos:

Solomon is a fitting choice, not only for his status as magus or priest, but also because part of the Song of Songs was sung in the procession that preceded the Friday night re-enactment of sacred intercourse between God and his Shekinah. The apple and the apple blossoms (in addition to the double allusion to Genesis) also parallel the Cabbalistic ritual where the Shekinah is frequently called the field of holy apple trees, which are symbolically fertilized in the union between the King and his Sabbath Bride.<sup>75</sup>

Returning to Solomon and Sheba, Yeats has written that chance and choice exists in God "for if they did not he would have no freedom." (V. Plays p. 790) At the moment of Solomon and Sheba's union, a cockerel crew from an apple bough because he thought that:

---

<sup>74</sup>Cavanaugh p. 79.

<sup>75</sup>Cavanaugh p. 79.

Chance being at one with Choice at last,  
 All that the brigard apple brought  
 And this foul world were dead at last

Solomon explains that:

Yet the world ends when these two things,  
 Though several, are a single light,  
 When oil and wick are burned as one;  
 (V. 388)

This same joining through sexual energy is also  
 expressed in "The Tower" where Yeats wrote that:

... the tragedy began  
 With Homer that was a blind man,  
 And Helen has all living hearts betrayed.  
 O may the moon and sunlight seem  
 One inextricable beam,  
 For if I triumph I must make one mad.  
 (V. 411)

Helen has provided for "the sexual instinct of Europe,  
 its goal, its fixed type". (Explorations p. 451) The  
 various interacting causative chains between the desire that  
 the work of art arouses in its audience and the relationship  
 between the subject and the object of art are no more  
 extricable than Yeats's inextricable beam of moonlight and  
 sunlight. The mingled beam in this poem refers to the  
 interrelation of lunar imagination and daylight reality.  
 Solomon explains that "the world ends when these two things,  
 through several, are a single light". But the world  
 remains, the hieros gamos of Solomon and Sheba does not  
 achieve the world ending union. Sheba experience a  
 momentary experience of transcendence, but realizes that  
 they must "try again."

Because she has this insight, Cavanaugh feels that Sheba has achieved the status of the independent virgin, the self-possessed woman who can never be owned by another. Sheba has ensured the virginity of her soul by "congress with God." In her synthesis of the symbolism of the hieros gamos, Cavanaugh stresses that this virginity is a quality, not a physiological fact. Not all women attain this perpetual virginity. "Woman can only become one-in-herself when she is fully awakened to the possibilities slumbering in her own nature, has experienced what it is to be set afire with passion, carnal and spiritual, and has devoted her powers to the god of instinct, then when the nonpersonal, the divine energy has been aroused in her, she attains chastity of soul."<sup>76</sup>

In "A Prayer for my Daughter" Yeats states that

All hatred driven hence,  
the soul recovers radical innocence  
And learns at last that it is self-delighting,  
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,  
(V. 405)

Discussing these lines, Bloom feels that the description of radical innocence returns Yeats to his deepest and most sustained but also most despairing perception, the perpetual virginity of the soul. We come back to Yeats's Kabbalistic insight that "the tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul." According to Yeats, with

---

<sup>76</sup>Cavanaugh pp. 79-80.

the soul's radical innocence, we are condemned to know at last that:

I shall find the dark grow luminous, the  
void fruitful when I understand I have  
nothing, that the ringers in the tower  
have appointed for the hymen of the soul  
a passing bell.<sup>77</sup>

Perhaps the most striking instance of the "psychological virgin" in Yeats's work is Crazy Jane, the central character in a cycle of poems published in "Words for Music Perhaps". These are worth examining at length because the notions of sexuality in Yeats ultimately questions the romantic belief of Eros as a reconciling force and tests whether language, either as natural image or symbol, is capable of achieving this reconciliation.

Catherine Cavanaugh sees purgatorial images throughout the Crazy Jane sequence and equates the road that Jack and Jane travel with the purgatorial road. Yeats used the imagery of sexual intercourse as a parallel to artistic creation and has this equivalence coincide with a process of purgatory. He viewed the period between death and rebirth as a reliving of passionate moments, and because all strong passions contain "cruelty and deceit", they require expiation.

The fourth poem, "Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman" contain some of the most haunting and enigmatic lines of the

---

<sup>77</sup>Yeats. "Per Amica Silentia Lunae", Mythologies (New York: Collier, 1974) p. 332.

entire cycle. Indeed, Harold Bloom cites it as one of the most accomplished of Yeats's career and traces the movement of the poem from a lover's quarrel to love's endurance and then past Crazy Jane's skepticism of that endurance into the ghostly intensity of Yeats's vision of the sexuality that still prevails among the dead.

The second stanza is both the philosophical core of the poem and pivotal in its interpretation.

A lonely ghost the ghost is  
That to God shall come;  
I - love's skein upon the ground,  
My body in the tomb -  
Shall leap into the light lost  
In my mother's womb

The image of the light lost in the mother's womb is richly equivocal. It is not clear if the light is there, or is lost in the womb. The poem centers on the winding and unfolding movement which parallels the winding of the mummy sheets and the turning of the gyre. This is an image which recurs almost obsessively in several other of Yeats's poems, most notably in "Byzantium":

For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth  
May unwind the winding path.

And it appears again in "His Bargain," a poem published in 1930, contemporaneous with the Jane poems:

Who talks of Plato's spindle;  
What set it whirling round?  
Eternity may dwindle  
Time is unwound,  
.....  
However they may take it,  
Before the thread began  
I made, and may not break it

When the last thread has run,  
 A bargain with that hair  
 And all the windings there.  
 (V. 520)

What seems like a most enigmatic poem makes more sense against the Jane poems; indeed, the hair of the last lines prefigures the image of the winding, strangling hair of "Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers" where "her coal black hair is wound as though to strangle her." The poem "His Bargain" is further joined to the Jane poem by the concept behind Plato's spindle. Here Yeats is alluding to Plato's parable of the souls lined up before Lachsis in the interval between death and rebirth, a time analogous to the judgement day of the Jane poems. Plato presents a rational choice as opposed to Yeats's insistence on the sexual and physical dimensions of birth and rebirth.

The road that Jane must travel is the lonely ghost's road of sexual purgatory which, according to Bloom, is the "accepted price of extravagance." This is the central meaning of the fifth poem in the cycle "Crazy Jane on God." Here the sexual imagery is quite evident, her body the great road that men pass over, the battle in the narrow pass. The redemptive quality of Jane's transgression and journey is explicit in this poem. The resolution offered in the refrain "All things remain in God" suggests the high wisdom attained through experience, a wisdom of the poetic sublime.

The image of the house that lights up is the burning house of the play Purgatory. Here in the poem, as in the

later play, the image is connected with birth, sex and death. In both poem and play the conflagration enables the main character to become "both agent and issue of their own conception and thus bring the inextinguishable fire of the apocalypse, ending the darkness, cruelty, deceit, and the passion of the purgatorial process of expiation."<sup>78</sup>

The image of the purgatorial road of the last stanza of "Crazy Jane on God" is carried over to the first stanza of "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop". The house "that from childhood stood uninhabited ruinous" is now transformed by the Bishop into "a heavenly mansion." Yet Jane, in her more complete wisdom, prefers "some foul sty." In this poem she sings with an authentic extravagance of the "psychological virgin" as the house image is brought to its final particularity in the lines:

But Love has pitched his mansion in  
The place of excrement;  
For nothing can be sole or whole  
That has not been rent.

The mixing of high and low, body and soul that these lines imply are richly allusive. There are religious implication of sole to the soul, of the particular to the whole and this, in turn, is connected to the need for a rending in order to achieve wholeness. It also implies Jane's lowliness, the renting out of her body that enables her to achieve redemption.

---

<sup>78</sup>Cavanaugh p. 132.

Critics have pointed out the Blakian source for this last stanza. Bloom offers a full reading of the influence between Blake and Yeats.

The Man who respects Woman shall be despised  
 by Woman  
 And deadly cunning & mean abjectness  
 only, shall enjoy them  
 For I will make their places of joy & love,  
 excrementitious  
 Continually building, continually destroying  
 in Family feuds  
 While you are under the dominion of a jealous  
 Female  
 Unpermanent for ever because of love  
 & jealousy.  
 You shall want all the Minute  
 Particulars of Life.  
 (Jerusalem 88:37-43)

Bloom traces the movement in meaning, the changes in emphasis between Blake and Yeats. He also sees a Gnostic assumption in the place "of excrement" where Love has the audacity to pitch its mansion where it lacks priority. Yet Yeats does not imply a lack of priority, but rather projects the wonder and wholeness of the physical fact. The final poem of the Jane cycle in Words for Music Perhaps also has Blakian overtones, the theme of "sexual love founded on spiritual hate."

"Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers" finds Jane too old for the dance of sexual love. She watches as "that ivory image" dances with her "chosen youth" The dance is close to a dance of death, but whether one or the other or both die is left in doubt. The certainty of this poem is that sexual love is founded on spiritual hate, "They had all

that had their hate." Jane concludes the poem with the assertion that the passion to try the dance is more important than death.

In A Vision, Yeats states that "All antithetical life, for primary life has but a single movement, is seen as if it were a form of Sexual Life. It becomes vital through conflict and happy through harmonization, and without either is self consuming." (A Vision, p. 173) In the essay "Anima Hominus", Yeats makes explicit the relationship between sex, love and hate. "Then my imagination runs from Daimon to sweetheart, and I divine an analogy that evades the intellect.... It may be 'sexual love' which is found on 'spiritual hate', is an image of the warfare of man and daimon."<sup>79</sup>

Yeats attributes the idea that "sexual love is founded on spiritual hate" to Blake. In "Jerusalem", Blake writes

Seeing his sons assimilated with Luvah,  
bound in the bonds  
Of spiritual Hate, from which springs  
Sexual Love in iron chains.  
(54: 6-12)

Throughout his life, Yeats was involved in the struggle in which "the body is not bruised to pleasure soul." He was caught in the incompatibility of soul and body, of mind and matter. In "The Tower" and up to "Byzantium", Yeats generally commits himself to the primacy of the mind - mind free of the body. This position can be seen in "Sailing to

---

<sup>79</sup>Yeats, Mythologies p. 336

Byzantium" and is brought into question in "Among School Children" But it is in the poems of Words for Music Perhaps that Yeats reverses himself as he champions the body as the indispensable factor in human experience. These poems, through The Last Poems, namely "The Three Bushes" and its attendant song sequence, stress the importance of the physical and sexual. It is often tempting in view of these poems to see Yeats as propounding a unitary, monistic view of body and soul.

Love is all  
Unsatisfied  
That cannot take the whole  
Body and Soul  
(V. 510)

However Yeats never renounced this dualistic view of life, instead he rejects synthesis in favor of an oscillation between two poles. What we find in these poems is a redefining of the balance in favor of the physical.

In his essay "Images and Emblem in Yeats", Paul de Man claims that on the whole Yeats's approach to Eros is negative. He traces a tortuous history in Yeats's work of the reconciling symbol of "body" as the loosely Platonic notion that the divine is manifest in the incarnated world of Eros. Yet he couples this notion with the concept of death, usually the sacrificial death of the beloved. For de Man, this death symbolizes the tragedy of all becoming and it proceeds by the negation of what it overcomes. De Man

sees Yeats as using the rhetoric of Eros in a way that undermines precisely what one imagines he is saying:

It is not easy to disentangle a cluster of themes that seem to derive from a variety of not altogether compatible sources, all the more so since Yeats's thematic strategy is not unlike his ambivalent use of imagery: he uses the language of Neoplatonism, romanticism, and aetheticism in order to undermine the belief which these traditions have in common: the belief in the Eros as a reconciliatory force.<sup>80</sup>

While the Jane poem does use Eros as a reconciliatory force, de Man's criticism uncovers many ambiguities as we examine the association of sexuality and death. De Man contends that Yeats's approach to Eros is negative yet he concedes that the Crazy Jane poems and "The Three Bushes" are poems that make it difficult to conceive of Yeats as a poet who speaks evil of erotic love. However he dismisses these poems in one line and goes on to develop a reading of Yeats which aligns Eros with death. De Man writes,

his ambiguous treatment of Eros and the conception of physical and divine love as mutually exclusive are not Platonic; for all his sexual bravado, Yeats has a very Protestant and un-Greek sense of the degradation of matter and the body as his ferocious treatment of old age testifies. .... Yeats's Eros, if it can still be called that name, is aimed against the body, the senses, and the mind, and it demands that the quest for the divine begin with the denial of whatever natural attributes man may possess - or, to speak in terms of the

---

<sup>80</sup>De Man, "Images and Emblem in Yeats," The Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) p. 207.

intellectual traditions, that it begin outside of the Christian, Platonist and humanistic tradition. (p. 229)

This point is stressed because it is allied with another major question in Yeats's work, the synthesizing power of language. Yeats used the symbol as a means of achieving the synthesis between the phenomenal and noumenal, or the spiritual and the physical. Although taking us through a long detour, this question brings us back to the central topic, namely the view of language as developed in the Kabbalah and how it effects a poet working under its influence.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Yeats and the Symbol

In "The Symbolism of Poetry", Yeats said that symbolism is "the substance of style". (Essays p. 155) The symbol, however, is a term which has become theoretically overburdened. Is it a means by which mind and nature, subject and object are reconciled in a moment of perfect access to truth achieved through the imagination? Or is it merely a trope, conceived in language as an impersonal network of tropological drives and displacements?

The term symbol comes from the Greek meaning a pledge or token which was brought together. With the rise of Christianity, it became connected with the sacraments. In the Eucharist, the bread and wine was not merely a representation of Christ's body, but were actually present through them. Romantic criticism appropriated this process and secularized it. Just as with the Church Fathers, the symbol is not merely a rhetorical trope, but a mystery wherein the word actually embodies in its very nature the thing it stands for.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>For history of the symbol see Hazard Adams, Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1983).

The history of symbolism from its early religious beginnings take us through the Hermetic tradition. Hermes Trismegistus is an Hellenized form of the Egyptian god Toth. Dog-headed Thoth, associated with the moon and the ibis, was the inventor of speech, writing, the zodiac and alchemy. "Since magic depends upon words, he became magus-in-chief and, under Greek auspices, the Logos or creator of things."<sup>2</sup> So from its very beginnings the art of writing, symbolism and magic were inextricably bound together.

The works of Hermes, the Corpus Hermeticum, or Pimander, are largely Platonic with additions from Zoroaster. These basic writings, centered in Alexandria and at the Mareotic Lake, date from two hundred B.C. to two hundred A.D. According to these writings, the cosmos was a unity of interdependent parts, held together in a pattern of sympathies and antipathies. At the heart of it were two ideas which influenced Western thought for many centuries, the idea of a chain of being and the idea of correspondence or analogical connection. In the Asclepias, one of the Hermetic dialogues we find: "All things are connected one to another by mutual correspondences in a chain which extends from the lowest to the highest."<sup>3</sup> When in 1463 Marsilio Ficino translated the *Corpus*, the philosophy of

---

<sup>2</sup>William York Tindall, The Literary Symbol (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967) Historical background derived from this source.

<sup>3</sup>Tindall p. 51.

Hermeticism became widely known, influencing "alchemical divines" such as Agrippa and Boehme. However it was not until 1541, with the appearance of the Tabula Smaragdina or Emerald Tablet, another work attributed to Hermes, that the central tenet of the occult tradition, "As above, so below" gained acceptance.

Hermeticism held sway for a while, but finally was seen as an irrational method. The writings of Boehme and Swedenborg could not bring back the world of Hermes, but instead could offer Hermeticism as a literary method. When existence was thought to comprise a chain of being from upper to lower, the use of the symbol was appropriate to the nature of things. But as reason and science gained prominence, it undermined any belief in the upper half of the chain. The reemergence of the symbol during the Romantic movement can be understood as an attempt to recover the upper half of the broken chain.

The very core of Yeats's occultism was that message on Hermes' emerald tablet which announced that the physical world was only an analogue of the higher world:

Life is not in our control, for we enact  
in our daily lives a drama in which  
higher beings indifferently make use of  
our bodies for their sport. These  
higher beings have many names: the  
moods; the Sidhe; the gods of 'Rosa  
Alchemica' ... All men came under their  
control but it is the artist's business

to become the most sensitive vehicle for the transmission of ultimate truth.<sup>4</sup>

In the earliest stages of his poetic career, Yeats felt that the purpose of the symbol was to draw man upward toward the divine; in the last stages it clatters loudly back to earth. Up through the 1920's Yeats had a strong sense that the symbol and what it symbolizes are quite distinct. The poem "The Circus Animals Desertion" is an attempt to reconcile two opposing notions, that art is art because it is not life, and that for the poet, the only source of myth is his life, autobiography. Daniel Albright implies that the metaphor of the circus suggest that art has nothing to do with life.

Art is so evasive that it is almost nugatory; but the end of the poem indicates that a radical breakdown in the wall between life and art is occurring. The most remarkable aspect of the poem is its suggestion that the breakdown has been struggling to occur since the beginning of Yeats's career ... The breakdown however, is not only in the wall between life and art; it is a collapse of the analogical levels of reality as well.<sup>5</sup>

By the last poems the symbolic becomes swallowed in the physical; "the metaphoric tenor becomes lost in the metaphoric vehicle."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Albright, Myth against Myth: Study of Yeats's Imagination in Old Age (London: Oxford University Press, 1972) pp. 175-176.

<sup>5</sup>Albright p. 179.

<sup>6</sup>Albright p. 179.

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned  
 has run wild,  
 From collar to collar, from stilt to  
 stilt, from father to child.  
 All Metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all.  
 (V. 623)

If in 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' the problems were on the personal level, in "High Talk" the problem is historical. Although the poets stilts are shrinking, fifteen feet not twenty, it is not the failure of the artist's effort, but because the current turn of the historical gyre which renders the highest symbolic poetry impossible. To "walk on stilts" is futile in an age which permits no balance, no aesthetic equilibrium which enabled the earlier mode. "Metaphors decay rapidly because there is no coherent world-view in the twentieth century to give them substantiality ... And the poem ends in a wilderness of metaphors which have stiffened into meaningless because they lack referents - an impressive calculated incoherence."<sup>7</sup>

The way Yeats uses language is examined at length in the essay "Image and Emblem in Yeats" from The Rhetoric of Romanticism by Paul de Man.<sup>8</sup> De Man begins by placing Yeats's early works within the European tradition of symbolism, however he uses the term image, rather than symbol. De Man states that symbolic language is:

---

<sup>7</sup>Albright p. 180.

<sup>8</sup>Paul de Man "Image and Emblem in Yeats," The Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) p. 153 Numbered in the text hereafter.

able to cross the gap between subject and object without apparent effort, and to unite them within the single unit of the natural image. Behind such imagery stands the conception of fundamental unity of mind and matter, expanding from the particular oneness of the single image into universal unity. (153)

De Man finds that this kind of image carries with it the dangers of narcissistic self-contemplation. He traces the movement of the image, which started in perception, but then fused the object seen with the seeing consciousness before returning to the original perception. What was first perception becomes metaphor (or symbol, de Man does not distinguish) and finally, using the material properties of the object, becomes a self-reflective consciousness. At this point de Man notes the influences on Yeats of the English Romantics, namely Shelley, and Tennyson, Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites. "None of these influences, however, can account for the combination of imagery founded on correspondence between mind and matter, with conscious self-contemplation, a combination which characterizes French rather than English poetry of the second half of the nineteenth century." (155) De Man acknowledges that Yeats later discovers his affinities with the *symbolistes*, but finds that his work is closest to theirs in the poetry before 1885, a period when he had little knowledge of their work.

To explain this phenomenon, de Man looks to the "universal nature of the poetic consciousness" (a term

unusual for de Man) but finds this explanation insufficient. He then goes on to mention Yeats's involvement in the Dublin Theosophical Society which has its foundation in Neoplatonic and occult tradition. This tradition had great influence on late French romanticism and symbolism, but found few adherent among English poets of the same period. De Man feels that this current was strong enough to steer Yeats in the direction of the French movement with which he was unfamiliar, rather than to the English tradition of his boyhood. Yet de Man does not examine what it was in the occult tradition that steered the poet to symbolism; how it fit in with his knowledge of the world and affected his use of language. It seems to me that Yeats's occult studies provided the strongest influence on his use of symbols.

In "The Symbolism of Poetry", written in 1900, Yeats comes very close to Baudelaire in his analysis of his writing.

All sounds, all colours, all forms,  
 either because of their pre-ordained  
 energies or because of long association,  
 evoke indefinable and yet precise  
 emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call  
 down among us certain disembodied  
 powers, whose footsteps over our hearts  
 we call emotions.<sup>9</sup>

This is indeed related to Baudelaire as he writes that "... Swedenborg ... *nous avait déjà enseigné que...tout, forme, mouvement, nombre, couleur, parfum, dans le spirituel comme*

---

<sup>9</sup>Yeats, "Symbolism in Poetry," Essays and Introductions p. 156.

*dans le naturel, est significatif, réciproque, converse, correspondant.*"<sup>10</sup> De Man will note the similarities between the two poets, but rather than trace back to the common source, namely Swedenborg, and through him to wider study of the occult and Kabbalah, he will set up a split in the way the symbol functions, and write about the failure of the Romantic symbol. According to de Man, the works of most modern poets, namely Valery, Claudel, Rilke and Hofmannsthal, are "instances of the struggle to escape from the narcissistic imagery ingrained in symbolism, and the difficulty of their poetry reflects ... the failure of their attempt." (162)

Using the poem "The White Birds" (1892), de Man shows us Yeats's solution to the problems of the symbol (a problem of which Yeats himself was not aware and did not articulate). In the earliest poems, nouns function mimetically, referring to natural objects as they are perceived by the poet. However in "The White Birds" the same nouns no longer have any mimetic referent; the poem is in no way "about" actual stars or meteors. These images "are taken from the literary tradition and receive their meaning from traditional or personal, but not from natural associations - in the same way that the colors of a national banner are determined, not by analogy with nature, but by the decree of an independent will." (165) De Man states

---

<sup>10</sup>Baudelaire, quoted in de Man p. 156.

that Yeats, offering a term for this specific function of the noun sometimes uses the word "symbol", "profound symbol" until he finally settles on the term "emblem", as "having its meaning by a traditional and not by a natural right." This definition is offered in the essay Ideas of Good and Evil. However on examining this passage, it is surprising to note that barely any mention is made of the emblem. This essay is about the division between allegory and symbol with the poet clearly on the side of the symbol. De Man himself admits that "the articles from 'Ideas of Good and Evil' do not openly make the distinction between the two kinds of imagery; .... 'The Symbolism of Poetry' contain a claim of unity rooted in the experience of matter, but the essay as a whole states the superiority of emblems over images, without apparent awareness of the contradiction between the two attitudes," (170)

Yeats's is not precise in his use of the term *symbol*. Throughout his poetry and essays, it is used interchangeably with the terms emblem and with image. (The only time emblem is used specifically is in reference to painting where it refers to medieval illustrations). He breaks down symbols into two kinds, the emotional and the intellectual, the latter evoking "ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions." (168) Then Yeats speaks of a "continuous, indefinable symbolism which is the substance of all style." Yet these seem to be simply metaphors of emotional

intensity. Most critics, when writing of Yeats's use of symbols, will divide them into three categories (sometimes the first two are coalesced). First there is a traditional symbolism, accrued from culture and myth. Then there are archetypal symbols (fire, water, horses etc) which rely on human dreams and visions. Finally there is the personal symbol which develops from a private mythology and gains cohesion through repeated occurrence throughout a poet's work. An example of this would be the tower (or tree or dancer) in Yeats's poetry. Examples of all three kinds of symbols abound in Yeats's work, oftentimes one word can partake of the three functions at once.

Yeats offers the imperfect dictionary definition of symbol as "the sign or representation of any moral thing by the images or properties of natural things."<sup>11</sup> He quickly points out the similarity of that definition to "the things below are as the things above" of the Emerald Tablet of Hermes. Thus Yeats comes out on the side of the symbol, and does not reject the use of traditional symbolism. Indeed, F.A.C. Wilson has written two long books tracing Yeats's work within this tradition, Yeats's Iconography and Yeats and the Tradition. Nowhere in either work does Wilson note a split in the poet's work between image and emblem.

---

<sup>11</sup>Yeats, "Symbolism in Painting," Essays p. 146.

Part of the problem arises with de Man substituting emblem for allegory rather than accepting that for Yeats symbol is a broad term encompassing both the natural image and the occult emblem in one unbroken line. There is no division between the things above and the things below. De Man bases his entire enterprise on a split which is crucial to his critical aim rather than to Yeats' view of poetry. Had de Man used the term symbol in his writing rather than image, he would have put himself in the position of directly contradicting Yeats's own texts.

Even de Man himself confesses that Yeats does not openly make a distinction between the two kinds of imagery. (170) He admits that in "The Symbolism of Poetry", there is a claim of unity rooted in the experience of matter, yet he still asserts that without apparently being aware of it, Yeats posits the superiority of the emblem. However on reviewing the essay, one comes away feeling that de Man manipulates sentences out of context and overlooks Yeats's main thrust, namely, the superiority of symbolism over allegory. (This "manipulation" is not based on problems of rhetoric.).

Yeats believed that all images came out of Anima Mundi and thus have a universal appeal and traditional meaning. This "Great Memory", because it is itself composed of symbols or is the storehouse for them, does not "seem to be the ultimate reality, only the language pointing to essence

or the single mood from which all moods or gods emanate, descending by degrees into our minds."<sup>12</sup>

There is not an opposition between image and emblem, only a difference in the amount of accrued meaning certain words may have. De Man writes:

A certain image born as by chance of a natural perception, or a literary reminiscence, or an arbitrary act of imagination becomes meaningful when its universality is revealed, either because it recurs, like a Jungian archetype, in a variety of separate traditions, or because its association with a certain experience is sanctioned by a supernatural vision; in both cases, the 'meaning' of the emblem is determined by a divine decision and appears as the means of access to an understanding of the will of God. The Natural images of the earliest volume are transformed into emblems which claim to be the divine logos. (167)

This passage is accurate in its view of the image, only the part about "divine decision" and access to the will of god is problematic. The question of God is perplexing in Yeats's work. Certainly this is not the god of organized religion. For a poet so concerned with the occult and the spirit, there is a curious lack of urgency about God in his work.

Once de Man has cut off the image from any origin in nature he can say that images of this kind "differ radically from the Baudelarian symbol" which is "persistently obsessed with the texture of matter and of sensation". (168) Even

---

<sup>12</sup>Adams p. 149.

Mallarme's highly intellectualized images are still based on the "ontological priority of natural things." According to de Man, symbolists use emblems only as ornament and decoration, while their original inventions arise from the world of nature. De Man writes:

Yeats reverses this priority. It may seem a minor matter when Yeats calls natural images nothing but disguised, not yet understood emblems, but it represents a radical departure from one of the main tenets of the Western poetic tradition. This tradition conceives of the logos as incarnate and locates divine essence in the object, not in the unmediated word of God. Romanticism and symbolism, with their avowed or occult pantheistic overtones and nostalgias, belong to that tradition. (168).

Locating divine essence in the word of God is a departure from Western poetic and religious tradition but is at the center of Judaic and Kabbalist tradition. This difference between the two modes of thought is the central thesis of Susan Handelman's book The Slayers of Moses. It helps to explain the relevance of Kabbalistic thought to post-structuralist theory. De Man sees Yeats' early work as belonging to this tradition (through symbolism, not occult studies.) But he situates the tension in Yeats's work in the rejection of nature.

But when nature itself is considered a mere sign, or a mouthpiece without actual substance, then one has left the mainstream of the tradition and embarked 'on strange seas of thought.'.... When Western art made extensive use of emblems, during the Middle ages, it was

to illustrate a dogma which states the withdrawal of the divine from anything but matter; afterward, poets could only celebrate the divine in natural images of earth and light. The Renaissance poets of the sixteenth century try in vain to keep their emblems from turning into pantheistic, Hellenic images - ... and romanticism, experiencing divine absence in the form of an alienation from nature, makes the natural image into its foremost stylistic device. Yeats's return to the emblem would seem to represent a very radical reaction.  
(169)

De Man's use of the word emblem is close to his use of the term "allegory" in his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality". In this essay, he privileges allegory as being more "authentic" than symbol. Both symbol and natural images are rejected because they aim to bridge the antinomies of subject and object, mind and nature, and this joining is beyond the capability of language. Emblem and allegory are preferred because each designates a distance in relation to its origin and rejects an illusory identification with the nonself. Yet de Man structures his entire thesis on this opposition which is of his making and not Yeats's. Yeats does not frame a choice between a natural image and emblem because he does not cut off the symbolic as rooted in the natural.

In the "Symbolism of Poetry", Yeats wrote: "If I watch a rushy pool in the moonlight, my emotion at its beauty is mixed with memories of the man that I have seen ploughing by its margin, or the clovers I saw there a night ago; but if I

look at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient names and meanings, I move among divine people, and things that have shaken off our mortality." (161) This passage which calls divine voices into existence as it seeks to "rediscover the long-lost unity between man and the gods." (169) This is not about the emblem, but instead is about symbols. De Man finds that we are not dealing with an epiphany, Yeats substitutes "names and meanings" for the thing itself. In this passage, the search for being is gnostic, because being is not in the divinely created thing; but is in "language as the vessel of divine intellect." This last phrase is typical of the underlying belief of Kabbalah. As such it is treated at length by Susan Handelman, and will be discussed again in the sixth chapter of this study.

Yeats has written that:

... in the end the creative energy of men depends upon their believing that they have, within themselves, something immortal and imperishable, and that all else is but as an image in a looking glass <sup>13</sup>

If everything is but an image in a mirror, we must always look back upon ourselves. This solipsism, the issue of radical subjectivity is treated in the poem "A Dialogue of Self and Soul". (V. 447) More than any other of Yeats poems, it deals with antinomies of primary and antithetical,

---

<sup>13</sup>Yeats, Explorations (New York: MacMillan, 1962) p. 151.

soul and self, emblem and image. The central emblem of the poem is Soto's sword unspotted by time, "emblematical of love and war." Yet against it is set not an image, but another emblem, the tower, representing night. The oppositions in Yeats never break neatly, certainly not according to the pattern set up by de Man. The sword as emblem not only represents love and war, but is also emblem of "that solipsistic creative energy that reduces all else to an image in a looking glass."<sup>14</sup>

The antagonist for the soul is the obsessed imagination which must focus on "ancestral night" so that the purgatorial cycles of life and death might end. Countering this, the self finds emblems of the day in order to justify the "crime" of rebirth. Bloom finds that the poem's greatest irony is that the soul is an esoteric Yeatsian and the self a natural man. The soul worships a plentitude of supernatural influx to the point that he is struck deaf and blind. The self is also blind, but lives in the vision of self-confrontation and self-forgiveness. The self is content with the "frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch."

The opposition that this poem sets up are repeated in one of the last poems Yeats was to write, "The Circus Animals Desertion." Here again the poet questions the source of his poems, and finds that

---

<sup>14</sup>Bloom p. 374.

... and yet when all is said  
 It was the dream itself enchanted me  
 ... And not those things that  
 they were emblems of.  
 (V. 630)

The emblem is rejected, the natural image affirmed,

Those masterful images because complete  
 Grew in pure mind, but out of what  
 began?  
 ... the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

As the poet despaired for lack of theme, he recognized the role of the heart. It pained Yeats to recognize "that his concern was not with the content of the poetic vision, as Blake's was, but with his relation as poet to his own vision ... There are very few poets in English whose subject is the content of poetic vision ... It is a misfortune for a poet to mistake his natural kind. In 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', Yeats discovers his kind with considerable bitterness, but this is a bitterness that possesses aesthetic dignity."<sup>15</sup> It seems that this remark by Bloom sets the matter in its proper balance. The issue is not between image and emblem, because there is no distinct dividing line between the two. The poet sought for a theme, but now, a "broken man", he must be satisfied with his heart. "Yeats regrets all his ladders, Platonic and otherwise. To know where all the ladders start is not to prefer the start to the higher rungs."<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>Bloom p, 457.

<sup>16</sup>Bloom p. 459.

This reading of Yeats stands in stark contrast to de Man's. Whereas Bloom sees the solipsism as being the source of poetry, de Man finds only an impossibility. In "Michael Robartes and Dancer" the "body", being perfection, outdances thought, and would have all the attributes of Eros if it were real and had substance. Here de Man does not accept poetic inspiration "when the long looking glass is full". Instead he finds Narcissus discovering his own presence and reality as a consciousness of the self. There is a failure in the attempt at self possession as de Man finds

the impossibility for consciousness to become its own object and leave the natural state of the self undisturbed. Narcissus is the myth of the dialectic between object and consciousness, and the myth necessarily implies that the reflection be perceived as being that of a thing in nature..... The "body" is precisely what is not embodied or, to put it less paradoxically, the mirrored body itself has become pure emblem... In the same manner, an emblem appears to the eye or the ear as a pure sign, without having to become matter. The mirror asserts the priority of the shadow over the object, because the shadow, not the object, is the product of divine fire and light....[Yeats] isolates and contrasts two symmetrically balanced predicaments! That of the narcissistic poet of the image, who fails to unite with the body as natural object, and that of the poet of the emblem, who fails to unite with the body as a supernatural form of the divine. (222-223)

Bloom does not find the failure of the poet to unite with the body, indeed the self-reflected image becomes the source of the poetry. De Man, on the other hand, longs for

the priority of the emblem, but instead finds only the insufficiency of both image and emblem.

If we stop at this point and examine several of Yeats's poems which deal with the image perhaps we can see if indeed there is a tension and distinction in Yeats's use of image and emblem. Three poems which are concerned with this question are "A Dialogue of Self and Soul", "Byzantium" and "Her Vision in the Wood". Because each of these poems is well known, I will discuss them only in relation to the image.

The poem "Byzantium" is an amplification of what Yeats set down in "Sailing to Byzantium". In the earlier poem the poet is seeking his daimon at the center of Unity of Being in the city of Justinian, a city where the life of the spirit and the creation of art is united. While the poet may sing of whatever is begotten, born and dies, he can do so only out of nature, in artifice. This would seem to leave us in the world of the emblem, yet the images of the first stanza are of nature, the salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas. All that is of natural life (the natural images) neglect monuments of unaging intellect. The speaker of the poem, an aged man, cannot partake of dynamic life and so wishes to be joined to the artifice of eternity; but once he has become the golden bird, he will sing of generated life. The final stanza begins with the lines:

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing.

This line is often quoted by critics to prove Yeats's desire for the perfect, timeless and artificial. But the speaker of these lines, the poetic voice, is in nature; he is creating his song while still a part of the generated life. Although this poem does not employ the terminology de Man discusses, image and emblem, it does work along the opposition he suggests.

The situation becomes more complex when we get to the poem "Byzantium" written as an amplification of "Sailing to Byzantium." Bloom finds that in this poem Yeats sets up a close association between the realm of the antithetical or anti-naturalistic art, and of death or the life after death and before birth.<sup>17</sup> Yet this is a poem of images, based on the distinction between the unpurged images of day and the purged images of night. Never once is the word emblem used.

In the poem, the poet calls up one of the images, paraphrasing Dante's address to Virgil<sup>18</sup> of "shade more than man, more image than shade." Once an image has arisen, it calls forth others:

A mouth that has no moisture and no breath  
Breathless mouths may summon.

Helen Vender correlates this to a A Vision where images, like the mask, are the opposites of the poet who invokes them, being creations of his desire. "Will and mask exists

---

<sup>17</sup>Bloom p. 389.

<sup>18</sup>*Qual che tu sii, od ombra od nomo certo* (Inferno I)  
F.A.C. Wilson. Yeats Iconography p. 305.

always in the Heraclitean relationship, 'living each other's death, dying each other's life,' and therefore Yeats addresses his images in a conscious recollection of Coleridge."<sup>19</sup>

I hail the superhuman;  
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

The purged images of the night are associated with Byzantium where a starlit or moonlit dome distains all mere complexities. The starlit is of Phase I, the perfect objective and the moonlit is Phase 15, the perfect subjective. Both are independent of "the fury and mire of human veins." The golden nightingale, like the floating image of the second stanza, is refined almost beyond recognition. Just as the image was "Shade more than man, more image than a shade", the nightingale is "more miracle than bird or handiwork."

Yeats sets up his opposition between the complexities of blood and mire and the perfection of golden handiwork, but then in the fourth stanza, he shifts to describe the flames of Byzantium. These fires seem to be more than the refirner's fire of the Emperor's smithies as Vendler interprets it. As this is a purgatorial poem, describing the state between life and death, it deals with the fires of purgation. But the "flame that no faggot feeds" have Kabbalistic overtones as the ever burning flame of letters.

---

<sup>19</sup>Vendler, p. 113.

(There is also Kabbalistic reference to the Tree of Life with the bird on its star-lit bough.)

Yeats operates throughout this poem by a tactics of repetition as much lexical material is repeated throughout the five stanzas. There is no escape from this lexical universe; we are entrapped by mire, complexities, gongs, images, miracles, flames and blood. Each word is repeated until a tightly woven network is achieved. Man is defined in terms of image; a comparison is set up between image, shade and man, and miracle bird and handiwork. Yet in the final stanza it is the image that begets fresh images and these are images of life, of the gong-tormented sea. The world of the emblem, of the perfected artifact, has brought us back to the natural image, and each is balanced by the other. The two oppositions so carefully separated throughout the earlier stanza begin to interact. The unpurged images of day confront the purged images of night as the fire confronts a wave of mire and blood.

The sacred dolphins, bearing the blood-begotten spirits, inhabit the unpurged medium; the flood sweeps against the fire of the smithies and is broken by them, but returns with renewed force. The marbles of the pavement shatter the 'bitter furies of complexity' but no victory is final, as the violent clashes continue. Suddenly, in a dazzling syntactical victory, the resolution, so unforeseeable, is accomplished: the two kinds of images, purged and unpurged, are not hostile but symbiotic. The

unpurged images beget the purged images;  
blood begets spirits.<sup>20</sup>

The poem 'Byzantium' sets up an opposition of images and does not employ the term emblem. However it does point to the values that de Man set up for the emblem. One would fully agree with de Man if the symbols Yeats uses throughout the poem could clearly be defined as either an image or emblem. Most of the words operate as emblems; they are not generated from an observation from nature. However many words seem to operate on both levels at once; even when dealing with the dolphin, which is clearly an emblem in this poem, we cannot repress its naturalistic connotation.

While a poem such as "Byzantium" points to the emblem as its symbolic form, "Her Vision in the Wood" returns us to the world of blood and mire. As de Man points out, the unit of imagery in this work is accomplished by the reverse eucharist, turning blood into wine ("wine" being the emblem of the natural substance "blood" or, in other words, human blood being wine to the gods).<sup>21</sup> The poem is set in "the sacred wood", home of the gods, particularly Dionysus, at "wine-dark midnight", time of supernatural vision. In a Bacchante-like act of self immolation, the woman rages at the falling off of her sexuality. In what is an "absurd gesture", the old woman must destroy herself to make certain

---

<sup>20</sup>Vendler p. 117.

<sup>21</sup>de Man p. 232.

she is alive. Her blood produces a visionary stage but not necessarily her death as de Man claims.

It seemed a Quattrocento painter's throng,  
A thoughtless image of Mantegna's thought-  
Why should they think that are for ever young?  
(V. 357)

The vision becomes a work of art, thought becomes image, the act of the inner seeing eye. What has cost the old woman, in this case the aged artist, her life's blood is effortless for the young. In two lines the word thought is used three times before she joins the chorus and sings her malediction.

The man in the poem is presented as Adonis slain by the boar. In his notes to "The Valley of the Black Pig" Yeats traces the route whereby the pig became the last destroyer of the gods and the natural world. Again in the final stanza we have the turning of blood into wine, but now it is wine associated with the song, "drunken with singing as with wine." The end of the poem does not offer us the emblem, "no fabulous symbol", but the reality of the natural realm.

The poem

marks a decisive shift from the realm of the emblem back to that of the natural image. That this shift remains possible and becomes necessary indicates the defeat and the fallacy of the entire wisdom derived from the emblem. For if it is true that, for the creatures in the poem and, consequently, for the poet and his readers as well, the man has remained a physical, natural body and not grown into a supernatural emblem, then the entire ritual of love, together with the poetical and stylistic strategy that prompted this ritual, is shown to be an infinitely dangerous deceit.

Where we had been promised the eternal  
 peace and ecstasy of divine presence,  
 only the image of a beast torn wreck  
 remains. (237)

De Man states that Yeats's conversion to an emblematic conception of language was never complete. "In the last analysis he remains loyal to natural things, and to the poetic tradition of which he is heir, although he fully realizes that it can only lead him to a narcissistic paralysis." (170)

After about 1900, Yeats dismissed the emblematic style as allegory and returns to a more natural kind of image. The "redeeming power" of the emblem cannot really suffice for him and his real torment remains that of romantic alienation from nature. With the return to natural images, instead of inheriting emblems from the literary and esoteric tradition, the mature poetry arises from the particular perception in the poet's experience. The return to the natural image is coupled with the need to root the image in the "body" of this world. The body is exalted as a way to the divine.

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
 The body is not bruised to pleasure soul  
 ("Among School Children" V. 445)

God guard me from those thoughts men think  
 In the mind alone; He that sings a lasting song  
 Thinks in a marrow-bone;  
 ("A Prayer for Old Age", V. 553)

The sexualization of Yeats's poetry confirms a definitive return to the world of natural images. One is

tempted to see Yeats as the poet who went further than any in overcoming the separation between mind and matter, "the dissociation of sensibility that characterizes the romantic heritage." (de Man, p. 188) This is the thesis that Kermode argues in The Romantic Image as he presents "the reconciling image". There the image of the dancer is offered as the most perfect example of reconciliation because it contains the ideal attributes of body and imagination. Kermode, unlike de Man, sees Yeats's images always arising from the natural world as the very tension between body and imagination becomes the subject matter of the poem. (see "Among School Children").

This, however, is an interpretation de Man cannot accept. As he reaches the final question of this poem

O Body swaying to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?  
(V. 446)

he rejects the dancer as the image of reconciliation. "The ways of the image and emblem are distinct and opposed; the final line is not a rhetorical statement of reconciliation but an anguished question; it is our perilous fate not to know if the glimpse of unity which we perceive at times can be made more permanent by natural ways or by the asceticism of renunciation, by images or by emblem." (202) De Man takes us far from a reconciliation between image and reality as he reads the poem as the "cancellation of divine messages by the destructive power of nature."

De Man traces a self defeating logic to the visionary imagination as practiced by Yeats. Yeats offers a natural image which is in truth an emblem, and nature merely a sign or mouthpiece, without real substance. De Man states that this rhetoric may deceive the reader, but never the poet whose fundamental bewilderment must eventually emerge. He then asks:

Why is it then that the poetry ... is a poetry of terror and annihilation, apocalyptic rather than eschatological? It can only be because Yeats still experiences the Annunciation...the advent of the emblem ... as an intolerable destruction of nature ... Yeats ends ... in utter mockery... The failure of the emblem [to transform] ... the utterly worthless content of reality amounts to total nihilism. Yeats however has burned his bridges, and there is no return out of his exploded paradise of emblems back to a wasted earth. Those who look to Yeats for reassurance from the anxieties of our post-romantic predicament, or for relief from the paralysis of nihilism, will not find it in his conception of the emblem. He cautions instead against the danger of unwarranted hopeful solutions, and thus accomplishes all that the highest forms of language can for the moment accomplish.<sup>22</sup>

This *cento* of passages from de Man makes it very clear that the rejection the emblem must result in nihilism. By forcing the Yeatsean symbol into the natural image/emblem split, de Man has produced a paralysis. When de Man refers to the "highest forms of language", he implies irony,

---

<sup>22</sup>Daniel O'Hara p. 362.

metonymy and allegory. Yet allegory seems to be another name for emblem. When Yeats must use the natural image in place of the emblem, de Man feels that the poet has acknowledged a visionary aesthetics which subverts the very possibility of aesthetic vision <sup>23</sup>

With the Yeatsean symbol, language is forced to the limit of self-critical reflection on its own nature and genesis. According to Christopher Norris, "the rigorous unreliability of language is thus laid bare, ...where the Romantics typically overreach themselves - as in aiming for a pure unmediated vision, a perfect correspondence between idea, language and reality."<sup>24</sup> Thus for Norris, de Man's deconstruction of Romantic ideology is not the assumption of a higher dialectical ground from which to locate a correctable error. Rather, it is the recognition that any form of discourse once aware of its own paradoxical basis, cannot do more than self-critically rehearse the necessary delusions which produce and sustain it. Deconstruction engages the rhetoric of Romanticism on three issues, the first is the claim of metaphor and symbol which on closer reading often fall into chains of metonymic association. The second is the 'breakdown in the means of transcending the ontological divide, the dualism of subject and object,

---

<sup>23</sup>O'Hara p. 363.

<sup>24</sup>Christopher Norris, The Deconstructive Turn: Essays in the Rhetoric of Philosophy (London: Methuen Press, 1983) p. 136.

and of inward and outward experience, which the Romantic metaphor strove to overcome." The third issue is Romanticism's endeavor to "cover its own rhetorical tracks," passing off as symbol that which is in reality a species of allegory or in the case of Yeats, emblem, with its artificially contrived meaning.

The problem with this enterprise is that it is subject to its own aporias. When emblem is privileged over image, as it is in de Man's work, we are left with a rhetoric that in function seeks its own fusion between language and reality, mind and object. The emblem supports Yeats's ideal in its most esoteric endeavors of communion. It seeks to achieve that very notion which de Man claims is impossible. The emblem, as miraculous form of the symbol, can achieve the union of subject and object, and can achieve a transcendence. Certainly this cannot be attained by the natural image; but de Man leaves open the possibility for the emblem, even as he denies that the emblem can attain this fusion. It thus seems that de Man's own critical writing is subject to the occasions of "blindness and insight" that he finds in other critics. He is not able to find that "meta ground" from which he can have his writing free from the aporias and errors he finds in others.

In his book, The Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic, Hazard Adams attempts a thoroughgoing analysis of the symbol. He begins with the relatively simple schema of the

romantic distinction between allegory and symbol, stating from the outset the doubt that the literary symbol can be used to signify a type of trope. Rather than valorizing "symbol" at the expense of "allegory" as did Goethe and many subsequent romantics, or reversing the order, as did Walter Benjamin or de Man, Adams suggests that "symbol" can be used as a term that contains, but does not negate "allegory".

His discussion of the French symbolists brings us close to the concept of language found in the Kabbalah. He looks at the question of poem-nature-dictionary and finds that for Baudelaire, everything is a text to be "read". The ultimate texts seems to be a nonverbal mystical source. "Nature is a dictionary of a nonverbal text. This text the poet has to reconstruct with verbal signifiers." (120)

Mallarmé's famous phrase expands Baudelaire's insight. "In the end, you see, the world is made to end in a beautiful book." (120). In his essay "The Book: A Spiritual Instrument", Mallarmé elaborates on this statement, revealing that he does not limit the word "book" to mean Baudelaire's dictionary or even language. The word "'book' is meant literally. The book has come to represent for him not only itself but all the possibilities of language arranged in print and enfolded in the white blankness of its pages, the whole book in its physical existence, including those spaces, becoming a language". ( 120) This concept of the book is very close to Kabbalistic ideas of the Torah as

the ultimate book, already existent in an ideal realm. The book brings us to writing that is compatible to ideas of Edmond Jabès, and to Jacques Derrida's essay about him.

Language is characterized by "le Hasard", that "brute unpoetical quality of unorganized language". (121) Creation is a linguistic act and though Mallarmé raises the problem of poetry to the level of language, language, to paraphrase Adams, seems to become detached from everything else in an absolute idealism. Yet it is not detached without a struggle, a struggle which returns to the source of French Symbolist theory, to the doctrine of correspondences. Baudelaire developed this theory through Swedenborg, who elaborated on the Hermetic concept of the Smaragdine Tablet.

Baudelaire's correspondences were a repository of all metaphor. He accepted not only the occultist's "vertical" correspondence of "as above, so below", but also a "horizontal" correspondence which is akin to synaesthesia. As critics have analyzed the symbolist movement, they have emphasized the mystical and occult aspects of vertical correspondence. According to Adams, synaesthesia, a form of horizontal symbolism, represents "the harmony lacking in the dictionary or in the temple before the rite of imagination is performed, or it represents the harmony lacking in nature when it is still dark and terrifying. This harmony is a sign of the harmony above, and is sometimes declared to be an actual recreation of it.

Vertical and horizontal symbolism end in the same place, being two aspects of the symbolization of another world." (125).

Adams's analysis of Yeats's view of the symbol does not rest on the same tension of image/emblem as in de Man. Rather, he stresses the separation of spirit and matter. Adams contends that even under surface of his earliest thought, Yeats maintained a skepticism about the separation of spirit and matter, even as he builds his arguments on that very negation. Yeats, in contrast to Blake, saw the symbol as a sign of something unexperienceable through the eyes, but rather, achieved through trance. He sought for a "dualistic and occultist" mysticism which was very much the opposite of Blake's emphasis on the visionary here and now.

In his 1893 edition of William Blake (published with Edwin Ellis), Yeats reiterates Swedenborg's ideas of "continuous" and "discrete" degrees of correspondence. According to Yeats, discrete degrees belong to mystical thought and protect spirit from matter. He attempts to align Blake with the dualistic mystics, yet Blake does not reject the existence of the body, but rather the identification of the body with Lockean matter. Yeats claims Blake as the founder of symbolism in modern times and declares Blake's distinction between allegory and vision to be really the same as that between allegory and symbolism.

In his early essay, when Yeats writes of symbolism, he stresses invisibility and essence or occult correspondence. Thus when Blake is defined as a "symbolist who had to invent his symbols", it is a contradiction in terms. If symbols had their origins in an occult source, what role did personal invention have? Yeats's way out was to claim that Blake did not invent, but had to rediscover a lost system of correspondence.

Adams sees Yeats's career as an effort to overcome the subject-object split with its inevitable negation of the subject. Locke's distinction between the primary and secondary qualities of experience led to the bifurcation of experience into object and subject Yeats came to see this as a form of Blakean negation.

Yeats's contrary, substituted for Locke's objective negation of the subject, is an antithetical opposition to the subject-object distinction of self ... 'antithetical' is sometimes called 'subjective' by Yeats, and this certainly reflects a tendency to slip back into the negative opposition the symbolists struggled with. But Yeats's subjective is a bodily form, and antithetical is sensuous spirit.

(292)

Yeats had strong tendencies toward a Platonism which was tempered by a modern materialist's desire for knowledge of things-in-themselves. Yet he was neither a Platonist nor a Kantian. Yeats wrote: "If Kant is right, the antinomy is in our method of reasoning; but if the Platonists are right, may one not think that the antinomy is itself

'constitutive', and that the consciousness by which we know ourselves and exist is itself irrational".<sup>25</sup> Yeats raises the irrational to the principle of reality. "In Kant the antinomies are a product of the merely regulative ideas of the reason, driven to impossible contradiction. For Yeats the contradiction itself is truth, as contrariety itself is a form of truth." (319)

For Yeats, the symbolic is concerned with the antinomial in "the very same way that any metaphor is an identity creatively in opposition to difference/indifference". (321) His resolution of this antinomy is to hold that contrariety is the encompassing pattern of experience itself. In later years when Yeats looked to revelation through mediation under the influence of Kabbalists, he was disappointed (see A Vision p. 301). Yet he realized that his creation, a product of his mediation, was true in its symbolic form (see "All Souls' Night", epilogue to A Vision). In his essay "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image" de Man attacks the symbol in an effort to banish all metaphor, all similitude in an effort to become literal.<sup>26</sup> In its effort to bridge the gap between word and thing, the symbol labors to generate a

---

<sup>25</sup>W.B. Yeats, W.B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore 1900-1937. ed. Ursula Bridge, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953) p. 131.

<sup>26</sup>Paul de Man, Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism ed. Harold Bloom. (New York: Norton, 1970).

"monistic situation", a bond between sign and object, whereas the "authentic" condition is an arbitrary sign which would affirm a distance between subject and object. The romantic image is generated by a nostalgia that enforces the "intrinsic ontological primacy of the natural object." (70). This is achieved by a "deliberate forgetting of the transcendental nature of the source" of the natural object and results in an act of "bad faith". This nostalgic mode of existence of the image is "itself a sign of divine absence" and the use of the romantic symbol is an admission of this absence. Frank Lentricchia sees in de Man's position on the romantic image a Sartrean form of humanism. This humanism places

at the beginnings a primal divorce of consciousness and nature, and sees as naive and sentimental any urge toward reconciliation, and congratulates itself for its courageous discovery that language, since it cannot recapture an integrated and unmediated origin, may therefore properly fulfill its beginning by passionately realizing its purely human project with no regrets, no looking back, and no self - doubts.<sup>27</sup>

Lentricchia situates de Man's theory after the fall of logos from ontological presence, giving his humanism force only "within a context in which the Edenic view of discourse

---

<sup>27</sup> Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) p. 289.

is posited as a forbidden ideal which is very nearly impossible to resist."<sup>28</sup>

When de Man writes of imprisonment in language, he attacks the concept of the romantic symbol. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality" he writes of the "mystification" that led the romantics into irreconcilable contradictions. He denies that the poetic consciousness is in any way privileged, that it can avoid the confusion and untruth of everyday language. The only language that could escape this is "unmediated expression", a philosophical impossibility.

Adams notes that de Man's judgement stems from the attitude that language is a copier or signifier of a preceding reality. But this is impossible. For de Man, language is fallen; "it stands between man and a hidden truth that it can never express... Language is a system of signs radically cut off from meaning." (36). Expression fails to coincide with what has to be expressed. De Man writes:

It is the distinct privilege of language to hide meaning behind a misleading sign, as when we hide rage or hatred behind a smile. But it is the distinctive curse of all language as soon as any kind of interpersonal relation is involved, that it is forced to act this way.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup>Lentricchia p. 289.

<sup>29</sup>Paul de Man Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963) p. 11.

For de Man communication of a previous truth or reality is paramount, but it is this which he finds impossible. Yet Yeats and the Kabbalists contend that this is precisely what language can do. Meaning is being made; it is not a fallen copy of anterior truth, a deviation from a pre-existent meaning. For de Man, the non-coincidence of sign and meaning is the defining aspect of literary language. "It is the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression."<sup>30</sup>

Thus de Man valorizes allegory, wherein the displacement is obvious, and rejects the symbol which does not distinguish between experience and the representation of the experience. For de Man the symbol is the "representation of a previously existent meaning, rather than the other way around, where the symbol is a forming."<sup>31</sup> In allegory, there is a direct relation of sign to meaning, whereas in the symbol there is indefiniteness. According to de Man, indefiniteness is a mystification and is rejected as weak thought. De Man treats the symbol as an inadequate trope which can never deliver on its promise of the "miraculous". He connects the "failure" of romanticism with the romantic concept of the symbol, "which would be a vehicle supposedly to achieve the ultimate - a form of language transcending language." (A 360) In "The Rhetoric

---

<sup>30</sup>de Man p. 17.

<sup>31</sup>Adams p. 358.

of Temporality" de Man sees the allegorical sign as referring temporally to the previous sign with which it can never coincide. This previous sign is pure anteriority. Thus in this temporal system of allegorical signs there is only and always a regress back through an infinite series of escaping meanings. The present can never capture the ultimate meaning and the symbol can never achieve incarnation.

For de Man, language hides behind a "misleading sign" which turns out to be the trope. Figurality provides the deceit which occupies the role of original sin for him. Adams contends that de Man's model of language upon which discourse is based is symbolic logic. Thus when no discourse measures up to this model which he accepts without reservation, he blames figures, particular metaphor, which frustrates his ideal of a pure philosophical discourse. Metaphor is guilty of glossing over difference and so figurality, which de Man equates with rhetoric, is responsible for what he terms "epistemological damage".<sup>32</sup>

The ideal form of language is then a pure and undifferentiated form of symbolic logic; our "fallen" linguistic state is one of "difference in a semiotic field". It is metaphor which deludes us into this false sense of indifference. De Man poses a Hobson choice for the language

---

<sup>32</sup>See de Man "The Epistemology of Metaphor," On Metaphor, ed. Sheldon Sacks, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978).

of philosophy. Either language may retain figurality and give up its claims to rigor or else it must cleanse itself of figurality. But de Man knows "that philosophy can only be rhetoric, subject to deconstruction in terms of the deceit it is continually performing with respect to a positivistic notion of truth, which requires a pure 'unfigurality'." (361)

We are offered logical positivism as a norm yet we are forewarned that no discourse can reach this ideal. The norm itself is never questioned and the ideal is not a "fictive ontological limit." Adams finds that de Man's critique is radically antimythical, locating truth at that limit, yet never finding it. The only myth he deals in is the myth of a fallen figurality. This fall is the fixed condition into which man is born.

Man is in language, language is not in man. There is no contrary: Man is in a fallen state where in practice difference negates indifference, the unattainable ideal by which everything must be judged. The one notion of language triumphs over and remains aloof from its fallen deceitfulness, as aloof as the Gnostic deity, signifiable, but only ironically so, by a 'religious' form of romantic allegory. (361)

It is irony which is the only "authentic" voice of romantic literature as it emphasizes the inability to teach an ultimate meaning and questions the presumptuousness of the "miraculously" symbolizing imagination. Irony acknowledges the "fictiveness of fictions." Under the

ironic attitude , poetry would have no contact with the world. Thus, for de Man the post-Romantic Symbolist assumption that art can bring about the reconciliation of mind and nature through a synthesis achieved by the power of creative imagining is denied. Language, analyzed through grammar and rhetoric, cannot present the sublime.

And yet Yeats is a poet of the sublime, perhaps the last great poet to consistently achieve that mode. He consciously used the symbol and metaphor to invoke the sublime. Even for the critic wary of the rhetorical basis to achieve this end, there is no denying his achievement. Modernist that he was, Yeats rarely used the term "sublime" even though his apocalyptic lyrics of tragic joy descend from the romantic sublime. His primary aesthetic categories - ecstasy, terror, joy, *sprezzatura*, derive from the long line of writers beginning with Longinus. When Yeats writes of the poet's "ecstasy" as "arising from the contemplation of things vaster than the individual and imperfectly seen"<sup>33</sup> he places himself in the tradition of the sublime.

Theories of the sublime can help us understand the structure and genealogy of Yeats's poems which affirm death and destruction. We can trace their affective movement from terror to joy with their characteristically violent and fragmentary images. The sublime is close to what Yeats calls "tragic joy", for the sublime transforms the painful

---

<sup>33</sup>Yeats, Autobiography p. 319.

spectacle of destruction and death into the joyful affirmation of human freedom. Using early poems like 'The Valley of the Black Pig', middle poems like "The Second Coming" and the late poems like "Lapis Lazuli" and "The Gypes", we can trace Yeats's favorite sublime modes - the curse, the prophecy and the apocalypse.

Yeats's term "tragic joy" captures both the emotive structure and the ambivalence of the sublime as it converts defeat and terror to freedom and joy.<sup>34</sup> According to Jahan Ramanzani, Yeats's poems aim at courage in the face of Blakean nature, where the universe of death traps the human mind. Yeats insisted that "only the greatest obstacles that can be contemplated without despair can rouse the will to full intensity."<sup>35</sup> Yeats mythologizes this obstacle, calling it, in his system, "the Body of Fate", and in his poetry it takes the form of reality, and finally, of death itself.

According to Ramazani, death precipitates the emotional turning called the sublime. Although writers from Longinus to Heidegger and Bloom have pointed to nothingness, semiotic collapse, defeat by a precursor and annihilation of the ego as initiating the sublime, at the basis of most theories, we find death as the organizing trope. Both Neil Hertz and

---

<sup>34</sup>R. Jahan Ramanzani, "Yeats: Tragic Joy and the Sublime" PLMA, Vol. 104, 3, March 1989, p. 163.

<sup>35</sup>Yeats, Autobiography p. 132.

Thomas Weiskel offer psychoanalytic accounts of the sublime as a confrontation with death. But only in Yeats do we find that the sublime is a "staged" confrontation as his heroes undergo a "sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death."<sup>36</sup>

The psychic energy released by the encounter with the sublime often takes the form of laughter as terror is transmuted into joy. Hamlet and Lear do not weep, but instead laugh with "gaiety transfiguring all that dread" ("Lapis Lazuli", V. 565). As they gaze on the tragic scene, the eyes of the Chinaman are gay. Yeats takes us beyond the casting of a cold eye on life and death to a poetic sublimity.

Both the mystic and the poet of the sublime share Yeats's conviction that "the borders of our mind are ever shifting. For the mystic the energy flows in one direction from the other to the self, whereas the sublime poet reverses that process, believing that the self has produced what it has heard." (Essay, p. 28)

The sublime breaks through the decorum and equilibrium of the beautiful. As Ramazani notes it also troubles the ear in Yeats's work. The rhythmic and phonemic patterns and rhetorical figures in his work produce the impression of formlessness breaking through, or, as Yeats says, of Transfiguration occurring within an aesthetic of Incarnation

---

<sup>36</sup>Yeats, Essays p. 522-523.

(Letters, p. 402). While Yeats rarely used the term sublime, he does use Castiglione's *sprezzatura*, an early term for the notion of the nonrational in art that anticipates the concept of the sublime.

Yeats's later lyrics carry this "formlessness" to the reckless extreme of the curse. Ramanzani notes that by exaggerating certain features of the sublime, the curse offers insight into the psychic and rhetorical sublime in Yeats. Some of his poems seem to will the destruction they contemplate (see "The Gyres" and "Under Ben Bulben"). All his poems of tragic joy involve the curse which reveals the destructive urge or death drive involved in his poetics. The speakers in these poems are seized by a sudden urge to curse as one possessed by a language beyond themselves. Lear, Oedipus and Red Hanrahan<sup>37</sup> curse to regain their masculine potency and aggressivity.

The curse is related to another modality of the sublime, the prophecy. This speech act announces and transforms the shape of reality as it unites the word with divine authority. Both "Lapis Lazuli" and "The Gyres" prophetically envision a violent world, but as Ramazani notes, the sublime converts the passive victim into heroic orator. In both these poems, there is the attempt to alter the prophetic relation to vision, changing elegiac submission into an act of active rejoicing.

---

<sup>37</sup>See "Red Hanrahan's Curse," Mythologies p. 240.

Yeats invokes the violence inherent in the sublime in  
 "Under Ben Bulben"

You that Mitchel's prayer have heard,  
 'Send war in our time, O Lord!'  
 Know that when all words are said  
 And a man is fighting mad,  
 Something drops from eyes long blind,  
 He completes his partial mind,  
 For an instant stands at ease,  
 Laughs aloud, his heart at peace.

Here the sublime is inextricably united with the death drive; there must be destruction in the search for apocalyptic wholeness. Derrida has suggested that the apocalyptic is "a transcendental condition of all discourse, of all experience itself, of every mark or every trace. And the genre of writing called 'apocalyptic' in the strict sense, then, would be only an example, an exemplary revelation of this transcendental structure. In that case, if the apocalypse reveals, it is first the revelation of the apocalypse, the self-presentation of the apocalyptic structure of language, of writing, of the experience of presence."<sup>38</sup> This brings us back to Yeats's poem where the mind is always partial because it is never complete until death, just as writing is always half-written because it can never absorb what it signifies. Yeats's apocalyptic sublime aggressively attempts to overcome the structure of deferral and desire inherent in every scene of writing and act of

---

<sup>38</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy," trans. John P. Leavy, *Semia*, 23, (1982), p. 87.

mind.<sup>39</sup> And it shares with Kabbalah an awareness of the role that writing plays in the sublime.

---

<sup>39</sup>See Ramanzani p. 173.

## CHAPTER 4.

## The Sublime

Questions concerning Kabbalah and poetry can be linked through the sublime. If we examine the Kabbalah, both in its subject matter and as a language theory, we are engaged with questions of the sublime. In Kabbalah, language transcends nature, over-reaches itself and enables a knowledge of or a union with God. We can take this as an extreme example of the sublime.

The term "sublime" is not truly Greek, but is contaminated by Latinity and Judaic thought. The term ὑψος comes from the first diaspora and is the term for God, as the most high. But as Lacoue-Labarthe notes, it comes to us through rhetoric; "it does not attain to philosophy, after its resurgence in modern times except by the path of the French poetics and English aesthetics."<sup>1</sup>

The word "sublime" is used in a way that implies a certain clarity of definition, but there are many aspects of the sublime. There is the literary sublime, the Romantic sublime, the Kantian sublime which is further divided into the mathematical and the dynamic sublime and so on. In

---

<sup>1</sup>Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Sublime Truth," Of the Sublime: Presence in Question Ed. Jeffery Librett. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) p. 84.

literary terms, the sublime is not a genre, and its theorists are happy to emphasize its fluid movement across generic boundaries. Nevertheless, the sublime has an affective structure and a rhetoric, so it might be thought of as an extended mode related to other modes. The question then becomes the relationship these various terms have to one another.

This chapter will be an attempt to work through the sublime in three aspects, the religious sublime of the Kabbalah, the philosophical sublime of Kant and the poetic sublime. We will examine whether this one term can subsume this concept in three modes of discourse. This in turn leads to a questioning of boundaries. If language operates in the same manner in each mode of discourse, we are testing the justification of boundaries.

Until the eighteenth century, the sublime had been a matter of literary criticism, but beginning with Kant, it came to be regarded as a philosophic concept, a category of aesthetic judgement. It is thus an essential issues within philosophy.

The sublime is that which marginalizes the literary text, takes it out of what it literally says and gives it another dimension, renders it more than 'literary.' The sublime opens the text to what is other than itself, to what only philosophy can name. Philosophy makes sense of the literary dimension of the literary text, but what it thematizes is not literary. What philosophy finds in the text is the sublime, which is a philosophical

concept and hence already outside the domain of the literary text qua literary concern. Thus an irreconcilable difference arises: the literary seeks to articulate and express the sublime; philosophy names and appropriates the sublime for itself - in effect, philosophy removes the sublime from its proper place and make use of it for its own purposes.<sup>2</sup>

Criticism approaches the literary text in its detail and particularity, while philosophy takes up the text in its generality, as a means to something else. The textual sublime questions the relations between philosophy and criticism. It operates in the space of difference, establishing the identity of critical texts and those philosophical issues that are not identical with the text. Silverman finds the textual sublime as that within the text which protects itself from attempts at closing it off, clarifying its meanings, or reifying it. Thus according to this definition, it is related to deconstruction as it is a marking of alternatives within the text itself. This will bring us to an account of the sublime as a pragmatic and rhetorical feature rather than as a dimension of transcendental philosophy. According to Silverman, the "textual sublime is the concretization and thematization of deconstructive practice. The textual sublime is the articulation of deconstruction supplementing itself with

---

<sup>2</sup>Hugh J. Silverman, The Textual Sublime: Deconstruction and its Differences (Albany: SUNY Press 1990) p. xii.

both philosophy and criticism."<sup>3</sup> But before we can examine what such a reading would imply, we can turn to Longinus for the classical interpretation of the sublime.

"The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human."<sup>4</sup> This seems like a simple definition, yet what lies beyond the human, God, nature or *daemon*, is certainly far from clear, and a definition of the "human" is also open to question. Longinus confines the human to the domain of art or *techne* and the sublime is precisely that which eludes art in our experience of art. It is a "spiritual principle", "in discourse", [he says,] we demand that which transcends the human"<sup>5</sup> (36.3) Schiller allies the beautiful with the human being; the sublime, however, he joins to pure *daemon* in man or to pure spirit. Thus as Thomas Weiskel points out, the humanistic sublime is an oxymoron. He also goes on to note that in literary history, the concept of the sublime revives as God withdraws from a participation in the experience of men. Interestingly, this is far from the case with Kabbalah. The more difficult the historical situation

---

<sup>3</sup>Silverman p. xi.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Weiskel, The Romantic Sublime (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Longinus, Peri Hypsos trans. W. Rhys Robert, The Great Critics ed. J. Smith and E. Parks, (New York: Norton 1967) p. 102.

resulting in a human longing for succor from God, the more laden the text becomes with words of the sublime.

The sublime is therefore often infused with nostalgia and uncertainty in the secular mind. Weiskel notes that the Romantic sublime can be seen as an attempt to recreate transcendence precisely when the traditional means of sublimation - spiritual, ontological and psychological - were no longer understood. The quest for the Romantic sublime was the "most spectacular response of the literary mind to the dualisms which cut across post Renaissance thinking and made so much authoritative doctrine suddenly in need of interpretation."<sup>6</sup> As a hermeneutic, the Romantic sublime provided a successful way to read, preserving the authority of the past within the structures of dualism. It offered a language for the urgent experiences of anxiety and unrest which were in need of legitimation and expression. "In largest perspective, it was a major analogy, a massive transposition of transcendence into a naturalistic key; in short, a stunning metaphor."<sup>7</sup>

We cannot approach the sublime through literal language. As early as Longinus, we are caught in metaphor, *hypsos*, or height as the trope of reading. We are uplifted and our soul soars "as though we had created" what we had heard (7.2). "The affective aggrandizement of the sublime

---

<sup>6</sup>Weiskel p. 4.

<sup>7</sup>Weiskel p. 4.

moment supports an illusion, a metaphorical union with the creator which suppresses the inferiority of our status as listeners ...".<sup>8</sup> The literary sublime thus partakes of the same movement as the Kabbalistic sublime which aims at a *unio mystico*, a movement out of the self to something beyond. In both instances, the sublime is reached through a trope, whether symbol or metaphor.

For Longinus, Homer was the sublime whom all latecomers rival in a mimetic struggle. The sublime measures our failure. "If it is a sacred relation to the divine that constitutes the sublime, then our failure will be equivalent to our distance from the sacred, or to our unbelief, our incapacity to navigate through the difference between immortal and mortal."<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, the sublime can be seen as an aesthetic category motivated by nostalgia. Yet by and large, the theme in the examples cited by Longinus is the question of death. The "mortal condition" and the moment of death are usually in the balance in sublime passages in a text. It is the speech that confronts death either as "benedictions or maledictions that fall back on the living as they echo off the walls of tombs, hyperboles of the improvised epitaph, defiances, supplication... The sublime is the ephemeral immortality of

---

<sup>8</sup>Weiskel p. 4.

<sup>9</sup>Michel Deguy, "The Discourse of Exaltation," Of the Sublime: Presence in Question ed. Jeffrey Librett, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) p. 7.

the point gained, adverse speech snatched from death where the totality of becoming-and-passing away concentrates itself."<sup>10</sup> Deguy says that sublimity belongs to the mortal curve, surmounts and overhangs it. The words of the sublime are the words of the end, of death, the testamentary. They are at once failure and promise, abandonment and salvation, but a salvation always too late and always for others.

In Longinus, *hypsos* is regarded as a quality immanent in great writing which refers to eternity and it transcends distinctions of culture, language or technique. When critics following Boileau rediscovered Longinus, they were drawn by the discovery of a heightened consciousness which was strangely allied to anxiety. This feeling was most often evoked by the spectacular or wild in nature. As an aesthetics of the sublime developed, most writers, including Kant, held the view that the sublime in art must always be governed by the conditions of its agreement with nature.

In one sense, the natural sublime was a response to the "darker implications of Locke's psychology and what the psychology represented of changes in perception. If the only route to the intellect lies through the senses, belief in a supernatural Being finds itself insecure. God had to be saved, even if He had to marry the world of appearances. And so, in the natural sublime, He did."<sup>11</sup> It is not

---

<sup>10</sup>Deguy p. 9.

<sup>11</sup>Weiskel, p. 14

surprising that we find God's traditional attributes - infinity, immensity, coexistence-aligned with the vastness of space as defined by astronomy. As the traditional emotions of religion were displaced from the Deity, they were associated with natural phenomena (the mountains, the ocean) as a sense of the numinous diffused throughout nature.

Locke had removed the soul from the "natural" order of things. In his study of the sublime, Monk finds a transitional moment when the search for sublimity withdrew from the object and became centered in the emotions of the subject. As Locke had emptied out the "essence" of the soul, it became unknowable. "The soul is a vacancy, whose extent is discovered as it is filled. Inner space, the infinitude of the Romantic mind, is born as a massive and more or less unconscious emptiness, an absence."<sup>12</sup> Thus, it obtains an idea of its own power though an event to which it makes no conscious contribution. Consciousness is set over and against order. In poetry, the sublime becomes associated with the vague and obscure, not the clear and distinct. It offers a radical alternative to Lockean psychology with its visual emphasis. In the late eighteenth century, both the sublime and Lockean thought assume a divorce between *res* and *verba*

---

<sup>12</sup>Weiskel p. 15.

Scientific thinking and the aesthetic of the sublime are correlative expressions of an episteme in which order is arbitrary, a matter of hypothesis, or as Burke says, of custom... The sublime comes to be associated both with the failure of clear thought and with matters beyond determinate perception., It is not a radical alternative but a necessary complement to a psychology that stressed its own limit. ...A general semiotic of the sublime would find ... the same discontinuity between sensation and idea as between idea and word.<sup>13</sup>

The discontinuity between idea and word parallels the discontinuity between signified and signifier. Both, I think are essential components of the sublime.

Weiskel contends that the sublime is one of those terms - like transcendence, inspiration, vision, and the daemonic - whose continual sublimation into metaphor makes thought possible. This sublimation enables us to grasp experience "in terms sanctioned by the past - this becomes the essential critical gesture." The act of metaphor permits much of experience to be authenticated and even recognized. The metaphor does not proceed strictly according to a rational process or an abstraction. As Weiskel notes, "behind each act of intellectual metaphor is an imitation, an identification or mimesis".<sup>14</sup> And behind this examination of metaphor there is a slide. W. K. Wimsatt accuses Longinus of sliding from one theoretical distinction

---

<sup>13</sup>Weiskel p. 17.

<sup>14</sup>Weiskel p. 4.

to another in an act "which seems to harbor a certain duplicity and invalidity."<sup>15</sup>

There is an overriding of lines of demarcation between writer and subject matter, between text and interpretation. On the subject of Ajax's prayer, Longinus writes, "In this passage, it is the real Homer, the gale of whose genius fans the excitement of the battle, the poet:

Rages like Ares, spear brandishing, or  
the deadly fire  
Raging in the mountains."

These lines both do and do not identify Homer with a god, as the literal meaning refers not to Ares, but to the raging feeling of Hector. Neil Hertz, commenting on this passage, notes that we are left with feelings of high excitement. "Homer's language can be felt to participate in godlike power and godlike violence, it does so at one remove, by way of a heroic simile, 'in a manner of speaking.'"<sup>16</sup> Longinus proceeds as one quotation suggests another, not necessarily because each illustrates the rhetorical trope under question, but on an often subtle link. In Chapter 9, Longinus offers a series of analogies for sublime language and we are given to feel that somewhere among the versions of the godlike, we can find the poet's own language.

---

<sup>15</sup>W. K. Wimsatt & Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism: A Short History (New York: Random House, 1957) p. 101.

<sup>16</sup>Neil Hertz, The End of the Line (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) p. 4.

When Longinus quotes Homer's line,

The sailors shudder in terror;  
They being carried away from under  
death, but only just. (Iliad 10.5)

He comments:

Notice also the forced combination of naturally uncompoundable prepositions; *hupék*, "away from under." Homer has tortured the words to correspond with the emotions of the moment, and expressed the emotions magnificently by thus crushing words together. (10.6)

Hertz finds in Longinus's singling out of that condensed prepositional phrase a major critical movement. That phrase catches in miniature the turning away from near-annihilation which is characteristic of the sublime turn. What we have is a transfer of power (or the simulation of such a transfer) from threatening forces to the act of poetry itself, as it is now Homer the poet who "forces" or "tortures" language. Hertz analyses a series of transitive relationship which couple active and passive elements so that all subjects of the sentences are assimilated to one another. There is a movement of power and disintegration in the comparison of something grand (i.e. a hero's action) with its concomitant connection with violent action and the pathos of self-loss.

Hertz compares the movement of Longinus' writing to a similar position in Walter Benjamin. He finds both to be writing out of a deep nostalgia aimed at certain literary works and the traditional culture out of which they spring,

Longinus recalling the Golden Age of Athens; and Benjamin writing of a Europe which existed before an undefined catastrophe. Each author uses a word rich enough to express qualities of the text which exist beyond nature. Longinus' word for the sublime, *hypsos*, is linked with cosmic nature itself, while Benjamin's term, *aura*, participates in the "ritual values of a lost culture."<sup>17</sup> Yet surprisingly, Hertz notes that both writers are drawn to texts that bear the marks of the disintegration of order. He cites Longinus' fondness for the Chaeronea speech as analogous to Benjamin's praise of Baudelaire's "Spleen" poems which he acknowledges as expressing "the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock."<sup>18</sup> Hertz suggests that we cannot take either critic's nostalgia or their structuring of history at face value; "each evokes a catastrophe, yet each seems equally concerned with a recurrent phenomenon in literature, the movement of disintegration and figurative reconstitution ... [called] the sublime turn."<sup>19</sup> One further corollary of this turn is both critics method of writing in which we find a violent fragmentation of the literary text into quotations. These quotations function to build up a discourse of the writer's (i.e., Benjamin or

---

<sup>17</sup>Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Illuminations (New York: Schocken, 1958).

<sup>18</sup>Benjamin p. 94.

<sup>19</sup>Hertz p. 14.

Longinus) as they direct attention to passages that serve as emblems of the least nostalgic aspect of the author's work.

According to Longinus, there is a reciprocal relation between figurative language and sublimity and this relationship brings the sublime dangerously close to the deceptive. He uses the "conventional" argument that art should be used to conceal art.<sup>20</sup> Hertz notes that the passage concerning this reciprocal relationship is addressed to figures of authority (tyrants, kings, governors) and therefore contains the outlines of an Oedipal confrontation. There is a fear that the use of figural language will enable a reversal of roles, in some way, a parody of the sublime reversal. The reversal operates in pairs of antithetical terms: divine and human, natural and unnatural, living and dead, master and slave, father and son. But Hertz points out that these pairs do not represent the end point of the structure. He cites one further figure of reversal which suggests that figures should indeed be concealed.

As he writes of the reciprocal play between figurative language and *hypsos*, Longinus cites a passage by Demosthenes illustrating the concealment of the figure. He proceeds by means of a simile. "For how did Demosthenes conceal the figure in that passage? By sheer brilliance of course. As fainter lights disappear when the sunshine surrounds them so the sophisms of rhetoric are dimmed when they are enveloped

---

<sup>20</sup>See Section (17.1 - 17.2).

in encircling grandeur". (17.2) It is not the figure that has disappeared, but its figurativeness. Again in Chapter 43, Longinus writes about beauty in language and concealment.

It is wrong to descend, in a sublime passage, to the filthy and contemptible, unless we are absolutely compelled to do so... We ought to imitate nature, who, in creating man, did not set out private parts (*ta apporetta*)... but concealed them as well she could.

The words *τα ἀππόρετα* refer not only to the genitals, but in the singular, to that which is forbidden, unspeakable, something mystical and sacred. Hertz points out that in the analogy between the concealed genitals and concealed figures of speech - "what is literally 'unspeakable' is not the shame of sexuality or of Oedipal desire but the figurativeness of that shame; that is, the figurativeness of every instance of the figurative, including those figures that inform our sexual imaginings."<sup>21</sup> Thus when figurative language is concealed, it may sustain the truthful and natural, but when it is revealed, it is always false. And what is revealed is not language's "flat-footed falsity", but its ability to move between two poles of the true and the false, the human and the divine. This is what Longinus calls "natural" and "wonderful", finding that "figures are natural allies of sublimity." (17.1) Hertz notes that it is when a literary

---

<sup>21</sup>Hertz p. 18.

text provides us with a powerful apprehension of this phenomenon that we are drawn to characterize it as "sublime".

Longinus implies that the height of art consists in dissimulating one's artifices. We are thus caught up in a series of contradictions between truth and falsity, the natural and the figurative, rhetoric and its opposite. Michael Deguy claims that in Racine's *Britannicus*, Burrhus claims to speak with an openness "of a soldier who knows ill/ How to disguise the truth". He is the "nonorator" who is incapable of speaking any falsehood and he openly proclaims this. Deguy points out that this display of emphatic humility is in reality an act of presumption. The avowal of truth is set out in Alexandrine verse that is:

the height of disguise which makes the naked truth appear. The proper is a figure, the denegated figure, the figure of the denegation of figure. The figural - rhetoric, ... the place within which all lexis takes on form - deforms the straight path 'denuded of artifice,' which itself does not exist, but by whose phantom all of our 'expressions' are haunted.<sup>22</sup>

Deguy says that we are caught between two positions; on the one hand, the "naive" naturalists who believe in the difference between the proper (direct) and the figural, and on the other hand, Longinus and his adherents who seek to explain the turns of figuration. Longinus reveals the

---

<sup>22</sup>Michel Deguy p. 23.

paradox of the "undisguised" statement, that which claims to be proper and natural, but is, nonetheless, figural. Deguy asks:

What must the incessantly desired and invoked natural be in order for figural language - distorted beyond distortion, 'polymetic', anti-economical with respect to a more proper' mode of speech - to be constantly suspected, accused, in need of 'dissimulating' itself? One must dissimulate simulation, feign ignorance of figuration. Once the turn is unveiled, known as such, one exposes oneself to the accusations of treachery and trickery, of the original sin of lexis - but against the background of what postulated radical innocence.<sup>23</sup>

We have the fear of "pretty words" and the irony involves the "swindler" who interlaces his own discourse with warnings of this fear in order to deflect the suspicion that they are nothing but words. "Words" or discourse are suspect and are forever ruses, but it is only through words that what one desires will appear, "the incredible salvation, which is other than words, the other of words, and which one calls silence. Discourses are for making silence, and Longinus himself does not escape from the topos of silence where words abolish themselves."<sup>24</sup>

The topos of silence where words abolish themselves lies not in the domain of Western thinking, but rather, in the hidden recesses of Kabbalah. We operate in a

---

<sup>23</sup>Deguy p. 23.

<sup>24</sup>Deguy p. 24.

hermeneutic motion in an act of elicitation and an appropriative transfer of meaning. George Steiner sees an act of trust at the base of this transfer or translation, an operative convention which derives from a sequence of phenomenological assumptions about the coherence of the world and the presence of meaning. This act of translation leaves one theoretically vulnerable to two dialectically related and mutually determined metaphysical alternatives. One may find that 'anything' can mean 'everything', in a "vertigo of self-sustaining metaphoric or analogic enchainment... Or one may find that there is 'nothing there' which can be divorced from its formal autonomy, that every meaning worth expressing is monadic and will not enter into any alternative mold."<sup>25</sup>

The Kabbalah tells of a day of redemption on which translation will no longer be necessary. All human language will have entered an Edenic state of translucent immediacy, the lost speech of Adam and God regained. But the Kabbalah also offers a more esoteric possibility, the possibility of the silence where words abolish themselves. There is the heretical conjecture that translation will not only be unnecessary, but impossible. Shaking off their servitude of meaning, words will rebel against man. "They will 'become only themselves, and as dead stones in our mouths'. In

---

<sup>25</sup>George Steiner, After Babel (London: Oxford University Press, 1976) p. 297.

either case, men and women will have been freed forever from the burden and the splendor of the ruin at Babel."<sup>26</sup>

The story of Babel concerns the destructive prodigality of language. The primal scattering of languages is explained in the Kabbalistic tradition. Behind our present discord was a single primal language, an *Ur-Sprache*. This Adamic vernacular not only enabled all men to understand one another, to communicate with perfect ease, it bodied forth, to a greater or lesser degree, the original *Logos*, the act of immediate calling into being whereby God had literally 'spoken the world'...".<sup>27</sup> The language of Eden had powers similar to God's language in which the mere naming of a thing was sufficient cause of its coming into being. Because this *Ur-Sprache* came of divine etymology, it had perfect congruence with reality:

The tongue of Eden was like a flawless glass; a light of total understanding streamed through it. Thus Babel was a second Fall, in some regards as desolate as the first. Adam had been driven from the garden; now men were harried, like yelping dogs, out of the single family of man. And they were exiled from the assurance of being able to grasp and communicate reality.<sup>28</sup>

Kabbalists posited a return to unison with the advent of the messianic moment and the language of the Torah was

---

<sup>26</sup>Steiner p. 474.

<sup>27</sup>Steiner p. 58.

<sup>28</sup>Steiner p. 59.

God's idiom, though man was no longer able to understand its full meaning. By studying the hidden configuration of numbers and letters, the initiate could hope to discover the language of God. According to the *Zohar*, the name of God, *Elohim*, unites *Mi*, the hidden subject, with *Eloh*, the hidden object. The split of the subject from the object is symbolic of the split in the temporal world. The name of God, with its assurance of unity, provides man with a release from the dialectics of history. Only in God's speech, known to all men before the fall of Babel, can reality be grasped and communicated.

The story of Babel as told in Genesis (11:1-9;7) is the story of an end and a beginning; at the beginning there is a unique and universal language. At the origin there is not merely language and monologue, but tautology, the repetition of a single language. "This unity and identity annul all story in the very story which is told of them, or rather they install story only at the very moment when this unity and identity are lost."<sup>29</sup>

What this tautology spoke was the repetition of the name of God, *El*, as question and answer, as pure presence. As Louis Marin states, Adam communicates nothing but takes pleasure in that resounding monosyllable, *El*, "a cry of ecstasy, the pure sonority of speech and its tonality formed as voice. In the cry of Adamic ecstasy where, in a unique

---

<sup>29</sup>Louis Marin, "On a Tower of Babel" in Librett p. 182.

Name, all names and all articulations of language are virtually present, the language of man doubles the creative speech of God. From the time of Longinus on, the divine pronouncement, 'Let there be light', was the statement of the sublime. The Adamic language is the end of all language as its origin in the unnameable name."<sup>30</sup> Marin makes the connection between this language as the storm which presents the unrepresentable and the myth of the deluge as the language of created nature, which presents the nonrepresentable origin as its end. The flood is the death sentence to all of nature, humans, animals, birds and beasts. The ark of Noah protected what remained of life as he labored under instructions from God.

Commenting on the destruction of Babel and the creation

Noah's of Ark, Louis Mari writes:

Divine speech is the *arche* of all architecture: the plan of the edifice is revealed, coming from on high, in an epiphany of transcendence that finds a material, takes on a form, encloses itself within an exact limit. The sublimity of the ark takes place along this limit which appears in the form of a construction only insofar as it obeys Yahweh's commandment, responds through its architectural end to the end of Nature, the destruction of all creatures. Adam's cry of ecstasy, the universal storm of the deluge, the architecture of the ark; the sound at the border of the articulation of language, the air stirred for the effacement of all created flesh, the *arche* of architecture: a tri-unitary

---

<sup>30</sup>Marin p. 182.

sublimity, tri-unitary presentation of the nonrepresentable origin-end, the first and last name that the first man - the most ancient ancestor, without father or mother - uttered, the sound he made resound, *El*.<sup>31</sup>

The ark of Noah and the Tower of Nimrod at Babel are two great images of the domination of nature and of the sublime. Noah submitted to the power of nature and the power of God whereas Nimrod sought to dominate nature on his own and thereby secured the punishment and wrath of God. There is a parallelism at work between the ark of Noah versus Nimrod's tower, a divine architecture balanced by a human architecture and the Name of God as the origin of the prelapsarian tongue versus a construction by mankind of their proper name. "Let us make a name for ourselves lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

The tower was the work of a community. Goethe defines the sacred as that which unites souls. The project of the tower was a task of union insofar as its creation was to mark the dissolution of the patriarchy burdened by the Law of the transcendent Name. Thus the tower was touched with the sacred, that bond uniting humanity even as its very construction was its destruction. The interrupted edifice and that community which came together only for a moment before its dispersion, both are marked by the sublime. "The sublime in general is an effort to express the infinite, an

---

<sup>31</sup>Marin p. 183.

effort which in the world of phenomena finds no object which would lend itself to representation ... inaccessible, inexpressible by all finite expression... But if this inherent unity is to be brought before our vision, this is only possible if, as substance, it is also grasped as the creative power of all things, in which it therefore has its revelation.<sup>32</sup> Both the tempest and the architectural ark, according to Hegel, come from on high.

Marin sees the erection of the tower as the epideixis of discourse, bound up with language as a celebration of God in the infinite repetition of His Name. He cites the Rabbinic tradition that the tower celebrates the Name of God by "constructing an idol of it, that is, the proper name of the community which edifies the Name in its universal immanence; the community which - in accordance with a process that always animates representation - takes the place of, substitutes itself for, represents the Name of the Other in its unique transcendence."<sup>33</sup>

Humanity was brought together to work on the tower and with the dispersal of language, left off work and never came together in the same unity again. The architectural project of the tower can only be realized through the specialized language of technology and art, which in their very

---

<sup>32</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts, trans T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) 13, 468; 1, 363.

<sup>33</sup>Marin p. 186.

pronouncement, disarticulate the originary unnameable Name. Humanity wanted to appropriate this name for itself and construct its representation. The community of this representation would have been independent and autonomous, thus the noncommunication of languages on the site of the tower is nothing other than the

presentation of the noncommunicable instance of the other Name, and if the mutual translation of languages will attempt to surmount their mutual radical estrangement, will attempt to break down the forever disjointed wall of sense, translation will remain an infinite, interminable task, forever opaque, as the interrupted edification of the tower on the plain of Sinear testifies, the head, the summit, or *archi-tectum* of which was supposed to have occupied the infinite and formless - sublime - place of the clouds.<sup>34</sup>

Two utterances strike Kant as perfect examples of the sublime. Both utterances are divine; literally, it is a God who speaks. The first concerns the Jewish prohibition against the graven image, the second is an inscription on the Temple of Isis, "I am all that is and that was and that shall be, and no mortal hath lifted my veil." Both these instances come to the heart of the question of the sublime because they touch on presentation and the possibility of art.

Kant writes:

Perhaps there is no sublimer passage in the Jewish law than the command, 'Thou

---

<sup>34</sup>Marin p. 187.

shalt not make to thyself any graven image, not the likeness of anything which is in heaven or in the earth or under the earth,' etc. This command alone can explain the enthusiasm that the Jewish people in their moral period felt for their religion.

Critique of Judgement (29,110;115)

According to Hegel, the sublime is the inadequation of form to spiritual content. He therefore situates the sublime in symbolic art and sees that at its limit, it is, according to Mosaic law, the prohibition of art. But for Kant, the working through of the sublime entails the very possibility of art.

Kant defines the "soul" of a work as " 'that supplement or surplus of life' - for the logic of the sublime is (almost) always a logic of the supplement."<sup>35</sup> According to Kant, this is the faculty of the presentation of aesthetic Ideas, those representations of the imagination which give "much to think, without any determinate thought, i.e., any concept, being capable of being adequate to [them], and which consequently no language could completely express and render intelligible."<sup>36</sup> The question of whether language could render these thoughts intelligible is not examined at any length at this point. The focus of both the aesthetic and the sublime seems to be on the visible, whether in

---

<sup>35</sup>Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe p. 72.

<sup>36</sup>Kant, Section 49 "Of the Faculties of the Mind that constitute Genius" (143-44; 157) qtd by Lacoue-Labarthe p. 72.

nature or in art, and thus avoids the question of language. These aesthetic ideas tend toward "something which is located beyond the limits of experience." Their aim is metaphysical, and, Lacoue-Labarthe adds, "what is at stake in the sublime, since Longinus, will always have been the presentation of the metaphysical as such."<sup>37</sup>

As Kant discusses aesthetic Ideas as sensible forms, he gives two examples, each containing the image of the rising or setting sun (145; 159) Derrida has explained at length (in "White Mythology") how heliotropism is at the base of discourse on the metaphysical. Since the time of Longinus, the sublime has been conceived in accordance with "the metaphysical distinction par excellence", namely, the distinction between the sensible and the supersensible. This distinction has bearing upon the two instances of divine utterance.

In both cases, it is a god who speaks, but not in his own voice; the message is reported or inscribed. Most importantly, both utterances have to do with the nonrepresentation of the god. The Judaic prohibition is part of the prohibition against presentation in general, the prohibition of Isis is a declaration of impossibility, ("I cannot be unveiled".) In both instances the god is not presentable, or to state it in Longinian terms: the sublime is the presentation of the nonpresentable. Lacoue-Labarthe

---

<sup>37</sup>Lacoue-Labarthe p. 72.

builds his entire argument about the sublime on this statement, but he invokes Hegel (and Heidegger) to present the nonpresentable.

The sublime in Hegel occurs just before the moment of the beautiful or art. It concerns the inadequation of form to spiritual content.

Sublimity is the form which expresses the relation between God and the things of nature. One cannot call the infinite subject sublime: it is the absolute in and for itself, it is holy. Sublimity is the phenomenon, the relation between this infinite subject and the world; it is the Idea that manifests itself in exteriority.<sup>38</sup>

If the sublime is thought to be the manifestation of the infinite, and if the essence of manifestation or presentation is its form, then the very structure of the sublime is contradictory. Lacoue-Labarthe calls it the contradiction par excellence, which art, religion and philosophy struggle to reconcile. The truth of the sublime is dialectical, indeed; it can be seen as dialectics itself. Lacoue-Labarthe adds two other statements, namely, that the sublime is the implementation of the beautiful and that the essence of the sublime is nothing other than the beautiful. The necessity for these two statements becomes clear only after a detour through Freud. In a practically classical

---

<sup>38</sup>Georg Friedrich Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Vol. 2. Ed. P. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) pp. 134, 137.

interpretation of the sublime, Freud uses Michelangelo's Moses as an emblem to point up the enigma of this question.

Writing about the sculpture, Freud notes how the figure in the sculpture is superior to the Moses of tradition.

He transformed the theme of the broken tables of the law, not permitting the anger of Moses to break them, but the danger that they could be broken appeases his anger... In this way, he (Michelangelo) introduced into the figure of Moses something new, something superhuman, and the strong mass as well as the exuberant musculature of this powerful character are just a concrete expression of the highest psychic exploit of which a man could be capable: to defeat his own passion in the name of an end for which he knows himself to be destined.<sup>39</sup>

In order to overcome the obstacle of "negative presentation", Freud must look to "sensible signs" of the super-sensible. He states that the moral force of man cannot be rendered sensible, but then adds that it can be represented to the understanding by sensible signs, as "in the dignity of the human form." This solution presents its own difficulty. If the form which must present the sublime is adequate to that which it is supposed to present, it is then an instance of the beautiful, not the sublime.

This, then, is the problem facing Freud when he has Moses replace anger by suffering. There is also the added complication that the figure of Moses is the representative of the prohibition against representation, his anger raised

---

<sup>39</sup>Lacoue-Labarthe p. 87.

by idolatry, the cultic worship of the "graven image". Lacoue-Labarthe notes that Freud maintains a strange silence on this paradox, a silence not based on blindness, but rather at the presentiment that what is at stake is "the possibility or impossibility of art from the standpoint of aesthetics."<sup>40</sup>

Moses can become angry, but anger, an impulse, is not properly sublime. Freud acknowledges that Michelangelo's intention was not the sublime figuration of the hatred of figuration. If on the other hand, Moses masters his anger (in the Schillerian definition of sublimity) we have a figure of adequation: that which the figure figures is the cessation of hostility of figuration. "Moses, in clear opposition to Judaic (Mosaic) sublimity, is a homage, grandiose but beautiful, paid to art in its eidetic determination... The tables of the law which Moses retains in extremis under his arm signify in a Hegelian manner that the essence of the sublime is the beautiful."<sup>41</sup>

Freud leaves the matter undecided. Lacoue-Labarthe sums up the difficulty. The prohibition of representation is a meta-sublime statement. It states in a sublime manner sublimity itself, namely the incommensurability of the sensible to the metaphysical (to God.) Moses emblemizes the aporia of the eidetic apprehension of the sublime. As

---

<sup>40</sup>Lacoue-Labarthe p. 88.

<sup>41</sup>Lacoue-Labarthe pp. 88-89.

he becomes a figure, he contradicts the message he carries. We are then left with two alternatives. Either Hegel is correct when he states that in its very negativity, Mosaic law states the essence of sublimity, namely, that negative presentation signifies the negation of presentation. No art can escape this situation and the figure of Moses marks the impossibility of a great "modern" (in Hegel's terminology, "romantic") art. This is what condemns art to exhaust itself in the effort to present this impossibility and combat figurality in all its forms.

The other alternative suggests that art is not essentially a matter of eidetic presentation. But if it is presentation, what does it present other than form or figure? What could noneidetic presentation be? The answer to this question brings us to Kant's second instance of sublimity, the inscription on the temple of Isis: "I am all that is, that was, and that will be, and no mortal has lifted my veil."

In contrast with the message of Moses, the utterance of Isis is constative, not prescriptive. As a model of esoteric utterance it says that truth or the essence of divinity cannot be unveiled. It presents the "fact" that there is the nonpresentable where the nonpresentable is understood as non-unveivable. It is a prosopopoeia of truth, or more accurately, an utterance of the truth of the

truth, of the play of veiling and unveiling, of presentation.

What is produced in Isis's sentence is that telling the truth about itself, truth unveils itself as the impossibility of unveiling and the need, for (mortal) Being, of its unveiling. "Speaking of itself, unveiling itself, truth says that the essence of truth is nontruth - or that the essence of unveiling is veiling. The truth (the unveiling) unveils itself as veiling itself."<sup>42</sup>

In the second lecture in "The Origin of the Work of Art", Heidegger avows that in its essence, the truth is non-truth. The contradictory nature of ἀλήθεια shows that it "belongs to the essence of the truth as unconcealedness not to give itself in the mode of double concealment."<sup>43</sup> Heidegger defines concealment (*Verbergen*) as the essence of the *Lichtung*, of the brightness or the clearing, of the empty space or the Open. The clearing is at once concealment yet the opening - uncovering, the clarity, is no being: "This open center is therefore not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know." (39;53)

This passage from Heidegger is strongly reminiscent of the Kabbalistic notion of the primordial point, the dot.

---

<sup>42</sup>Lacoue-Labarthe p. 91.

<sup>43</sup>Martin Heidegger (42;56) quoted by Lacoue-Labarthe, p. 92.

This dot represents the divine nothing, the depth of nothingness from which creation springs.

In a passage from the *Zohar*, the beginning of Creation within God Himself is described:

In the beginning, when the King's will began to take effect, He engraved signs into the heavenly sphere. A dark flame issued from within the most hidden recess, from the mystery of the Infinite, like a mist forming in the unformed, enclosed in the ring of that sphere, neither white nor black, neither red nor green, of no color whatever, ...It could not be recognized at all until a hidden, supernal point shone forth under the impact of the final breaking through. Beyond this point nothing is knowable, and that is why it is called *reshith*, beginning, the first of those creative words by which the universe was created (I, 15a)<sup>44</sup>

In the continuation of this passage, the nothing is replaced by the aura of light which surrounds the *ein sof*, or as Scholem calls it, the "infinite, beginningless and uncreated."

The clearing, according to Heidegger, unveils itself in its essence in an act of estrangement, a becoming uncanny. As he describes it, we are in the vocabulary of the sublime with de-familiarity, alienation, derangement, shock. It is the work of art which produces this happening of the clearing. It presents ἀ-λήθεια "the no-thing, luminous with

---

<sup>44</sup>Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism trans. Ralph Manheim, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) pp. 102-103.

an 'obscure illumination,' which 'is' the Being of what is. And this is sublimity."<sup>45</sup>

There is a passage in Walter Benjamin's writing which one may assume Heidegger had to have read. It occurs in his essay "The Elective Affinities of Goethe."

Thus, in the face of the beautiful, the idea of unveiling becomes the idea of the impossibility of unveiling... Because only the beautiful and nothing besides can be essentially veiled and unveiled, the divine ground of the Being of beauty lies in the secret. And thus the appearance in beauty is this: not the superfluous veiling of things in themselves, but the necessary veiling of things for us... For the sake of the unity which the veil and that which is veiled comprise in it, the Idea can be essentially valid only where the duality of nakedness and veiling does not yet obtain: in art and in the appearance of mere nature. On the other hand, the more distinctly this duality expresses itself, in order finally in man to reach its greatest force, the more this becomes clear: in veil-less nakedness the essentially beautiful has withdrawn and in the naked body of the human being a Being beyond all beauty is attained - the sublime, and a work beyond all images - the work of the creator... Only nature is impossible to unveil; it retains a secret for us long as God allows it to subsist. Truth is discovered in the essence of language. The human body strips itself, a sign that the human being itself steps before God.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup>Lacoue-Labarthe p. 95.

<sup>46</sup>Walter Benjamin "Goethes Wahlverwandschaften", Gesammelte Schriften, Vol I, 1 ed. Rolf Tiedemman and Hermann Schweppenhauser. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980) pp. 194-97, Lacoue-Labarthe, pp. 107-108.

The conceptual image of the aura is present in much of Benjamin's work and figures most prominently in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction and On Some Motifs in Baudelaire. In the first essay, aura is loss, since the aura of a work of art is that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction. It is a concept linked with distance and an estrangement of the object world. In the Baudelaire essay, the aura is linked with "aureole", the bright halo of a god or saint or the bright light around the sun or stars. As he writes of Baudelaire's prose poem on the loss of the poet's aureole, there is also the suggestion of the loss of the sublime's high breaking light. He further identified the aura as "the figure of shock, indeed of catastrophe".

Gershom Scholem, a close friend of Benjamin, recognized that the angel in Benjamin's work involved the ephemeral. In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin wrote of the Talmudic legend that angels are created to sing their hymn before God and then dissolve into naught. Scholem comments on

the formation and disappearance of angels before God, of whom it is said in a Kabbalistic book that they 'pass away as the spark on the coals.' To this, however, was added for Benjamin the further conception of Jewish tradition of the personal angel of each human being who represents the latter's secret self and whose name nevertheless remains hidden from him... This angel, to be sure, can also enter into opposition to, and a relation of strong tension with,

the earthy creature to whom he is attached.<sup>47</sup>

"True actuality" is the strength of the aura. Bloom sees Benjamin's idea of the sublime as the "negative moment" in the personal angel of the hidden name. It seems to be related to the Jewish Gnostic and Kabbalistic idea of the *zelem*. This *zelem* or "image" is each person's principle of individuality, the spiritual configuration unique to each person. It is related to his ethereal body and serves as an intermediary between his body and his soul. The *zelem*, like Benjamin's aura, is evidence of authentic individuality, and "its image of a luminous envelope suits Benjamin's curiously visionary materialism, his sense that the aura is a final defense of the soul against the shock or catastrophe of multiplicity, against masses of objects or multitudes of people in the street."<sup>48</sup>

The sublime dramatizes the rhythm of transcendence in its most extreme form because it originates where conventional systems of reading break down. It is on the very collapse of the rational system that the foundation for another order of meaning is built.

Weiskel begins his examination of the Romantic sublime with the question of whether it is possible to deidealize the sublime once transcendent idealism was no longer

---

<sup>47</sup>Harold Bloom, *Agon* p. 231.

<sup>48</sup>Bloom p. 232.

inevitable for aesthetics. The sublime dramatized the rhythm of transcendence in its most extreme form because it has its origin where conventional systems of reading broke down. It is on this very collapse that the foundation for another order of meaning was built. In the Kantian experience of the sublime, the "surface is broken" as discourse breaks down and the faculties are checked. There is a discontinuity between what can be apprehended through reason and what we intuit to be meaningful. In Kant's view, the "representation" of an object (of nature) must collapse, and this failure leads us to posit an "unattainability." This inability to comprehend signifies the imaginations relation to the ideas of reason. "In the opposing case of the beautiful, the natural object itself comes to signify. In the sublime, a relation to the object - the negative relation of unattainability - becomes the signifier in the aesthetic order of meaning."<sup>49</sup>

The discontinuity between idea and word parallels the discontinuity between signified and signifier. Both, I think, are essential components of the sublime.

According to Weiskel, we can call something sublime, either nature as in Kant or a line of poetry, if the attempt to represent it causes the mind's inability to grasp it wholly to regard it as a symbol of the mind's relation to a transcendent order. With poetic imagery, it is difficult to

---

<sup>49</sup>Weiskel p. 23.

differentiate between the image as perception and as a sign standing for the nonsensible or unimaginable. With a reversion to habitual perception, the sublime subsides into something else. "For it is precisely the semiotic character of the sublime moment which preserves the sublimation necessary to the sublime."<sup>50</sup> The idealist can perform this sublimation because, for him, the transcendent exists a priori and can be invoked at the necessary moment. "An implicit semiotic code authorizes the exchange of outer and inner: The sublimation which achieves homeostasis involves a metaphorical transposition of two orders of 'unattainability'."<sup>51</sup>

In some instances of the sublime, discourse is ruptured by an excess of the signified; meaning is overwhelmed by an overdetermination which in its extreme threatens a state of absolute metaphor, a situation which Frye calls "a universe in which everything is potentially identical with everything else".<sup>52</sup> This brings us back to the quotation from Bloom in the introduction to this dissertation, with the situation reaching its clearest example in the sublime (Bloom questioned whether there was any difference between "an

---

<sup>50</sup>Weiskel p. 24.

<sup>51</sup>Weiskel p. 25.

<sup>52</sup>Northrup Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1957) p. 124.

absolute randomness of language and the Kabbalistic magical absolute, in which language is totally overdetermined.")<sup>53</sup>

Weiskel finds that the dominant image of the Romantic sublime is the abyss as the presentation of unattainability, phenomenologically, a negation. This abyss, the "fixed, abysmal, gloomy breathing-place" is a central image in romantic poetry. This can lead to stasis, a death by plenitude, which Wordsworth calls an "abyss of idealism". It destroys the "seeking for a signifier, the 'perpetual logic' in which alone the mind can continue to live."<sup>54</sup> Carried to its extreme, silence becomes "more sublime than words". (Longinus 9.2) "The attenuation of the text (signifier) to the zero degree - significant absence - results in the richly ambivalent affective situation at the core of what Bloom calls the 'anxiety of influence'. The dissolving of word into Word, or for that matter of face into Human Form, is a moment of 'daemonic' influx."<sup>55</sup>

There are two instances of the sublime mode in which discourse breaks down. In the first case, because of an excess in the signifier, the syntagmatic flow must be halted and the chain broken up in order to restore meaning once again. This is achieved through metaphor, an insertion of a substitute term in the chain. The very absence of the

---

<sup>53</sup>Harold Bloom. "The Breaking of Form", p. 4.

<sup>54</sup>Weiskel p. 27.

<sup>55</sup>Weiskel p. 27.

signifier itself becomes a signifier as what was absence becomes presence under a new sign. Here Weiskel attempts to deidealize Kant's formulation in a semiotic translation which renounces presence as a transcendent term. Weiskel calls the mode of the sublime in which the absence of determinate meaning becomes significant the metaphorical sublime. The breakdown of discourse is resolved through an act of substitution. He places the natural or Kantian sublime in this category. He also associates it with the reader's or the hermeneutic sublime. A prime example of this mode of the sublime would be Kafka's work and theological mysteries and allegories without a clearly defined key.

The other mode of the sublime, as one might suspect, can be called metonymical. When the mind is overwhelmed by meaning, it recovers by displacing the excess of signified into a "spatial" or "temporal" contiguity. Elision is characteristic of this mode; it avoids stasis or fixation. If the metaphorical sublime is associated with the reader, the metonymical mode suggests the poet. This follows Jakobson division along the operation axes of language as exemplified in the symbolist (metaphorical) and realist (metonymical). While this breakdown seems rather arbitrary and fixed, it does offer a typology of the sublime which is more effective than the generally vague definitions of sublimation.

The hermeneutic sublime is a rhetoric, what Weiskel calls a "discourse of connotations." Its signs are made up of indeterminacy. The signifiers of this discourse are themselves constituted by the subject's inability to grasp this very discourse. This gives rise to the situation where the failure to understand something has the highest meaning; thus confusion becomes the preeminent occasion of the sublime. There is failure of discourse in the sublime, a condition Kant thought intrinsic to it (although he does allow for the mind to recover its balance).

Kant sought to establish the aesthetic boundary as he located judgments on the beautiful and sublime in a priori relations to the cognitive and ethical faculties of mind. He finds a profound alienation between imagination and reason through his explanation of the affective ambivalence of the sublime. The imagination feels a defeat, while reason takes over, thus pointing to a cognitive alienation within the mind as a whole. Weiskel sums it up concisely: the cause of the sublime is the aggrandizement of reason at the expense of reality and the imaginative apprehension of reality.

Kant states that "the feeling of our incapacity to attain to an idea that is a law for us is RESPECT".<sup>56</sup> His idea of respect is his version of the numinous "other", the "*mysterium tremendum* that is the central descriptive notion

---

<sup>56</sup>Weiskel p. 41.

in religiously oriented theories of the sublime".<sup>57</sup> For Kant, the sublime brings us to the boundary of the "invisible world", but leaves us as soon as that world is represented or given positive content. We are left then with a sublime that is negative and dialectical, a movement between two states. Weiskel makes the interesting point that as a structure, the sublime is compatible with many theologies and with the modern theology of the unconscious. This remains true unless the existence, not the content, of the invisible world is questioned. Then the possibility of the sublime disappears. Also, if the sensible world is too strongly negated, the "usurpation loses its strength and the sublime is reified into a permanent attitude of alienation from nature."<sup>58</sup>

There is a paradoxical structure in the Kantian sublime; aesthetic greatness reveals man's ontological destiny, but with the awareness of its unattainability. In the sublime moment there is an acceptance of human limitations as the sublime comes into play precisely insofar as man cannot attain a totality:

The intensity of the sublime experience is a direct function of the impossibility of realizing (in any way) the idea of humanity (or any supersensible idea). We might even say that the secondary discourse of the sublime is built on the failure of the

---

<sup>57</sup>Weiskel p. 42.

<sup>58</sup>Weiskel p. 44.

beautiful and its reconciling fictions. The sublime and the beautiful differ not in ontological presupposition, but in the attitude toward dualism implicit in each.<sup>59</sup>

Weiskel offers two versions of transcendence, the negative sublime (Kant) and the positive or egotistical sublime. The egotistical sublime subverts dualism by refusing to polarize thought and perception into a timeless, noumenal order and a finite, sensible world. The state of undifferentiated perception, either as memory or fiction, are its major features. This form of the sublime is repetitive, the mind is endlessly deployed, but unable to leap through time. Because time will not relent, the ultimate form of activity is circular.

Hegel associated the positive sublime with the aesthetics of immanence or with pantheism. In this form of the sublime, spirit and matter are differentiated only in principle, not in perception.

Romanticism has been seen as the sublimation of religious doctrine. M. H. Abrams advances this idea as he studies a poem of sublimation. There, the great shifter "I" expands until it becomes the absolute present of the maker and the sense of a dramatic speaker is reduced to zero degree. In this absolute state, everything but the "I" is a fiction. Thus poetry, dependent as it is upon "external

---

<sup>59</sup>Weiskel p. 45.

regions", even if they are only reflections of this "I", threatens to evaporate altogether.

There is, as Weiskel points out, another response to fictionality in Romanticism. "The egotistical sublime strips fictions of their ontological significance- their power, as symbol of epiphany, to crash through the phenomenal and articulate essence of eternity. The poet, like Yeats, who invests fictions with ontological meaning inevitably resurrects the question of belief."<sup>60</sup> Yeats's belief takes a personal religious form and for him, disillusionment, or the confrontation with fictionality, is a true crisis. Weiskel contends that the response to this crisis is desublimation. One has only to think of "The Circus Animal's Desertion" to see the results of the disillusionment. Poems of desublimation generally occur late in the "ontogenetic career of the imagination" and play out the opposition between the reality principle and fantasy.

In the study of the sublime one may encounter curious combination. Weiskel notes the peculiar joining of holy innocence and conspiratorial self-aggrandizement of reason in Kant. As the negative sublime begins with an overwhelming interest in nature, it ends in an excessive disdain of nature (in Schiller, Schopenhauer and at times, Wordsworth). Reason, which begins as a negative or

---

<sup>60</sup>Weiskel p. 56.

dialectical alternative to human limitation, ends with a near theological prestige which requires a total withdrawal from natural connection. In Romantic poetry, when man, being convinced of his own sublimity, withdraws from an engagement with nature, he is unable to experience the sublime. Kant recognizes this situation; the mind which recognizes its own sublimity will not yield before a Godhead, but rather, will identify with that Godhead. If the form of the positive sublime is repetitive and circular, that of the negative aims at disillusionment - that is, the unmasking of the subreption whereby an object appears sublime.

A study of the sublime reveals the complicated ways in which the aesthetic and non-aesthetic are interrelated. This becomes the focus of study in Kant and in Derrida's writing about Kant. Both philosophers need the notion of the frame in their discourse on art, with Derrida examining the frame in order to question the notion of closure around art. In *La vérité en peinture*, Derrida examines whether Kant has succeeded in The Third Critique in delineating a purely aesthetic space. He uses the concept of the parergon, using *parerga* as cited in Kant, the frame of the painting, the clothing of statues, the columns of a building and notes that their exteriority to a work defines them less than their essential link to the internal structure of the work. The parergon is not an exteriority nor is it of

surplus nature, it is "the internal structural relation that attaches them to the interior lack of the *ergon*."<sup>61</sup> Derrida seeks to make it as difficult as possible for Kant to return from the *parergon* to the *ergon*. He does this to suggest that the aesthetic resists closure from within a space that is not purely aesthetic in nature.

In the Third Critique, the sublime, which exceeds the *parerga* of the beautiful, tests the limitations of the aesthetic. There cannot be a *parergon* of the sublime, the colossal excludes boundary - the infinite cannot be bordered. This unbounded characteristic of the sublime is in sharp contrast to the aesthetic. The question of frame leads Derrida to another question raised by the sublime, namely, how philosophy can measure the unmeasurable, present the unrepresentable. Unlike the aesthetic, the sublime exceeds the frame due to its excessive nature and dynamism.

The sublime pushes art and the theory of art outside the specifically aesthetic. This links the questions raised by art to areas of history, politics and ethics. The sublime is thus marked by the ability to pass from one side of the frame to the other:

To insist on the contradictory role of the frame in terms of the sublime is to confront art and the various theories of art with their limitation. But it also makes the sublime a question of and for

---

<sup>61</sup>Jacques Derrida, The Truth in Painting trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) p. 69.

art. The sublime, considered in this light, constitutes a radical way of working the frame of art and opening the aesthetic up to the paraesthetic elements constituting, and at the same time, deconstituting its specificity.<sup>61</sup>

Derrida's reading of Kant, with its difficulty of the frame bordering the aesthetic, becomes exemplary of "parergonal logic", where it becomes impossible to delineate the interiority or exteriority of art. The entire question of the aesthetic is recast by Derrida in terms of paraesthetic issues that are at the same time intrinsic and external to art.

Kant's texts and Derrida's reading of them are based on the ocular, a "seeing" to inaugurate the sublime. Yet there is in Derrida, as there in Hebraism in general, a strong anti-mimetic strain which would counter-indicate a visual approach to the sublime. Alternately, one would have to turn to the rhetorical to find a truly verbal definition of the sublime. In his writing on the subject, de Man concentrates on the tension between an ocular (and therefore material) sublime and a non-phenomenological rendering of the sublime.

In his essay "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant", Paul de Man examines the Kantian sublime and aesthetics.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup>David Carroll, Paraesthetics (London: Routledge 1987) p. 143

<sup>62</sup>Paul DeMan, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects ed. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica (Amhurst: University of Massachusetts Press 1984)

He seeks to escape from Kant's opposition of the dynamic and mathematical sublime by insisting that the sublime is tropological; that it is a rhetorical, linguistic device that surpasses comprehension. According to de Man, the sublime cannot be philosophical and at the same time stand off against the ideological and the metaphysical, the critical and the transcendental.

He begins by stating that Kant sought in the Third Critique to establish a causal link between critical philosophy and ideology, between a conceptual and an empirically determined discourse. He needed a phenomenized, empirically manifest principle and therefore turned to the aesthetic which filled this possibility. He invested great importance on it as the possibility of philosophy (as the articulation of a transcendental with a metaphysical discourse) depends on it. The section on the sublime is at the center of this articulation.

Kant asserts that there are no sublime objects in nature, that it is an inward experience of consciousness. Unlike the beautiful, it displays nothing of the purposiveness in nature, but instead, informs us of the teleology of our own faculties. The sublime is not "the large", but the largest, and as such it is not accessible to the senses. It is not a pure number, but of absolute

---

pp. 121-44. Hereafter cited in text with page number in parenthesis.

magnitude, borderless and without limit. The articulation of the sublime can never occur, indeed, the failure of articulation is its distinguishing characteristic. De Man contends that it transposes the natural to the supernatural, perception to imagination, understanding to reason. Yet these transpositions never allow for a condition of totality that is constitutive of the sublime. It therefore does not supersede this failure by becoming, as in a dialectic, the knowledge of this failure.

What the sublime does is make us aware of another faculty besides understanding, namely the imagination. De Man locates the operation of the imagination in opposition to nature; and it is only by an act of Kantian "subreption" that we attribute it fallaciously to nature. What the imagination undoes is the very labor of reason:

The transcendental judgement that is to decide on the possibility of the existence of the sublime (as the spatial articulation of the infinite) functions metaphorically, or ideologically, when it surreptitiously defines itself in terms of its other, namely of extension and totality. If space lies outside the sublime and remains there, and if space is nevertheless a necessary condition for the sublime to come into being, then the principle of the sublime is a metaphysical principle that mistakes itself for a transcendental one. If imagination, the faculty of the sublime, comes into being at the expense of the totalizing power of the mind, how can it then... be in contrastive harmony with the faculty of reason, which delimits the contour of this totality? (126)

De Man builds up this argument to prove an important point, that the sublime, proven through discourse as a tropological system, can be articulated only within such a formal system. It is, then, pure discourse, not a faculty of the mind. De Man states most forcibly that the sublime cannot be grounded as a philosophical principle, but only as a linguistic principle. "When the sublime is translated back... from language into cognition, from formal description into philosophical argument, it loses all inherent coherence and dissolves in the *aporias* of intellectual and sensory appearance." (p. 127)

The purpose of the Third Critique was the articulation of the boundary between pure and practical reason; and the articulation of this difference occurs when language is seen as a performative system, not only a tropological one. Because of this, de Man feels that there is a deep, even fatal discontinuity in the Critique. Language as a linguistic structure (as a performative system, not just a cognitive system) cannot be accessible to the powers of transcendental philosophy. It is also not accessible to the powers of metaphysics or ideology; this leaves de Man with the question of where this disruption becomes apparent in the text. He finds that the disarticulation occurs in the concluding remarks on the analytics of the sublime. (sec. 29)

We are reminded that objects in nature which are capable of producing sublime effects must be considered in a totally non- theological manner. Kant relates the principle of disinterestedness specifically to objects in nature and cites two landscapes as examples, the starry heaven and the vast ocean. Both are seen as architectonic constructs.

De Man cites Wordsworth as the poet whose vision most closely resembles Kant on the question of the sublime. In both there is a "constant exchange between mind and nature, of the chiasmic transfer of properties between the sensory and the intellectual world that characterizes figural diction." (p.135) De Man also holds that Kant's vision is not a literal but rather a material vision, which is not defined in linguistic terms. He then asks how the radical materiality of the sublime can be reconciled with the fact that the sublime does not reside in the nature, in the phenomenal, but in the human mind as inward noumenal effect. The task of the sublime becomes one of translating the abstractions of reason back into the phenomenal world of appearance. Again the problem becomes the reconciliation of the inward nature of the sublime with the radical materiality of the examples given, the reconciliation of concrete representation of ideas with "pure ocular vision". De Man finds in Kant the elevation of the imagination from the metaphysical to transcendental as imagination allies itself with reason, the faculty which establishes the

superiority of mind over nature. The imagination's security arises from the actual, physical situation which when threatened, results in a feeling of terror and submission to nature. In the sublime, the imagination achieves tranquility as it submits to reason and attains to freedom. It conquers nature as it substitutes for reason at the cost of its empirical nature.

As de Man reproduces Kant's argument, he claims we are not dealing with a tight, analytical argument, but with a story, a dramatized scene of the mind in action. Therefore, we are not dealing with mental categories but with tropes in an allegorical tale. It is a story of oppositions, between nature and reason, the imagination and nature, tranquility and shock, a story not governed by the laws of the mind but by the laws of figural language. Once again, de Man does not find philosophical argument, but a passage "determined by linguistic structures not within the author's control."  
(140)

Kant presented the architectonic vision of nature as a building, a distinctly material, nontropological view. He defines the architectonic as the organic unity of systems which moves us away from the nonteleological, aesthetic perspective. From the phenomenality of the aesthetic, we move to the materiality of *Augenschein*, of aesthetic vision; from the organic, the architectonic principle of the Critique of Pure Reason we arrive at a materialism in the

Third Critique. The architectonic as the material appears near the end of the analytics of the aesthetic on the sublime. De Man traces the movement from the architectonic to the phenomenological and finally to the material. "This moment marks the undoing of the aesthetic as a valid category. The critical power of a transcendental philosophy undoes the very project of such a philosophy leaving us, certainly not with an ideology --- ... but with a materialism that Kants' posterity has not yet begun to face up to." (p. 143) This happens, not as a result of lack of rational power, but is due to the very consistency of this power.

De Man notes that when we come upon a passage where articulation is threatened by its undoing, we have a shift from the tropological to a different mode of language. In the passages on the dynamic sublime, one finds a shift from trope to performance. De Man concludes by stating that we are made to assent to the aporetic incompatibility between the failure of imagination to grasp magnitude and the success of imagination under the auspices of reason. "The bottom line in Kant ... is the prosaic materiality of the letter and no degree of obfuscation or ideology can transform this materiality into phenomenal cognition of aesthetic judgment." (144) It would seem that a deconstructive reading is thus based on the materiality of the letter (which is difference) rather than on cognition of

aesthetic judgment (which is totalizing theory.) The only way de Man can achieve a conceptual resolution to a philosophical problematic in Kant's text is through the materiality of the text, shifting the problematic to rhetoric and grammar. This kind of deconstructive reading reveals its own structure in the text and is coextensive with all use of language whatsoever. "Thus a deconstructive reading ineuctably repeats the linguistic categories of the text, whose structure is self-deconstructive to begin with. Therefore, the difference between a deconstructive reading and its text is only ironic, in that the deconstructive reading thematizes aporias implicit in the text, while formally and practically repeating these same aporias itself."<sup>63</sup> Thus deconstruction is an endless reiteration of itself.

According to de Man, it is the materiality of Kant's text which resolves the aporias inherent in the analytic of the sublime, thereby shifting a philosophical problematic to a problematic of language and text. In this way, de Man has vindicated textual criticism against the claim of "transcendence", his main complaint against aesthetic ideology.

---

<sup>63</sup>Gary E. Aylesworth, "Deconstruction and Criticism: Preliminary Remarks," The Textual Sublime Deconstruction and its Differences ed. Hugh Silverman and Gary E. Aylesworth, Albany: SUNY Press, 1990) p. 70.

Rudolph Gasché challenges de Man's interpretation of both the phenomenality and the materiality of the sublime. The importance of this issue is crucial, because it articulates the relation between pure and practical reason, and on this articulation the Critique of Judgment is based. De Man seeks to find the breakdown in Kant's structure that is based on aporias that can be solved only on the level of language. Gasché, on the other hand, finds Kant's strategy to be sound, thus vindicating philosophy from the reductive claims of textual criticism. He does not fault de Man's approach, but asks whether a traditional philosophical reading could resolve the discrepancies de Man uncovered.

The crux of the argument centers on Kant's suggestion that the sublime can be phenomenally presented by the two examples cited earlier, the sky and ocean. Kant suggests we regard these phenomena "as poets do", through "what the eye reveals" (*was der Augenschein zeigt*). De Man contends that *Augenschein* involves no reflexive judgment and therefore constitutes a pure materialism. This contradicts Kant's assertion that the sublime is a presentation of ideas. Gasché questions de Man's result as a "retranslation of the antinomies of the philosophical discourse into the formal system of language, and ultimately into the materiality of

the radically untropological performative structures of language."<sup>64</sup>

Because we are dealing with only pure aesthetical judgments concerning the sublime, we are concerned with the relation of imagination and reason. The *Augenschein* involved cannot be only material ocular vision, devoid of reflective complication. The sublime must be independent of objects, a move that involves a play of faculties between imagination and reason, between a sensible faculty and a supersensible faculty. Imagination is the faculty of *Darstellung*, sensible presentation. The play of faculties in the sublime enables the negative presentation of the unrepresentable. The imagination is extended in an act of freedom exercised against itself.

Kant's example of the sublime, the Jewish command, "Thou shalt not make thyself any graven image" leaves no doubt that the imagination gives up any effort to visualize reason or make an image of it. "In short, then, the sublime is witness to a minimal (negative) presentation of the ideas, or rather of the faculty of ideas, namely, reason, and which itself, in its negativity, is the matrix of all sensible actualization of these ideas in the ethical realm."<sup>65</sup> Kant did not conceive of *Augenschein* as "mere,

---

<sup>64</sup>Rodolphe Gasché, "On Mere Sight: A Response to Paul de Man" in Silverman and Aylesworth, p. 110.

<sup>65</sup>Gasché p. 114.

unmediated ocular vision", it is rather a "sensuous synthesis of phenomenality in a phenomenal manner."<sup>66</sup> As soon as *Augenschein* enters service of the sublime it sees only the unseeable itself. It sees nothing determinate, thus yielding to the law of freedom and reason. Failing to present the intelligible, the *Augenschein* offers it to thought, and thus imagination yields to reason.

Rather than being mere ocular vision, the "immediate intuition" of the *Augenschein* is immediate in its negative presentation of the faculty of the ideas. Instead of being an obstacle to the presentation of ideas, the *Augenschein* seems to be another name for the extended imagination itself.<sup>67</sup>

I have lingered on de Man's reading of the Kantian sublime because it raises a number of important questions that go beyond the text. Not only is the role of the sublime and the grounding of aesthetics at stake, but indeed, the separation of discourse between philosophy and literature. By "reducing" a reading of Kant to the material letter and figurality, de Man destroys the possibility of separation of discourse. In "Indifference to Philosophy"<sup>68</sup>, Gasché examines de Man's essay on Kant in detail. He finds de Man's linguistic or rhetorical reading to be essentially

---

<sup>66</sup>Gasché p. 114.

<sup>67</sup>Gasché p. 115.

<sup>68</sup>Rudolph Gasché, "Indifference to Philosophy," Reading de Man Reading, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

a non-phenomenal reading. It erases the difference between literary and non-literary texts since all opposites remain undecidable. Such a reading focuses on the autonomous potential of language, not on the transparent meaning of language as in philosophy, but on an opaque use of language, free from all relation to what is signified. Commenting on de Man's reading of Kant, Gasché notes that while this work contains many philosophical "errors", a cogent "theoretical" project underlies the project. De Man's work involves a nonphenomenal, rhetorical reading of philosophic texts. This analysis has no relation whatsoever to the meaning that this language appears to transport.

Gasché traces the implications of this nonphenomenal reading. He concludes:

For de Man, the semantic levels of a text, its strata of aesthetic or conceptual figuration, are nothing but the always already aborted attempts to cover up, or recuperate, the total lack of meaning at the base of the irretrievably singular linguistic events, by exactly repeating the originary act of violence.<sup>69</sup>

The literary and philosophical discourse are acts of forgetting or recuperating the non-phenomenal properties of the material and formal act of figuration, which itself is a repetition of the "originary violence of positing." "All there can be, consequently, is an endless series of acts of imposition that, because they lack all continuity with what

---

<sup>69</sup>Gasché p. 289.

precedes them, repeat, 'original' arbitrary act of linguistic positing. Ultimately, there is no difference between the repetition and the authority of meaning."<sup>70</sup>

De Man can assert that philosophy turns out to be "an endless reflection on its own destruction at the hands of literature," while literature itself is philosophical and not distinguishable from philosophy. Literature and philosophy, metaphysics and critical analysis are the same because linguistic and semantic distinctions blur into total indifference. For de Man, the properties of language are truly universal. "His radical empiricism - his stress on the arbitrariness, extreme singularity, and impenetrable materiality of the linguistic acts and signifier - appears to have gained such momentum here that its own generality and universality turn into a radical challenge to the generality of philosophical discourse."<sup>71</sup>

How does this bring us back to poetry and the concept of the sublime? De Man points the way as he states that in poetic language, words are not used as signs, or even as names but in order to name. He points to Holderlin where "naming fulfills its highest function in naming being as a

---

<sup>70</sup>Gasché p. 289.

<sup>71</sup>Gasché p. 293.

presence."<sup>72</sup> In this sense metaphor is a singular experience of origination. De Man says:

Hölderlin's statement is a perfect definition of what we call a natural image: the word that designates a desire for an epiphany but necessarily fails to be an epiphany, because it is pure origination. For it is in the essence of language to be capable of origination, but of never achieving the absolute identity with itself that exists in the natural object. Poetic language can do nothing but originate anew over and over again: it is always constitutive, able to posit regardless of presence but, by the same token, unable to give a foundation to what it posits except as an intent of consciousness.<sup>73</sup>

It is through the question of poetry and origination that we can leave de Man and return to questions of poetry and the sublime. According to Vico, poetry began with the attempt to ward off danger and death through divination. "The true God" founded the Jewish religion "on the prohibition of the divination on which all the gentile nations arose."<sup>74</sup> For Vico a strong poet must invent or originate himself. Unlike the Jewish religion, poetry does not trace back to a "divine" origin, it seeks to imagine its own origin. According to Bloom, Vico saw tropes as defenses

---

<sup>72</sup>Paul de Man, "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image" p. 67.

<sup>73</sup>de Man p. 69.

<sup>74</sup>Harold Bloom, Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976) p. 7.

and the poet divined through the turns of figurative language. Bloom then goes on to equate Vico's defense with Freud's notion of defense.

Vico also said that a strong poet must invent or originate himself. Bloom takes Vico's insights about defenses and poetry and joins them to Freud's notion of defense. Using both Vico and Freud, Bloom contends that our drives become compulsive and partly repressed which rhetorically means hyperbolical or sublime. Through Bloom, we return once again to Kabbalah and the sublime.

Kabbalah operates as an interpretative model, a discipline using a conceptual rhetoric oriented as a defense. It is an appropriate critical paradigm because it is an extreme form of negative theology. Negative theology is a metaphor for the act of reading, and Kabbalah is the most negative of all theologies.

Bloom contends that the Kabbalah offers a dialectic of creation close to revisionist poetics and a conceptual rhetoric oriented towards defense. Luria's interpretation of Kabbalah offered a dialectics of creation as an ingoing or regressive process. The work of de Man and deconstruction touches its limit in the tracing of a poem's epistemological or negative moment. To get beyond the aporia or limit of interpretability, Bloom turns to Valentinus (Gnosticism) and Luria. Both offer modes of

antithetical knowledge, which means a knowledge negative and evasive.

According to Bloom, the doctrine of Lurianic Kabbalah, "is a unique blend of Gnostic and Neoplatonic elements, of a self-conscious subjectivity founded upon a revisionist view of creation, combined with a rational but rhetorically extreme dialectic of creativity."<sup>75</sup> Luria saw creation no longer as an outgoing process as in the Zohar, but rather, as an ingoing process. This period of Kabbalah relied on Gnostic models of catastrophe-creation. Lurianic creation begins with an act of self-limitation by God, *tsimtsum*. Bloom finds its aesthetic equivalent in any new poet's initial rhetoric of limitation. Rhetorically, *tsimtsum*, is a composite trope, beginning as an "irony for the creative act, since it says 'withdrawal' yet means the opposite, which is absolute 'concentration.'" Making begins with a regression, a holding-in of the Divine breath, which Bloom calls a kind of digression.<sup>76</sup>

Following the divine contraction is the breaking of the vessels, which, according to Bloom, is the principle of rhetorical substitution. This in turn is followed by *Tikkun*, restitution and its equivalent symbolic representation. In A Map of Misreading and Poetry and Repression Blooms sets forth a detailed equivalence of

---

<sup>75</sup>Bloom p. 16.

<sup>76</sup>Bloom p. 16.

poetic tropes and Kabbalistic terms. He defines "revisionism" as a notion with the triadic meanings of re-seeing, re-estimating, and re-aiming. In Kabbalistic terms these become contraction, breaking-of-the-vessels, and restitution, and in poetic terms, limitation, substitution, and representation. (Rhetorically, sublimation is a metaphor, a re-seeing, and hyperbole a re-aiming).

Yeats can be seen as the last great poet of the sublime. While we have traced through the elements of Kabbalah in his work, we must also take into account the strong influence of Gnosticism. Yeats was consciously and deliberately an antithetical poet. He defined the antithetical as "the other self, the anti-self or the antithetical self, as one may choose to name it, [which] comes but to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality."<sup>77</sup>

The proper figure for the antithetical is the Daimon. Bloom states that in A Vision, the Daimon operates as Muse-principle and as the self-destructive principle that expresses itself in heterosexual love. Bloom notes that E.R. Dodd likens this same principle or daimon to the unconscious. In his essay on the *Unheimlich* or "Uncanny", Freud relates the uncanny or daemonic to repetition-compulsion whose affect is morbid anxiety. The daemonic

---

<sup>77</sup>W.B. Yeats, "*Per Amica Silentia Lunae*", Mythologies, p. 331.

operates as the survival of an archaic narcissism which Bloom defines as the faith that mind can triumph over matter. Bloom cautions at this point that Freud's work on the uncanny destroys the enterprise of literary Romanticism. He sees Yeats and Stevens as the last sublime representatives of Coleridgean Romanticism. In the formula "the power of mind over the universe of death", he defines the Imagination as the mind's power and the object-world as the universe of death. Bloom contends that Freud is telling us that this formula is only a survival, a trace of the repression of an archaic narcissism. He find that "the daemonic or sublime is thus merely another evasion of the unacceptable necessity of dying".<sup>78</sup> Freud would have it that we cannot distinguish the daemonic or sublime from a variant of repetition compulsion whose affect is anxiety.

In Yeats, the uncanny or repressed spills over into every major psychic defense. Bloom traces Freud's insight into Yeatsean terms finding that both the awareness of the Muse and sexual love are compulsive repetitions of an obsessional anxiety. Bloom traces the negative aspect of the Romantic sublime in Yeats

The sublime, in this light becomes wholly demonic, a desperate 'evasion of dying' in a quest for symbolic immortality that must compulsively court the catastrophe of creative death in an obsessive pattern of demon repetition, in which 'awareness of the precursor',

---

<sup>78</sup>Bloom Poetry and Repression p. 209.

'the presence of the Muse', and the theme of sexual love compose one complex structure in a career of systematic misreading of self and others.<sup>79</sup>

For Bloom, the visionary artist can create only when at risk whereby he attains a Gnostic liberation or freedom. But this freedom is ultimately a delusion, a "lie against time and process" because it can never be completed. The only completion is an imaginative or literal death. "Like the Valentinian entity called Error, Yeats elaborated his own matter in the void, and like his masters Pater and Nietzsche, he came to regard the void as being itself sacred."<sup>80</sup>

Yeats was the antithetical questor of his own poetry and his "daemonic Gnosticism" was his defense against the anxiety of influence of his Romantic precursors (namely, Shelley, Blake and Pater). The Yeatsian sublime is thus representative of every related romantic questor's wish to achieve victory over the pressure of poetic anteriority.

Bloom analyses the poetic sublime through Gnosticism and Kabbalah. However, he refracts these ideas through Freudian psychology. With Bloom, we reach the poetic sublime by first crossing the Freudian sublime. He begins by stating that Freud's system is a science of anxiety. From the late Freud we learn that our instinctual life is

---

<sup>79</sup>Daniel O'Hara p. 358.

<sup>80</sup>O'Hara p. 212.

agonistic and self-destructive, and that our most authentic moments are characterized by negation, contraction and repression. Freud's account of anxiety is at one with the poetic sublime because anxiety is used for mastering anteriority by remembering rather than repeating the past. Freud indicates that anxiety is a form of expectation resembling desire. This enables us to see why poetry loves both love and anxiety. In "Freud and the Sublime: A Catastrophe Theory of Creativity"<sup>81</sup> Bloom works to a negative definition of the sublime by showing that negation allows poetry to free itself from the hysteria of repression. Bloom speaks of the paradox of repression and of the power brought into being by the influx of repression. It is in the sublime that the "deep structure" of rhetoric is revealed. What relates one trope to another in a systematic way and carries each trope from evasion to persuasion is that trope's function as defense. This insight answers de Man's definition of aporia as the problematic between rhetoric as a system of tropes and rhetoric as persuasion. Rhetoric, according to Bloom, is more the art of defense than the art of persuasion. Both rhetoric and Freud's science are a reliance on trope.

Bloom unites his Kabbalistic structures and psychology in his analysis of poetic repression. Like Lurianic *tikkun* restriction, in poetic repression you forget something in

---

<sup>81</sup>Bloom, Agon.

order to present something else. Poetic sublimation corresponds to *tzimtzum* as the poet concentrates something in order to avoid presenting that something and offers something else in its place.<sup>82</sup> "Substitution or breaking-of-the vessels between poetic repression and poetic sublimation is a transformation from the unconscious to consciousness just as the movement from poetic sublimation to poetic introjection or projection restores or returns representation to the unconscious."<sup>83</sup>

Freud formulated a catastrophe theory of the genesis of drives, both libido and the death drive. Bloom also contends that Freud held a catastrophe theory of the genesis of creativity and that our instinctual life is agonistic and self-destructive.<sup>84</sup> Because of this, Bloom uses Freud to substantiate his theory of the "anxiety of influence". Originally the idea of the sublime was literary, meaning a "loftiness" of style, of great verbal power. In the Enlightenment, this idea was strangely transformed into a vision of the terror in both nature and art. This terror allied uneasily with pleasurable sensations of narcissistic freedom. In his essay on the uncanny, Freud stated that the uncanny is in reality nothing new, but the familiar estranged by a process of repression.

---

<sup>82</sup> Bloom, Poetry and Repression p. 240.

<sup>83</sup>Bloom p. 240.

<sup>84</sup>Bloom, Agon pp. 87, 98.

In the sublime, Bloom locates a disjunction between experiential loss and rhetorical gain (which he somewhat pretentiously called the Crossing of Solipsism). The gap between life and art is revealed at this juncture by "the verbal glory of the Sublime in the life-of-the text. The sublime is an un-naming accomplished by a purposeful forgetting, a forgetting of anterior texts."<sup>85</sup> Strong criticism begins by finding the sublime moment which is the most intense negative moment in the poem. Bloom defines the sublime moment proper as "the gap of negation or disjunctive generation of meaning that [he has] been naming the Crossing of Solipsism, an abyss of middleness in every strong 'modern' poem."<sup>86</sup> Every reader comes to this agonistic place in the reading of a strong poem that imposes itself upon tradition. To become memorable, a poem must overcome the anterior traces of other poems. The topos of comparison is where the voice of the dead breaks through an image of voice itself. Poetic crisis for Bloom is a crisis in which quotations from other poems are being repressed. "The overcoming of crisis-in a poem - is never a true overcoming but is always an out-talking of a rival poem. This hyperbolic out-or over-talking achieves what Longinus called elevation of the Sublime."<sup>87</sup> This is always marked

---

<sup>85</sup>Bloom, Agon p. 226.

<sup>86</sup>Bloom p. 238.

<sup>87</sup>Bloom pp. 239-40.

by a negative moment, the burden of an already said. The movement of this repetition has the status of a tautology.

The sublime is always a quotation, a measuring that destroys the context of a text. All sublimes are transcendent, but this transcendence transcends not the world but anterior texts. Therefore neither Homer nor the Bible were sublime texts until the critics and Talmudists learned to quote from them.

Bloom seeks after the figure the poet makes, not so much in his poem, but as his poem relates to other texts, "This spectral figure, part poet's phantasmagoria, part reader's projected phantasm, haunts those interstices in a text, those spots of rhetorical disjunction and semantic indeterminacy, which have always been... Bloom's critical point."<sup>88</sup> Daniel O'Hara feels that Bloom's kind of criticism must end in a self-parody of interminable self revision because of his assumption that poetry speaks the language of the will and the will is an "apocalyptic antithetical force at odds with all that is not its anti-natural self - even with its own earlier representations."<sup>89</sup> For Bloom the irony of revisionism is the anxiety of influence.

---

<sup>88</sup>Daniel O'Hara, The Romance of Interpretation (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) p. 61.

<sup>89</sup>O'Hara, "Yeats and Theory" p. 63.

In analyzing Yeats's poetry, Bloom accepts the poet's identification of the Muse-principle with the "principle of self-destruction" which lures them on with an impossible vision of sublimity. The sublime exceeds while it conventionalizes its own formulations; it both authorizes and transgresses all authority structures. For O'Hara, the sublime cannot be separated from the principle of change itself and any attempt to theorize about it lends itself to an ironic vision destructive of all device except its self-representation as rhetoric. "The sublime, in short, constitutes an empty theoretical category of referring to the death of the critical imagination in its own vastly allusive capacities."<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup>O'Hara, "Yeats in Theory" p. 358.

## Chapter 5

## The Book of Edmond Jabès

The poetry of W.B. Yeats was examined because his thinking was both gnostic and mystical; it referred back to the Kabbalah without any relation to the Jewish spiritual past. Edmond Jabès may disavow the mystical tradition, yet the influences of Kabbalah on his work was profound

I believe I did find my way back to a certain tradition insofar as I immersed myself completely in the Kabbalah and the Talmud ... Being neither a mystic nor a gnostic, it is clearly not the letter of those texts that marked me, but the shape of the thinking, their spiritual depth, particular logic and inventiveness - I am thinking here of the Kabbalah. Those books were in complete harmony with my preoccupation as a writer. Not only did they stimulate my own questioning, they also seemed to prolong it into an immemorial past.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Edmond Jabès - *From the Desert to The Book: Dialogues with Marcel Cohen*. Trans. by Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY, Station Hill Press 1990) p. 48. I have followed Warren Motte's list of abbreviations for Jabès's works which are as follows:

- A - *Aely*
- BD - *Je bâtis ma demeure*
- BD - *The Book of Questions*
- BY - *The Book of Yukel, Return to the Book*
- CS - *Ça suit son cours*
- DD - *Dans la double dépendance du dit*
- DG - *The Book of Dialogue*
- DL - *Du désert au livre*
- E - *Elya*

In the postscript of a letter to the present author dated November 24, 1986, Edmond Jabès commented on his reading of the Kabbalah, indicating that it did not shape his thinking as much as it coincided with long held beliefs. It is not clear how much these beliefs were influenced by his Judaic background in view of the fact that his family was not actively religious. The letter stated:

*P.S. Une petite remarque concernant ma relation aux textes de la Tradition Juive. Je n'ai lu le Talmud plus sérieusement et la cabbale qu' après et non avant d'écrire la première trilogie des livres des questions. Ensuite ce sont mes interrogations d'écrivain qui m'ont rapproché des Talmudistes et des cabbalistes, à travers leurs interrogations du livre avec lesquelles découvert de nombreuses affinités.*

It is these affinities that Jabès questions.

'There will be a moment,' the oldest disciple continued, 'when we will have to stop interrogating, either because there will be no answer possible, or because we will not be able

- 
- EL - •(El, ou le dernier livre)
  - II - *L'Ineffaçable l'inaperçu*
  - LB - The Book of Questions: •El, or the Last Book
  - LD - *Le Livre du dialogue*
  - LP - *Le Livre du partage*
  - LQ - *Le Livre des questions*
  - LR - *Le Livre des ressemblances*
  - LY - *Le Livre de Yukel*
  - MM - *La Mémoire et la main*
  - P - *Le Parcours*
  - PL - *Le Petit Livre du la subversion hors de soupçon*
  - R - *Récit*
  - RL - *Le Retour du livre*
  - SD - *Le Soupçon le désert*
  - Y - *Yaël*
  - YE - The Book of Questions: Yaël, Elya, Aely

to formulate any further questions. So why should we begin?'

'You see,' said Reb Mendel, 'at the end of an argument, there is always a decisive question unsettled.'

'Questioning means taking the road to despair,' continued the second disciple, 'We will never know what we are trying to learn.'

We must begin by questioning the questions and we will end, not in a closed circle, but in an open spiral, still held by the question. The Book of Questions by Edmond Jabès invites questioning as the appropriate critical stance to the text; our problem therefore is to define the appropriate questions. Because Jabès concerns himself with the act of writing and being a Jew, and defines them both as "the same hope, the same waiting, and the same wearing down" (BQ 122), our initial question centers on this identification of Judaism and writing.

Can there be any expression, Jabès asks, which is not in the interrogative mode? Implicit in language is the need to know, to comprehend experience which can only be satisfied by a question. "What generates language is the recognition of an absence or of a lack which the question attempts to compensate. Speech travels from human lips out to a world which it challenges, for 'the wings of the word are questions.'<sup>2</sup> The question initiates a dialogue; in a silent world, it becomes the independent act, which is at

---

<sup>2</sup>Richard Stamelman, Review of "Edmond Jabès's The Book of Questions", MNL 94 (May 79), p. 873.

once subversive in its inherent skepticism, and life enhancing through its doubts which reinforce belief. It is through questioning and dialogue that the self acquires being and definition. Jabès asserts, "you are silent: I was. You speak: I am" (BQ 29).

With questioning, one asks, the other may respond, the two do not speak together, but in turn. For Maurice Blanchot, this stop, this interval, carries the mysteries of language as it doubles the power of expression. It creates the interruption necessary for the sequence of words and in its discontinuity, assures the continuity of understanding. The interruption may be seen as the breathing pause in a dialectical discourse, where the stop enables one to understand, or the pause may induce a distance between speakers which is irreducible. It is this distance which insures the "strangeness" between men, the otherness over an infinite distance. It is to this interruption that there corresponds in language the hiatus that introduces writing - that marks the "relation of words into an essentially asymmetrical field ruled by discontinuity."<sup>3</sup> For Jabès, questioning takes the form of a quest - as his identity, both personal and metaphysical is bound up in language and writing.

---

<sup>3</sup>Maurice Blanchot, "Interruptions," The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabès. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985) p. 46.

To write about being Jewish, of the modern Jew as a wanderer and exile, is not unique. What is unique is to write in the style of ancient Hebrew text and postmodernist poetics about the coincidence of identity of poet and Jew.

In a statement frequently quoted, Jabès writes:

First I thought I was a writer. Then I realized I was a Jew. Then I no longer distinguished the writer in me from the Jew because one and the other are only torments of an ancient word. (BY 195)

Jabès begins with the recognition of the Jews as the people of the book. "Every Jew lives within a personified word which allows him to enter into all the written words. ... The Jew's fatherland is a sacred text amid the commentaries it has given rise to." (BQ 100). The definition of the race, of the religion, is predicated on the Jews' relation to the book of God. Following his exile in 1956, Jabès began to examine his Jewish identity and to study the Talmud and the Kabbalah. But it was the writing and Rabbinical commentaries of the Diaspora, the Midrash, that most affected him; so he began to people his writing with the poet-rabbis. These Rabbis took on a central importance because they were interpreters, "the best interpreters of the book." And the style of the Rabbis, the questioning, the concern with the word, began to blend with a French poetic sensibility. What was it in the ancient style that was compatible with a modern poetics?

The Midrash is commentary of the written Torah; it concerns itself with endless verbal interpretation. This emphasis on interpretation results in a form of intertextuality, as texts interact and interpenetrate each other, free from any consideration of linear chronology. By the sixteenth century, the Talmud was commented on in a style of exegesis called *pilpul* (a logical hairsplitting). *Pilpul* was a method of complex dialectics attempting to create a harmony between incongruent matters and retorts between two sages.<sup>4</sup> The form of the Talmud was unique as an assemblage of voices from different times and countries brought together within the perimeters of the text. The style is freely associative and its manner often cryptic. One need only look at The Book of Questions to see how Jabès reworks this tradition in the dialogues of his Rabbis. The form Jabès chose, of a "shifting, seemingly displaced colloquy of disparate voices" which implies a story which is never directly told, holds parallels to the format of the Talmud.

Because of the structure of Hebrew and the nonvocalized text of scripture, a work may be read in several ways. Variations of letter combinations permitted variant readings of words. As the Torah originally had no vowel punctuation, one spelling could produce more than one word. In .El, Or

---

<sup>4</sup>Susan Handelman, The Slayers of Moses. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982) p. 47.

The Last Book, Jabès verbal play (*Yaël, Elya, Nul, L'un, Livre, Libre, Seul, Seuil*) is very close to the manner of Midrashic practice. It also brings us back to the function of the letter as marking the written aspect of the text. The letter becomes the assurance of our textual consciousness.

In Elya, when the narrator speaks of himself as a "man of the Letter," (Elya 23) he is referring to the priority of the letter over the word. This suggests a reaction against the unicity, the "seeming totalization implicit in the word." Derrida has noted Jabès's insistence on the letter and feels that it is at the base of his literary project. The letter precedes the word; it is an ancient "artifact". Motte notes that Jabès's assertion of the anteriority of the letter favors the graphic at the expense of the phonic. The interest is not in speaking, but in writing, and the letter is the minimal graphic sign.

However, Jabès does not rest content with the letter as minimal sign; it comes to supplant the book and the name of God. In the tradition of the Kabbalah, Abraham Abulafia elaborated a system of the combination of letters called *Hokmath ha Tseruf*. Letters arranged in various permutations are used to achieve a mystical state through meditation. Abulafia's combination enabled a contemplation of the divine, the letters resulting in a "music of pure thought."

A further example of letter magic is the *Golem* or magical homunculus. The *Golem* was a clay statue which became animated by the marking of five letters upon its forehead; if any of the letters were erased or destroyed, the *Golem* would once again become clay. Gershom Scholem writes that "the creation of the Golem was, as it were, a particularly sublime experience felt by the mystic who became absorbed in the mysteries of alphabetic combinations described in the Book of Creation."<sup>5</sup>

Warren Motte noted the parallels between the Kabbalistic/Hasidic myth and Jabès's poetic enterprise. The letter animates Jabèsian *écriture* and the combinations of the letter results in "a belief in its aesthetic efficacy that verges on the mystical."<sup>6</sup>

What we call the Torah today comprises a written and oral tradition. According to the commentaries, the five books of the Torah were originally given by God to Moses orally, and only after the breaking of the Tablets were they presented in the form of a written text. Over the centuries, Rabbis analyzed this text and these oral commentaries (in addition to other books of the Prophets, etc.) attained equal status with the original text. Thus two sources of authority, written and oral, coexisted; and

---

<sup>5</sup>Gershom Scholem, Major Trends p. 99.

<sup>6</sup>Warren Motte Jr., Questioning Edmond Jabès (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) p. 34.

as the scribes and Rabbis produced their discussions, these too were included within revelation. What is of importance here is that the written Torah would henceforth include the very attempts to understand it. Commentary and exegesis, latent within the text, become part of the text. The assumption here is that ambiguity, contradiction, enigma are intentionally a part of the written Torah, thus allowing for opening of interpretation and the revelation of hidden secrets.

In Jabès's writings, the commentaries on the text, on the written nature of the text itself, become the crux of the work. It occupies the center, displacing what in the novel is traditionally occupied by the narrative. Jabès strongly emphasizes the written character of his book, the black marking of ink on the white page, the margins marking the indefinable boundaries of the book. Yet even in a writer so strongly aware of the written, the oral element is incorporated as a longing for voice, presence, for origins.

You have guessed that I prize highly what is said - even more perhaps than what is written. Because what is written lacks my voice. And that is what I believe in. I mean the creative voice, not the voice which is merely an accessory and a servant. (BQ 64).

It is interesting to read Gershom Scholem's analysis of the Zohar and to note the resemblance of Jabès's work:

The Zohar is written in pseudepigraphic form, almost, one might say, in the form of a mystical novel. In itself, this is not a new departure in style, for the

pseudepigraphic form had been employed by many previous writers, including Kabbalists. Already the authors of the Book Bahir made use of the device and spoke through the mouths of older authorities - some of them mere names of fiction, such as Rabbi Amora or Rabbi Rehumai . . . . . The author is a homiletical rather than a systematic thinker.<sup>7</sup>

But Jabès's use of the Zohar goes beyond similarities of style on the use of fictional Rabbis. The Kabbalah provided the concept of the withdrawal and negativity of God; it offered the metaphors of exile. Harold Bloom has analyzed the Kabbalah both "as a model for the process of poetic influence, and a map for the problematic pathways of interpretation."<sup>8</sup> In the Kabbalah, the *Sefirot*, or emanations from God can be seen as a desire for difference and an end to exile. Bloom sees this desire to be elsewhere as a definition of the motive of metaphor and indeed for the life-affirming nature of all poetry. As a theory of writing, it denies the absolute distinction between writing and inspired speech, between presence and absence. The Kabbalists exalted "rhetorical substitution, the principle of the second chance, while like poets, they theoretically celebrated the first chance alone, God's creation being that first chance."<sup>9</sup> The Kabbalists, elevating rhetorical

---

<sup>7</sup>Scholem p. 157.

<sup>8</sup>Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism p. 52.

<sup>9</sup>Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism p. 79.

substitution to the place of magic, saw that God had spoken in order to form the world.

Jabès writes as a Kabbalist:

At the origin, there is language. God is a circle of luminous letters. He is each of the letters of His Name. He is the middle, the void of the circle where man and the woman about to be mother stand. (BQ 78).

The movement from the letter to the negativity of the void which is present in some aspects of Hebraic thinking poses a supreme challenge to Greek metaphysics. The idea that the earth was created, and that matter was not eternal, but rather came into being through the word of God was a threat to Greek thought. In certain aspects of Judaism there is posited

an extreme negativity at the center of things, and this negativity is associated with language. One does not attempt to transcend the realm of language to a vision of being, but rather probes the inner world of the word to find the key to reality.<sup>10</sup>

In both Judaic writing and in Jabès, we find an emphasis, not on imagination but on interpretation, not on theophany, but on textuality.

The problem of exile is central to Jewish history, and the Kabbalah provides the metaphor of exile. Because of his own personal experience, Jabès sees exile as central to his being Jewish and to being a writer. To live in exile means

---

<sup>10</sup>Susan Handelman, "Jabès and the Rabbinic Tradition," The Sin of the Book, p. 88.

to write in exile. Writer and Jew are both haunted by an "ancient word" whose loss traces back to the central catastrophe of separation, the breaking of the Tablets of the Law. With the shattering of the Tables, the Jews were exiled from divine language. This separation in the religious sense is parallel to the writer's separation from the power of pure and total expression.

The text exists in a state of vacancy and *deracinement* profoundly different from the state of plenitude that once prevailed in the pre-exilic, prelapsarian homeland of the divine word. It is intimately joined to a temporal world whose precariousness and discontinuity it echoes.<sup>11</sup>

Jabès makes the connection between the breaking of the Tablets and the rupture of modern Jewish history. For Blanchot, The Book of Questions is written twice as it interrogates the movement of the rupture by which the book is broken and rewritten. As it is rewritten we have the book in which "'the virile world of the renewed history of a people folded in on itself' is designated - a double movement that Edmond Jabès supports: supports without unifying it, or even being able to reconcile it."<sup>12</sup> Blanchot sees the Breaking of the Tablets as the central metaphor for Jewish displacement and exile that has at its roots the displacement from God's word:

---

<sup>11</sup>Richard Stamelman, "Nomadic Writing: The Poetics of Exile," The Sin of the Book p. 94.

<sup>12</sup>Blanchot p. 49.

Because, first of all, the Tablets of Law were broken when still only barely touched by the divine hand ... and were written again, but not in their original form, so that it is from an already destroyed word that man learns the demand that must speak to him: there is no real first understanding, no initial and unbroken word, as if one could ever speak except the second time, after having refused to listen and having taken a distance in regard to the origin. Second - and this perhaps the most important teaching of the 'virile word' - the first text ... is also at the same time a commented text that not only must be re-uttered in its identity, but learned in its inexhaustible difference.<sup>13</sup>

The Breaking of the Tablets presupposed the displacement of the book of Jabès. He says, "freedom, at first, was engraved ten times in the Tablets of the Law, but we deserved it so little that the prophet broke them in anger." (BD 124).

In his anger at the Jewish people for worshipping the golden calf, God withdrew his word, creating a distance and an absence which gave rise to the human word. Thus the language of man coincides with the movement of exile. The first Tablets of the Law were broken, the second set replacing them were written in a "fallen" writing, a script that is marked by the distance God had placed between himself and man.

"No one," writes Gershom Scholem, "has yet read the Torah of the Tree of Life which was inscribed on the first

---

<sup>13</sup>Blanchot p. 49.

tablets. Israel was entrusted only with the second set of tablets, and they render the Torah as it is read under the dominion of the Tree of Knowledge and Differentiation, which is also called the Tree of Death."<sup>14</sup>

The Book of the Law in its final version is thus separated and in exile from its origin. The human text is a fragment of the original unreadable text which all writing desires to repossess; yet it is this very shattering of the text which makes writing human. It replaces the divine word with the human word, imperfect, mortal, within the flow of time and history. According to Jabès, by forcing Moses to break the Tablets, the Jews gave Moses a lesson in reading:

It was necessary for Moses to break the book in order for the book to become human ... This we do as well. We destroy the book when we read it, in order to make it into another book. The book is always born from a broken book. And the word too, is born from the broken word.<sup>15</sup>

In his essay on Jabès, Derrida also places the Breaking of the Tablets as the source of poetic autonomy:

God separated himself from himself in order to let us speak, in order to astonish and to interrogate us. He did so not by speaking, but by keeping still, by letting silence interrupt his voice and his signs, by letting the Tablets be broken. In Exodus God

---

<sup>14</sup>Scholem, The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality, p. 71, henceforth designated as I.P.A.

<sup>15</sup>Edmond Jabès, "Book of the Dead: An Interview with Edmond Jabès," Sin of the Book by Paul Auster, p. 23.

repented and said so at least twice, before the first and before the new Tablets, between the original speech and writing and, within Scripture, between the origin and repetition ... Writing is, thus, originally hermetic and secondary. Our writing, certainly, but already His, which starts with the stifling of his voice and the dissimulation of his Face. This difference, this negativity in God is our freedom, the transcendence and the verb which can relocate the purity of their negative origin only in the possibility of the Question.<sup>16</sup>

It is at the junction of this difference, this negativity in God that Jabès considers his "metaphysical" question.

What I mean by God in my work is something we come up against, an abyss, a void, something against which we are powerless. It is a distance ... the distance always between things ... God is perhaps a word without meaning. And the extraordinary thing is that in Jewish tradition God is invisible, and as a way of underscoring this invisibility, he has an unprouncable name ... When you can't say the name you are standing before nothing.<sup>17</sup>

Jabès's writing about God as a negativity emerges from within Jewish tradition, not of the Talmudic texts, but through the Kabbalah. Post-structuralist critical theory meshes easily with the esotericism of the Kabbalah. Harold Bloom makes use of the tropes of God's emanation, the

---

<sup>16</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," Writing and Difference, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup>"Book of the Dead," p. 19.

*Sefirot, Behinot, Tzimtsumim*, as non-representational, rhetorical, linguistic, anti-iconic.

Writing of Isaac Luria's theory, Gershom Scholem defines the doctrine of *tsimtsum* as a withdrawal or concentration of God. The concept of *tsimtsum*, the effacement of God, informs Jabès's concept of writing. Writing represents the withdrawal by which God retreats into his own being.

God communicates himself through the white spaces around words and by means of a hidden, white writing. He is heard, but only through his silence; present, but only through his invisibility; named, but only through an unknowable, unprounceable word; perceived, but only through the void his withdrawal has created; felt, but only through the whiteness and the nothingness that stands in his place.<sup>18</sup>

Jabès defines God as "the distance that is between things."<sup>19</sup> The book is where "God asserts himself, but where he withdraws into a word struck deaf and blind (A 117/292). As Stamelman notes, writing retracts the separation of man and God and the effacement by which God retreats into his own being. Jabès has developed a writing which resembles *tsimtsum*, where exile and rupture abide, where the writer-creator must exile himself from his creation. Authorial presence disappears, words move

---

<sup>18</sup>Richard Stamelman, Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) p. 239.

<sup>19</sup>"Book of the Dead," p. 19.

autonomously, "writing continues tenuously to exist, articulating the randomness and errancy of the loss and exile that have given it existence."<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes contends that as the author withdraws from the text, it becomes "a multi-dimensional space which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture."<sup>21</sup> The modern scriptor, for Barthes, is "cut off from any voice, borne by a gesture of pure inscription, traces a field without origin - or which, at least has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins."<sup>22</sup> We are left then, not only with the exile of authorial presence, but a breaking of the "word vessels" that once seemed stable and definitive. As through the cracks of these shattered words flows indeterminate meanings that evoke the nature of loss and rupture.

The first act of God as *Ein-Sof*, or Infinite Being, was a self limiting act of contraction as his essence became more and more hidden. This interpretation defines the radical act that made creation possible. How else could a finite world arise from the infinite presence of God if

---

<sup>20</sup>Stamelman p. 239.

<sup>21</sup>Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," Image, Music, Text, trans. Stephen Heath, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) p. 146.

<sup>22</sup>Barthes p. 146.

there were no withdrawal to make room for creation? Instead of emanation, we have the opposite, contraction, instead of a God who revealed himself in firm contours, we have a God who remains hidden in his own recesses and has created the void as his first act. As Scholem says, "One is tempted to interpret this withdrawal of God into his own Being in terms of exile, of banishing Himself from his totality - into profound seclusion. Regarded this way, the idea of *Tsimtsum* is the deepest symbol of exile that could be thought of. This paradox of *Tsimtsum* ... is the only serious attempt ever made to give substance to the idea of Creation out of Nothing."<sup>23</sup> The Jewish God thus became utterly separate from the world, Other, withdrawn, absent. It is the striking insight of Lurianic doctrine that every creative act requires negativity, withdrawal, absence. At each succeeding stage of creation more *Tsimtsumim* were required; after each withdrawal, God projected a divine emanation or ray into the void.

In Jabès's writings there are many references to this idea:

God has disappeared, existing only in creation. Being the Principle of Unity - a circle tightening in infallible memory of the circle - He was going to become the dazzling center of clear absence.

Never again will we escape exile,  
The book is among its true sages  
(E 144).

---

<sup>23</sup>Scholem p. 261.

·*El* or *le dernier livre* (the book whose very title contains one of the names of God, *El*) begins with a direct quotation about God's manifestation of Himself in a point. This image recurs in *Elya* in the story of the sage who dips his pen into ink to draw a dot. "The circle," he said, "which the blotter has made into a black dot invaded by the night is God." (*Elya* p. 30). This black point, the dot, is God's manifestation of Himself, it becomes for Jabès the cover and title of the book ·El. It contains one of the paradoxes of God, for while it is one of his manifestations, it is also his absence and exile from Himself.

The other Kabbalistic doctrine with bearing on Jabès's writing is "The Breaking of the Vessels" or *shevirat ha Kelim*, where once again exile is central to the creative process. With the breaking of the vessels which contain the light of God's emanation, nothing remains in its proper place; everything is somewhere else.

But a being that is not in its proper place is in exile. Thus, since that primordial act, all being has been a being in exile, in need of being led back and redeemed. The breaking of the vessels continues into all the further stages of emanation and creation; everything is in some way broken, everything has a flaw, everything is unfinished.<sup>24</sup>

Thus in the Kabbalah, the entire creation, not just the Tablets of the Law, has been shattered. "The universe

---

<sup>24</sup>Scholem, p. 261.

itself has undergone a primordial shattering. God has withdrawn; the Vessels are broken; the divine sparks are lost in the material world."<sup>25</sup> As Scholem reads it, Kabbalah is a great myth of exile, a passionate opening of the sacred text to the sorrows of a people in exile from whom the face of God is all too often hidden, and to whom the world appears as a shattered vessel.<sup>26</sup>

Those themes of the Kabbalah which arose from the opening of the Rabbinic text - exile, absence, the withdrawal of God, shattered light, separated lovers - become the themes of Jabès's books, transformed, yet within this tradition. Thus in the wake of Heidegger's and Derrida's deconstruction of Greek onto-theology, the concept of the otherness of God has once again gained acceptance. The problem facing theology has been "to incorporate time and negation to construct a concept of deity that transgresses the affirmation of theism and embraces atheistic negations as well."<sup>27</sup> This sense of God as other and absent is at the heart of Jabès's writings. It is at the basis of his concept of the divinity of the Word, as God's divinity is inseparable from creation and the word. "God is *before* and *after* God. God died creating, in

---

<sup>25</sup>Gershon Scholem. On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism. p. 112.

<sup>26</sup>Susan Handelman. "Jabès and the Rabbinic Tradition" p. 76.

<sup>27</sup>Handelman p. 70.

creating Himself, that is to say in multiplying his death  
 ... . Creation consecrates God and man and, hence, their  
 void." (Y 35-36).

Because the past can never be recovered in its full intensity, because the immediacy of experience can never be translated into words, because the objects of longing are forever eluding the grasp of desire, because the self is so plural and protean as to be always different from the definition or expression words may give it and because the notion of a beginning of an origin is a construction of human inaction - a fiction bespeaking the longing for an idealized, perfectly complete but nonexistent source - language is therefore in a state of profound irreversible exile: a rootlessness that reflects the essential separation and distance at the center of being.<sup>28</sup>

Jabès has made the errancy of language the subject of much of his writing. He has used a wide array of techniques to achieve his rhetoric of discontinuity, mixing poetry, prose, quotation, aphorisms, dialogues, commentaries, riddles and parables. He gives prominence to the space between words, the margins surrounding the text, and variations of typeset to achieve his ends.

As the letter evolves in Jabès's work, its functions increase, "no longer a semiotic artifact bound up in a necessarily deforming web of representation, no longer confined to mere taxonomic status, the letter begins to be and, in being, it guarantees the existence of that which it

---

<sup>28</sup>Stamelman, Lost Beyond Telling p. 225.

incorporates."<sup>29</sup> Thus the final stage of the letter is achieved in a movement from the human to the divine. "Four letters sufficed for God to be God." (DL 178). Even as Jabès proclaims his atheism, he constantly evokes the divine. His works strain toward it even while acknowledging its absence and unattainability. This seems to be a defining factor in his "Judaism after God" inasmuch as only in the effort to a nonexistent end does the existential value emerge.

The divine is the source of considerable longing for Jabès God. Jabès draws a distinction between *Dieu* with a capital D and the concept of divinity; his interest, with God as the source of a poetics of absence, is with the former rather than the latter. Where *Dieu* is used as a metaphor, Jabès identifies God as representing the "void". Asked by Marcel Cohen how he would identify "Judaism after God", Jabès answered:

- For me the words 'Jew' and 'God' are, it is true, metaphors. 'God' is the metaphor for emptiness; 'Jew' stands for the torment of God, of emptiness. Simultaneously, I try to get as close as possible to the historical meaning of the words 'Jew' and 'God'.

But the historical meaning, already so overloaded and overdetermined, often overwhelms the metaphor and the reader will read Jabès's text without making the metaphoric substitution. It is when Jabès reverts to the Kabbalistic

---

<sup>29</sup>Motte p. 36.

nation of God himself incorporating the void that his "metaphor" functions most effectively.

Many critics, including Stamelman, Motte, Hoffman and Bounoure, have noted that when God is used as a metaphor for the void, the language becomes unstable and ungrounded. Motte has pointed out that this tactic is fraught with paradox in a discourse that consciously rejects transcendence. This is due to the fact that metaphor is "a transcendent linguistic figure insofar as it engages complex semiotic orders, to deploy it explicitly and consistently in a discourse that presents itself as atranscendental results necessarily in paradox."<sup>30</sup> However, as Jabès explores God through the letter, the paradox motivates his text.

God spoke and what He said became our symbols. The shape of a letter is perhaps the shape of His face. God has as many faces as there are letters in an alphabet. (LB 64, EL 72).

God, in this manner, reiterates the proscription of the visual representation of God. The letter fulfills a transcendent function for Jabès, it can be seen as totalizing construct, a position that Jabès is often quick to denounce: "A sole letter can contain the book, the universe". (CS 59) Jabès rejected the word in favor of the letter because both word and God are totalizing constructs. But when God has absconded, "the letter is no longer

---

<sup>30</sup>Motte p. 37.

grounded, no longer adequate: it becomes void of significance."<sup>31</sup>

Jabès insists on the determinative power of the individual letter working through word to text. He has noticed this strategy in Derrida's texts and discusses it in *Ça suit son cours*

You are against all forms of repression. First and foremost, there where the book solicits you, you are against the repression exercised upon the letter; for the letter is, perhaps, an origin diverted from the origin, granted that it is bound to a signified whose weight it must in part support. It is thus that in the word *différence*, one letter, the seventh, exchanged against the first letter of the alphabet is secret, silently. And that sufficed for the text to be other. (CS 58).

Examples abound in Jabès's own text of similar letter play. "One letter in common is enough for two words to know each other." (LB 10, EL 15). A single vowel, an *i*, is sufficient for Jabès to link "justice" "*Loi*" and "*Bien*". The graphic effect of the trans-substitution of the letter enables Jabès to say :

Deprived of the air of its r, *la mort*, 'death', dies asphyxiated in the word, *le mot*. (LB 33, EL 39).

The word *amour* resembles *mort* and the word *mur*. As Jabès plays with these resemblance, he reverses the hierarchical relation of the literal and semantic. Motte has noted that

---

<sup>31</sup>Gabriel Bounoure. Edmond Jabès *La demeure et le livre* (Montipellier: Fata Morgana, 1984) p. 33

privilege and priority are often accorded to the literal meaning.

According to Robert Duncan, Jabès's working of "écrit/récit" is haunted by Ferdinand de Saussure's anagrams "and by his idea of a written language, world in itself, evoking sound as it evokes image, beyond resemblances."<sup>32</sup>

While Gabriel Bounoure sees surrealist influence in Jabès's letter play, there are also Kabbalistic elements. Gershon Scholem writes of several mystical techniques which play a role in Kabbalah. *Notarikon* interprets the letters of a word as abbreviations of whole sentences while *Temurah* involves the interchange of letter according to certain systematic rules.<sup>33</sup>

Motte asserts that the resemblance of two words accounts for the genesis of writing in Jabès, that *Récit* is a meditation upon the words *il* and *le*. One can compare the oscillation between the two terms to another of Abraham Abulafia's practices, *dillug* and *kefitsah*. These methods of "jumping" or "skipping" are, according to Scholem, "a very remarkable method of using associations as a way of meditation."<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>Robert Duncan, "The Delirium of Meaning," The Sin of the Book p. 20.

<sup>33</sup>Scholem, Major Trends p. 100.

<sup>34</sup>Scholem p. 135.

Abulafia's methods have a direct bearing on Jabès's study of the letter. Abulafia looked for an absolute object for meditation, something capable of acquiring the highest importance without having much importance of its own. The letters of the Hebrew alphabet became the ideal "object" of contemplation because they were in a sense abstract and non-corporeal. He went on to develop a theory of the mystical contemplation of letters and their configuration as the constituents of God's name.<sup>35</sup> The name of God thus becomes the central object of contemplation as it reflects the totality of existence. It is through the name that everything acquires meaning, yet on its own has no concrete or particular meaning. "In short, Abulafia believed that whoever succeeds in making this great Name of God, the least concrete and perceptible thing in the world, the object of his mediation is on the way to true mystical ecstasy."<sup>36</sup>

Abulafia developed from this concept the discipline called *Hokhmah ha-Tseruf* or the science of combination of letters as an aid to meditation. The combination of letters may have no meaning but they partake of divine language as the substance of reality. "There is a language which expresses the pure thought of God and the letters of this spiritual language are the elements both of the fundamental spiritual reality and of the profoundest understanding and

---

<sup>35</sup>Scholem p. 132.

<sup>36</sup>Scholem p. 133.

knowledge. Abulafia's mysticism is a course in the divine language."<sup>37</sup>

Scholem compares Abulafia's method of letter combination to musical composition. It has a "mystical logic" which corresponds to the inner harmony of thought in its movement towards God. Every letter represents a whole world to the mystic. In his manuals The Book of Eternal Life, The Light of the Intellect, The Words of Beauty and The Book of Combination, Abulafia offers methods from the actual articulation of the permutations and combinations, to their writing and finally, from the writing to a pure meditation.

Articulation, *mitva*, writing, *miktav* and thought, *mahsav*, thus form three superimposed layers of meditation. Letters are the elements of every one of them, element which manifest themselves in ever more spiritual forms. From the motion of the letters of thought result the truths of reason. He differentiates further between matter and form of the letters in order to approach closer to their spiritual nucleus; he immerses himself in the combinations of the pure forms of the letters, which now, being purely spiritual forms, impress themselves upon his soul.<sup>38</sup>

Warren Motte devotes an entire chapter of his book on Jabès to the letter. He traces the use of anagram and palindrome back to Kabbalistic practice. He quotes George Auclair on

---

<sup>37</sup>Scholem p. 133.

<sup>38</sup>Scholem p. 135.

Jabès's use of the palindrome in light of Kabbalistic theories of the sacred character of language.

When Jabès enunciates the palindrome *L'un = Nul*, isn't he, as an atheist, inviting us to see that French also holds secrets (troubling thought) that only a patient or inspired search for hidden permutation of letters within words can reveal. If vestiges of a fictive but nonetheless much regretted original language resonate in the palindrome, Jabès seem to suggest that the symmetry and purity of the original language can be recaptured in some measure through painstaking work of the letter.<sup>39</sup>

The names of the fourth, fifth and sixth volumes of The Book of Questions, *Yaël*, *Elya* and *Aely* are anagrammatic. Jabès himself suggest that the name *Yaël* generates the others in the series. The anagram itself is figures of Jabès's textual strategy, as each successive work can be seen as a combination exercise built on a preceding text.

Gershom Scholem writes on the mysticism of letters,

For the Kabbalist, ... linguistic mysticism is at the same time a mysticism of writing. Every act of speaking is, in the world of the spirit, at once an act of writing, and every writing is potential speech, which is destined to become audible<sup>40</sup>

However, the most significant form of the anagram has to do with the Teregrammaton, the unprouncable name of God. The vowels of both *Elohim* or *Adonai* are interpolated in the

---

<sup>39</sup>Motte p. 43.

<sup>40</sup>Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of Kabbalah" p. 79.

Hebrew letters of the Tetergrammaton and in modern transliteration in the Roman alphabet and result in *Yahweh*. Motte traced the anagram in the septology as a progression away from the word *Yahweh*. "The first syllable of *Yaël* reproduces the first syllable of the name of God; in *Elya* this syllable remains intact but it deferred; in *Aley* its component letters are split, and the sound is not voiced; in the point, *El*, it is absent. In *Jabès*, as we have seen, the letter is often proposed as a figure of a divinity who has absconded; thus the anagrammatic series in the septology can be seen to recapitulate the story of dead letters in their four letters. (LR 95)<sup>41</sup>

"The four letters J U I F which designate my origin are your four fingers" (BQ. 19). The question of origin, like the notion of the center, is problematic in *Jabès's* work, at once dislocated, denied, and deferred while it remains the object of longing. In this passage *Jabès* designates the letters of the word *juif*, but elsewhere, *Jabès* states that this word merely serves provisionally for the Tetragrammaton in its absence. *Jabès* makes the connection between the Tetragrammaton and writing, thus suggesting that the mystical name of God is both the origin and center of writing. "A man of writing is a man of the four letters, which form the unprounceable Name." (YE 250, A 60).

---

<sup>41</sup>Motte, pp. 44-45.

The name of God controls the act of writing. "Thus any page of writing is fashioned under the sign of four letters which are the masters of it's fate, with power to make it disappear through the expedient of the words containing them." (YE 250, A 61). There is no contradiction inherent in this strategy because the ineffable is not materialized under the influence of the materiality of the text; instead, the nature of the Tetragrammation is such that it dislocates the text into the realm of the silent and absent, the realm of the "four erased letter of His name." (YE 216, A 23).

"All writing embraces, finally, the unprounceability of the name of Yahweh." (LR 140). Because Jabès has given priority to the written over the oral, what is unprounceable is also unwritable. Writing does not have the prelapsarian power of language, but it is an end to which writing strains. To this end, Jabès adopts the Tetragrammaton, exploiting both its transcendence and its indeterminacy, and uses it as a figure of writing. The divine source of language, because it is always deferred, cannot serve as a salvation, but neither can the possibilities of purely human language, bound up as it is in the contradictions of representation. "In frustration man invented the sign, which, at first, was merely the image of an image, the representation of an irrerepresentable in search of itself." (P 25). Where language is inadequate to the needs of expression, the letter remains, "the wandering sign of all

wandering signs, pulling everything it constructs into exile and dislocation."<sup>42</sup>

Jabès parallels God's creation with the authors writing, but it is a post-modernist concept based on paradox.

In a universe filled with syllables [the author] will assume a manifold name, having learned that every letter is a name. When the initiative escapes him, when his voice suddenly stops taking the lead, he knows he is finally writing, has been written, and represents from now on a tiny part of the book which is surging forward and will destroy him as it breaks him. (Y 283).

The void, the abyss, the sense of rupture is at the center of the content of Jabès's thinking; it forms the foundation of his vision. And because it is so fundamental to his outlook, it is all pervasive; it affects his concept of language. The poetic word is not rooted in stability; writing, like the very life it represents, is in exile. It is fragmented, displaced, torn by lacunae, filled with traces of lost correspondences. It is written "in the sands of the desert." "An impermanence that belongs to the extravagant nature of meaning itself; nomadic in form and intention, poetry presents a mimesis of the world's errancy."<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup>Motte p. 51.

<sup>43</sup>Handelman p. 70.

Jabès writes the poetics of exile, decentered and discontinuous. The impossibility of translating the immediacy of experience into words, or of giving definition to the reality that is elusive and beyond our grasp has changed our view of language. Language itself is in a state of exile, its rootlessness reflects the dislocation at the center of being. If we must seek the center in this text, we find only a place of emptiness and silence. The literary space of Jabès's text is the void and abyss, it is distant also in time. His writing is an act of recuperation, a working back to origins, a reverse eschatology. It is an area that exceeds the power of the word, where only the scream can reflect the pain and horrors. What gives energy and individuality to Jabès's writing is his locating language within deconstructive poetics and Kabbalistic thought. Yet these two views are compatible, for although there is present in the Kabbalah the divine word, it is ultimately beyond understanding. Even here silence is at the heart of the language. Paradoxically, the meaningless word is full of meaning.

In his essay on Jabès, Derrida sees absence at the heart of the question. It is this absence which seeks to produce itself in the book, but in the process, in being pronounced, is lost. Absence remains inaccessible and impenetrable. "To gain access to it is to lose it; to show it is to hide it; to acknowledge it is to lie. Nothing is

our principle concern, said Reb Idar" (p. 188) and "Nothing - like Being - can only keep silent and hide itself." (BD 27) For Jabès, the phenomenon of absence is crucial, but we must make a distinction between absence and nonexistence. Absence implies that being once was; it is not equivalent to non-being. Absence, particularly in Jabès's writing, is a decisive reality.

The absence written about exists in the word itself. There is a rift in the word, a displacement between signified and signifier. Words do not hold stable meaning; they melt into one another. Jabès writes of the writer on the threshold (*seuil*) and the writer alone (*seul*). We cannot separate *cri* (the scream) from *écrit* (the writing). We no longer operate within the security of boundaries. In the very center of *El* there is a chart with *nul* (nothing) at the top of the page and *L'un* (the one) on the bottom. It is as if this sums up the entire work as the particular becomes canceled out in the nothing.

Over and over we see that Jabès's writing is marked by displacement, deferment, lacunae. The rift within the word operates on the level of the sentence. The blank white spaces around the words say as much as the marks of ink on the paper. They signify the void and abyss that forever surround the words, and as Lacan points out, the unconscious is present everywhere in language, even in the margins. Jabès himself reveals the process of his writing within his

work. "All my books are about cutting, about disjunction."  
 (BD 24). This is not incision simply for the sake of play,  
 but rather for advancing by means of the word itself. Jabès  
 writes:

This work of cutting is at the very heart of writing, at the very heart of writing itself. Why, because in words there are things that attract and repel each other ... Tensions and relationships arise from the fact that they have the same letters, or because there is some kind of sonority or assonance ... And this working with words can only be explored by means of the word itself, not by means of anything else.<sup>44</sup>

Because the act of writing must be accomplished in the act of interrupting itself, the text must mirror the difficulty. Jabès states that in a typical page there are:

isolated statements and paragraphs separated by white spaces, then broken by parenthetical remarks, by italicized passage, and italics within parentheses, so that the reader's eye can never grow accustomed to a single unbroken visual field, one reads in fits and starts - just as it was written.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, an examination of the surface of the text reveals much about Jabès's writing. It is very carefully controlled; he is conscious of the print, and its careful commingling with italics. The margins, the markings of ink of the letters, all take on significance. For him, there is no gap between subtext and conscious text.

---

<sup>44</sup>"Book of the Dead," p. 23.

<sup>45</sup>"Book of the Dead," p. 6.

Jabès himself gives us the key to the structure of his book. Although Yukel promises to give us the story of the olive tree, the date tree, the donkey, he does not.

'Yukel, you have not told us the story of the olive tree which died of no longer finding the soil of our country. You have not told us the story of the date tree which died at being left at the threshold of our country ...

'Yukel, you talked about the desert, and we looked for the date tree. You talked about Nathan Seichell, and looked for the olive tree ...

'You have not told us the story of man.'

'I talked to you about man's health. I talked to you about man's solitude and his lie. I talked to you about the proof of man's existence: God.

'I talked to you about the eloquence and nudity of the word.' (BQ 121).

This passage operate by a process of deferments, just as most of the book does. We are never told directly, what is told is oblique or contained in paradox. Yet many of the words here have significance throughout the book, desert, threshold, date and olive tree. The story of Nathan Seichell appears in the book, but it is a story of enigmatic meaning, full of strange images and paradox. What the book does talk about is indeed as Yukel states, man, God and the naked word.

There is little narration in the book; and what little there is, as in the story of Sarah and Yukel, is fragmented and proceeds by inference. But this becomes an area of stability within the book which otherwise is peopled with the shifting voices of Rabbis who, other than by their

names, have no presence. In The Book of Questions the narrator Yukel has the same name as the character Yukel within the book. They are both double yet the same. There is a resemblance between the two but they do not coincide.

*Le Livre des questions* operated as a narrative paradox. Jabès asserts that to tell a story is to lose it, so he must tell without telling. The narrative impulse thus stands in opposition to an impulse toward the antinarrative. The use of the question to generate text (the questions posed by Sarah, Yukel, the Rabbis) is one means of avoiding the authority that traditional narrative entails. Jabès has stated that the story of Sarah and Yukel is at the "center" of *Le Livre des question*, yet "it is the questioning around the story that gives the story its dimension. But the story is there only as a kind of basic pretext." The notion of the pre-existence of the story, that it once existed in a unified form and was later deconstructed in the writing of *Le Livre des question* seems to be implicit in Jabès's authorial strategy. And, as Motte has pointed out, the desire to reconstruct the story is often implicit in the effort of the reader who is urged on by the strong hermeneutic code.

Writing about the structure of Jabès's work, Mary Ann Caws says:

Chaque livre contient en lui le commencement du prochain qui sera écrit. Chaque livre, chaque lecture prolonge et nie - en même temps - son précédent.

Comme si la route était éternellement double: doublement possible et impossible, raisonnable et absurde, dans un style dialogué qui exprimerait déjà la division entre deux consciences, au moins.<sup>46</sup>

An exact documentation of all of the Jabèsian cycle can be found in Warren Motte's book.<sup>47</sup> From this description, it can be seen that the basic structure of the oeuvre is one of overlapping which gives the sense of a work in progress. In his books are prepared textual spaces that allow for the articulation of one book with another, in a dovetail effect. The basic technique is one of autoallusion. Though mostly serial (in other words, designed to link one given text to the text that precedes it), these techniques from time to time afford the imbrication of several texts.<sup>48</sup>

The works of Edmond Jabès examine how texts work in making problematic the communicative processes they represent. Using traditional Jewish themes, Jabès both represents and subverts structures of communication. His mode of literary production is neither fiction nor autobiography, characters appear as "moment channels", or transient figuration in language.

The word does not remain flesh for Jabès; the text engages in an:

---

<sup>46</sup>Mary Ann Caws, Edmond Jabès (Amsterdam: Editors Rodopi B.V. 1988) p. 17.

<sup>47</sup>Motte pp. 109-11.

<sup>48</sup>Motte p. 112.

affirmation between the solidity of an apparent configuration that brings promise of meaning and dissolution into a play of signifiers. 'The book reflects us, the double mirror; reflects the mirror', observes Jabès; the statement mimics the form of a palimpsest and suggests that the relationship of reader, text, and writer resembles a set of mirrored reflections in which it becomes impossible to determine point of origin.<sup>49</sup>

Ann Hoffman contends that the process by which one text assimilates fragments of another text produces a dialogue in which the repressed citation struggles to be heard. She cites Riffaterre's suggestion that intertextuality is a mimesis of repression. Where linearization is the process by which citation is absorbed into a focal text, Jabès can be said to stage a reversal of the process of linearization by introducing an artificial intertextuality.<sup>50</sup> The invented dialogue of Rabbis who are mere voices calls attention to itself. "Insofar as there is no linear narrative to incorporate into itself those voices, the energies of the text are displaced from any recognizable mimetic story onto textuality itself."<sup>51</sup> Jabès is committed to the erasure of narrative. For him, the book is not narrative, but is composed of the "discourse of origin."

---

<sup>49</sup>Anne Golomb Hoffman, Between Exile and Return, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991) p. 47.

<sup>50</sup>Hoffman p. 49.

<sup>51</sup>Hoffman p. 49.

In postexilic Judaism, the destroyed Temple is internalized in the consciousness through ritual and prayer. Geoffrey Hartman refers to the "memory-temple" that Rabbis preserved through ceremony. In El, Yukel says, "In the word *amour*, 'love' there is the *mur*, 'wall'. Has no one else noticed this? / For a moment, we will have rebuilt the Temple." (El 56). The dialogue of the lovers can thus be read as a process of building and unbuilding the Temple and as the process of writing itself. Hoffman finds this linkage to be a response to a post-Holocaust universe in which the possibility of unity has been shattered. "In *Jabès*, then, the orthographic coalescence of the lovers into the Temple (*amour* into *mur*) may herald the achievement of structure, although it can do only by marking its inherently subversive and tenuous nature."<sup>52</sup>

*Jabès* manifests a mistrust of fictional forms that asserts their own sufficiency. *Jabès* writes a book, not a novel, and indeed he opposes book and novel in a polemical polarization. The "novel" as genre is a closed form while the "book" opens up the process of writing. This mistrust of genre produces an extreme disintegration of form in *Jabès*.

When process is valorized and genre undermined, there is a movement away from the mastery over the text that is part of the concept of authorship. *Jabès*'s use of first

---

<sup>52</sup>Hoffman p. 50.

person representation of authorial voice reveals the diminished authority of this voice over the text. "The text constructs the authors in order to repudiate narration and enact the disappearance of the author into the writing, staging a return to *le livre* as the Book and into *écriture* in the sense both of Scripture and writing."<sup>53</sup> Both author and reader are thus consigned to "*franchir le seuil*", cross the threshold to "a text one has never left and yet to which one may never gain entry."<sup>54</sup>

Yukel, the writer, sees the word as the source of salvation, but Sarah does not share that faith. She rebels against the tyranny of words; her scream is "a wholly verbal vocalization, a human sound emitted apart from language and in stark, terrorized opposition thereto."<sup>55</sup> The word is subsumed by the void; the cry of emptiness is its replacement.

The scream, pure sound, cannot be adequately transcribed onto the written page; it refuses, as it were, its share of ink, and yet it is the very sound of the voiceless Book. It betokens a series of divorces; sound from sense, word from word, subject from word, subject from subject. It is the first word and the last word, it is law, it is separation, it is death. As such, it

---

<sup>53</sup>Jabès p. 23.

<sup>54</sup>Hoffman p. 62.

<sup>55</sup>Motte p. 72.

may announce the final term in Jabès's poetics of the word.<sup>56</sup>

The long passages in italics belong to the book Yukel is writing, but they also continue the larger book that holds them. There is in the work "a book carrying a book carrying a book carrying a book ...". Yet, as Sidney Levy points out, what is absent from Jabès book is precisely the book:

Assuming, however, that books are written to represent, to make present once again ... something that is fundamentally absent ... - then in Edmond Jabès's case, there is no presentation or representation of that absence. There is rather the presentation of a presentation, a book of a book. To put it differently, we can say that in this case there is an absence of presentation, absence of the represented, an absence which is the result of this image within an image within an image, on the self-reflecting mirror. It is as though Edmond Jabès set out to write a book and could only write about someone else writing a book which mirrors the book he is writing. What is absent, then, from this book is precisely what his book could or does contain, since at every level the contained turns out to be the container, the book itself, which ideally for Jabès would say nothing beyond itself.<sup>57</sup>

Jabès's concept of the Book is extremely complex. "In his literary strategy, Edmond Jabès wagers heavily on various techniques of overdetermination: the signifiers that

---

<sup>56</sup>Motte p. 72.

<sup>57</sup>Sidney Levy, "The Question of Absence," The Sin of the Book p. 153.

undergo such a process (words, figures, images) assume new roles in the grid of resemblance erected by the Jabèsian text."<sup>58</sup> This process reaches its culmination in the construct of the book, in what Motte calls "the most overdetermined element in the textual fabric."<sup>59</sup>

Jabès alludes repeatedly to "the Book within the book", suggesting a distinction between the book in the ideal and abstract, and Jabès's actual writings. We have an unattainable ideal Book as "a question of traces, the traces of a pure prelapsarian ideal in a fallen world."<sup>60</sup>

There are both profane and sacred antecedents for this vision of the Book. François Laruelle has located Jabès's works "at the intersection of the Greco-Occidental consecration of the Book as the level of literacy immanence, and of Jewish interpretation of the Book's transcendence, of its nothingness, of its illegibility. At the intersection - at the *chiasmus* perhaps - of the solicitude for the Book as the Being of the being-of the book, and of the Jewish passion for the book and its loftiness."<sup>61</sup>

In the area of the sacred, we have the texts of the Talmud and the Kabbalah. Jabès refers to the Talmud as a

---

<sup>58</sup>Motte p. 98.

<sup>59</sup>Motte p. 99.

<sup>60</sup>Motte p. 99.

<sup>61</sup>François Laruelle, "Project d'une philosophie du livre", Les Cahiers Obsidiane, 5, (1982), p. 140.

book of exile (DL 105) and he indicates that the Kabbalah had deeply influenced his concept of the Book. "Before Mallarmé and, naturally, in a different context the cabalists had already dreamed of an absolute book which would exclude chance, the book of perfect legibility." (PL 119).

Mallarmé's influence on the concept of the Book was profound but problematic. Jabès suggests that Mallarmé's concept of the Book was closed, allowing neither opening nor interpretation. In contrast, Maurice Blanchot also had an influence on Jabès, but he suggests the Book as a process of becoming rather than as a closed entity.

Blanchot speaks of the absence of the book, of a scripturary beyond discourse and language. This would be neither man's nor God's writing, but the writing of the other, of dying itself. Like the Kabbalists, he asserts that the book begins with the Bible where it achieves unsurpassable meaning. Blanchot finds that the Bible takes language back to its origin.

The Bible not only offers us the highest model of the book, the specimen that will never be superceded; the Bible also encompasses all books, no matter how alien they are to biblical revelation, knowledge, poetry, prophecy, proverbs, because it contains the spirit of the book . . . . It is not because the Bible is a sacred book that the books which spring from it - the whole literary process - are marked with the

theological sign and cause it to belong to the realm of the theological.<sup>62</sup>

The book was prior to the sacred; it became sacred because it was in the book and thereby took its form and structure. Blanchot asserts that the book is in essence theological and that the first manifestation of the theological could only have been in the form of a book. "In some sense God does not remain God (does not become divine) except as he speaks through the book."<sup>63</sup>

One can find in the opposition of Book and book a dynamic of totalization and fragmentation. "On one hand, the Book is a powerful totalizing figure: 'The book is unbearable totality' (CS 16); on the other hand, the book, as it is manifested in the Jabèsian text, is dislocated and fragmentary."<sup>64</sup>

The totality of the Book parallels the totality of God. "They shalt not make any book in the image of the Book, for I am the only Book." (PL 150). Both book and God are totalizing constructs, both represent transcendence and salvation, yet both recede in infinite unattainability.

We are left once again with an absence and this absence leads back to a question. In a book that lacks a subject and a single voice, how do we proceed to read? That is, how

---

<sup>62</sup>Maurice Blanchot, The Gaze of Orpheus, trans. Lydia David (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981) pp. 151-152.

<sup>63</sup>Blanchot p. 152.

<sup>64</sup>Motte p. 103.

do we read a voiceless text. Indeed, the first question of Jabès's text is legibility, the difficulty of penetration by reading. In Jabès's work there is an agnostic dynamic of legibility and illegibility. Joseph Guglielmi feels that much of the work's power derives from this opposition: "*Le Livre des ressemblances* is the open battle-field of a conflict between the legible and illegible."<sup>65</sup>

When questioned about his book's illegibility, Jabès commented:

I don't think my books are 'illegible.'  
I don't think they are obscure. They  
become illegible only when one looks for  
certitude in them. But perhaps you mean  
irrecoverable by 'illegible', I do  
believe that their legibility resides in  
the fragment, but, as the fragments  
continually confront each other, the  
constitution of meaning is infinitely  
deferred. This is undoubtedly why they  
are irrecoverable. (DL 158)

Jabès writes that a book within a book is an "immaterial text hidden from both writer and reader."<sup>66</sup> The subtext, or cryptotext as Motte calls it, is the point where the real and ideal intersect, a meeting of book and Book. The problem of the radical inadequacy of language is circumvented as the nonlinguistic takes on significance. Jabès suggest that we come "to read the erasure under the writing" (LP 32). Erasure and silence also signify.

---

<sup>65</sup>Joseph Guglielmi, *La Ressemblance impossible: Edmond Jabès*. (Paris: Les Editeurs Réunis, 1978) pp. 168-70.

<sup>66</sup>Warren Motte p. 22.

In some ways, the reader of Jabès's text is called on to read what is unwritten, to respond to the empty spaces within the text. Thus the blanks do not merely aid in signification; they themselves signify. The white spaces point toward and rejoin the topos of emptiness which is of primary importance in Jabès's work.

Jabès uses several methods to augment the "unreadability" of his text. Each of these devices poses a reading problem. Jabès has developed a "rhetoric of exile" based on parataxis, anaphora, ellipsis, paranomasia, and the oxymoron.<sup>67</sup> However, the three techniques that Jabès employs to present exile within language itself are quotation, aphorism, and the question.

The quotation interrupts the text as it sets the work free in a new context under new relationships. According to Walter Benjamin, the quotation "... summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely thereby calls it back to origins... . In quotation the two realms - of origin and destruction - justify themselves before language."<sup>68</sup> With quotations we are dealing with decentered nature of writing. for there is always another anterior text behind whatever is being

---

<sup>67</sup>Stamelman, Lost and Beyond Telling p. 166.

<sup>68</sup>Walter Benjamin, Reflections trans. Edmund Jephcott, (New York: Harcourt Jovanovich, 1978) p. 269.

written. The quotation is a fragment, broken off from a lost text.

For Jabès, the aphorism "is a miniature text whose beginning and end are telescoped. Aphorisms are also a sequence of concentration."<sup>69</sup> The enigma in each aphorism cancels out any sense of completeness it might have. We read each aphorism and understand the words, but the concentration of so much meaning in so small a space reduces it to an enigma. Each aphorism stimulates endless thought and eliminates finality. As Stamelman comments, behind the apparent fullness of the aphorism lies an abyss of indeterminacy. While the form suggests presence, its meaning expresses absence. "The reader moves into it as toward a center of meaning, only to be thrust centrifugally away into a plurality of indeterminate meanings. In form, the aphorism is implosive; in meaning, explosive."<sup>70</sup> The very density of the aphorism thwarts analysis; we can never know what has been elided to make the aphorism so terse and yet complete.

The question for Jabès evades the fulfillment of an answer as each question evokes responses that are only other questions:

'The Jew answers every question  
with another question.  
Reb Lema -

---

<sup>69</sup>Stamelman, Sin of the Book p. 108.

<sup>70</sup>Stamelman p. 109.

'My name is a question. It is also  
my freedom within my tendency to  
question -

Reb Eglal -

'The question precludes any  
answer.'

(BQ 116)

There is little to hold on to in the text, every  
metaphor operate elusively. Indeed, Jabès operates mainly  
through metonymy. As Derrida notes, the movement of the  
book is one silent displacement toward the essential, Jew to  
poet and writing, man to God. Jabès rarely developes  
metaphor fully:

Childhood is a piece of ground  
bathed in water, with little paper boats  
floating on it. Sometimes the boats  
turn into scorpions. Then life dies,  
poisoned from one moment to the next.

The poison is in each corolla, as  
the earth is in the sun. (BQ 53).

Metaphors of life, the water, the toys of play can turn into  
poisons. Yet as the passage goes on, these metaphors of  
life no longer have the same function. They cannot be  
organized into a concept of correspondence. Their function  
is subverted because they are not stable; images slide into  
one another. As Rosmarie Waldrop notes, Jabès uses  
metaphors paradoxically. Because each image slides into the  
next, we are left with the gesture of analogy, just as the  
rabbi-voices offer us not real statements, but the gesture  
of commentary. Thus both of these methods become the  
gestures of a signification which is ambiguous. Given the  
metaphor as sign and commentary of sign, we find:

that man, faced with the undecipherable world, creates his own world of signs, which is legible and inhabitable but has no bridge to 'the real world' or 'being'. It is a set of mirrors where signs perpetuate themselves. There are no referents. There are only endless questions, endless commentaries. The text is missing.<sup>71</sup>

Metaphor is an analogy that is imperfect and interminate as it cannot recuperate a stable set of meanings. According to de Man, the *figure*, in contrast to metaphor, is the tropological mode of loss.<sup>72</sup> It does not strive to recover what is absent but instead accepts the loss of referentiality. It reveals the void that informs its own structure and identity; it internalizes loss as its very mode of being. Stamelman contends that the figuration of loss reveals that figuration is loss. The very process by which writing attempts to preserve things actually cause things to vanish. Interpretation is an effort to unwrite a loss through writing. But it ends up repeating the loss through a representation, that, in the effort to signify the loss, succeeds only in forgetting it. Representation, therefore, only increases the distance between the present and an originary moment of lost presence. And when this originary moment is thought to be prelapsarian, then the distance becomes overwhelming.

---

<sup>71</sup>Rosmarie Waldrop, "Mirrors and Paradoxes," The Sin of the Book p. 145.

<sup>72</sup>Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) p. 46.

Stamelman finds allegory to be the perfect post-lapsarian trope. While we do not think of Jabès as an allegorical writer, his work falls under the characteristics of allegory. Allegorical signs are "fragments of a lost wholeness". There is no coincidence with an origin to control these tropes or to keep their meaning from slipping. The process of signification is thus arbitrary and can be undone because the link between signifier and signified is ruptured. This form of writing is not univocal, but evokes the desire for lost unitary meaning.

In its polysemy and mobility, and especially in the originating lack or loss that calls it into being, allegory resembles desire: primarily, the decentered, displaced desire that seeks a lost experience of pleasure through a series of changing representations, each of which is an allegorized fantasy of the absent, original satisfaction.<sup>73</sup>

As Walter Benjamin has noted, allegory is "at home in the Fall"<sup>74</sup> and this loss of paradisiacal speech is what brings melancholy into language. Language mourns the loss of oneness with the pure language of God. Because word and thing are no longer identical, language itself is in exile, subject to uncertainty and polysemy, in short, allegorical. Benjamin writes that after the Fall, things are "over-named."

---

<sup>73</sup>Stamelman p. 64.

<sup>74</sup>Stamelman p. 64.

Having lost the knowledge of a divine, Edenic language, man unknowingly renames things of the world that already have proper names in the lost language of God. His words are no more than supplements. Thus what Benjamin calls 'overnaming' is 'the linguistic being of melancholy' the way grief and loss come to dwell in language.<sup>75</sup>

Kabbalah is cognizant of the incessant nomination initiated by loss, but it also operates under the hope that the overnaming will coalesce under the one name that gives meaning to all others, the Name of God. Jabès too writes under the consciousness of naming:

We exist only in and by the name ...  
naming gives existence to the being and  
object names' ... one realized that  
nothing exists outside the book. (SD 92)

There are two central figures in Jabès's text, the circle and the point. "This circle," he said, "which the blotter has made into a point invaded by night, is God." (LB 8, EL 12). The circle is both symbol of perfection and eternity, yet it is also image of the void. Gabriel Bounoure has commented on the circular structure of the first three volumes of The Book of Questions. He finds that three great books are joined in the unity of a circular composition. The work draws to a close in a return to the book. The first volume showed the negative power of language, annihilating things in their existence.

---

<sup>75</sup>Stamelman p. 65.

Jabès himself does not see the structure of The Book of Questions as circular, but rather as an open spiral.

It's true that today I see these books ... as so many open circles forming a spiral with an eccentric center. The center of their spiral is a circle reduced to a point in space. This visible point - embodied in the title of the seventh Book of Questions as a red dot - is simultaneously the beginning and the end of these volumes. It recalls God, 'to reveal Himself, manifested Himself as a dot.' For me this red dot on the cover symbolized the effacement of the book, the effacement of God, bankruptcy of language as well as the origin of all writing-given that basically our decision to write, to talk, springs from a lack. In a way the dot is this lack made visible. (DL 54)

Thus Jabès linked the structure of his work to the two recurring images, the circle and the point

"Like the smallest circle - a new center - that is how I define the point in *Le Livre des questions*" (DD 17). While the notion of the center is problematic in Jabès's writing, we have the transformation of the circle into the point. In *EL, ou le dernier livre* the questioning of the point is most intense. The point is examined graphically. Experimenting in pointillism, Jabès writes the word N U L in black dots on white paper, on the next page he prints L'UN in white points on a black ground. There is a play of black and white, plenitude and void. Motte has suggested that by putting language on trial, the final culmination in the

point is not averbal but antiverbal. The point marks not only the end of the book, but also, the end of language.<sup>76</sup>

The point is also associated with the divine. Quoting directly from the Kabbalah, Jabès states that "When God, EL, wanted to reveal Himself, he appeared as a point" (LB 3, EL 7). Not only is the point the originary locus of the godhead, it is also the antiverbal sign that is the unprounceable name of God. It is God of the Kabbalah, withdrawing into himself in the process of *tsimtsum*. The fact that Jabès chose the point as the title of his book has far-reaching consequences, as God becomes present both in language and the book. Jabès draws on Judaic tradition in his use of the point; the present, having no extension in time or space, is compared to the point.

Commenting on the function of the point, Jabès has stated that where there is no risk, there can be no writing. His risk, he claimed, is maintained by a point:

What is this point? In Hebrew, the point is the vowel. It permits the word to be read, heard. When the point is missing, there is risk of gross misunderstanding. In fact, there is no such thing as the word. There are consonants waiting to become vocables.  
(DL 82).

If Jabès's text is seen as a circle, it must, finally, be decentered. "God is the all-embracing center" (YE 43) but the consequence of this is dislocation. The center

---

<sup>76</sup>See Motte, p. 136.

becomes the figure of the impossible in writing, a place of nostalgic longing and grief. The center is the circular arena of historical catastrophe. "Aside from challenging God, the center formed by the many extermination camps left the Jews - chosen people of the center - grappling with the interrogation of their race." (BY 198)

The concept of the decentered circle is explained most perceptibly by Maurice Blanchot.

The two experiences, that of Judaism and that of writing, at once joined and separate, which Edmond Jabès expresses and affirms, the one through the other ... have their common origin in the ambiguity of the rupture which, ... even in its explosion, reveals that the center while leaving it intact, but which is perhaps also the explosion of the center, the eccentric point which is center only in the shattering of its explosion.<sup>77</sup>

Jabès's process of decentering seems to exemplify Derrida's critique of the center as construct. According to Derrida, the center organizes a structure, giving it balance and stability. However, in its function as constraining structure, it becomes static and codified, and restrains play. Derrida sees the entire cultural history of the West as an evocation of the center. In the history of metaphysics, the center has received different forms or

---

<sup>77</sup>Maurice Blanchot, "Interruptions," Sin of the Book pp. 50-51.

names, often in the guise of metaphor.<sup>78</sup> In his writings, Jabès also sees the search for center as the nostalgia for origin. "Circle after circle, the center, always decentered, created, in order to reassure itself perhaps, an original fixed center." (DL 134).

When Derrida speaks of the rupture in a text, he alludes to the moment when structure and center are put into question. From this point on, the text may be "shattered", but it has been opened up. Derrida claims that the absence of the transcendental signifier extends the play of signification infinitely. Jabès develops this idea in his own writing, moving away from the idea of center in his figuration. He says that "the center does not exist. It is the point around which an eccentric discourse revolves, around which a questioning develops. It is the point of no return." (DD 79).

It is the question that perpetuates the book for Jabès, a book which remains open by virtue of the question. In his essay on Jabès, Derrida finds that beyond all the questions, there remains one nonquestion. "The nonquestion of which we are speaking is the unpenetrated certainty that Being is a Grammar; and that the world is in all its parts a cryptogram to be constituted ... through poetic inscription or

---

<sup>78</sup>See Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Writing and Difference.

deciphering."<sup>79</sup> He posits a radical illegibility, questions the book as only a phase of being and seeks an era for which it is no longer the model of meaning. Grammar becomes for Derrida the replacement of metaphysics, almost a "transcendental" justification of Being. This illegibility is not irrational or something defined by logic; it is, rather, prior to the book, and is therefore the very possibility of the book. What we have, then, is a seeking of origins which Derrida would place outside the book, but which Jabès would see as belonging to the book. Derrida states, "the question about the origins of the book, the absolute interrogation, the interrogation of all possible interrogations, the 'interrogation of God' will never belong to a book. Unless the question forgets itself within the articulation of its memory, the time of its interrogation, the time and tradition of its *sentence* unless the memory itself ... the syntax binding the question to itself, does not make a disguised affirmation of its origin."<sup>80</sup>

It seems that Jabès's work possesses the very illegibility Derrida writes about. Derrida states that the question about the book and the "interrogation of God" will never belong to a book, but for Jabès there is no God without the book; each creates the other. Derrida himself acknowledged Jabès's position that God may be an

---

<sup>79</sup>Derrida, Writing and Difference p. 76.

<sup>80</sup>Derrida p. 78.

interrogation of God. Jabès states, "there is the book of God in which God questions himself, and there is the book of man which is proportionate to God ... God is a questioning of God." (BQ 138).

Concerning this quest for origins, this radical illegibility, Jabès writes in EL:

As the object of our avid questioning, origins, whether in the time of the book or outside time, appear to be the pretext - the pre-text - for again and again affirming our origins. But if the place I have left remains the place I came from, how can I really know which was my place? (EL 34).

We cannot know our origins, yet the deconstruction of the text leads Jabès back to God as the Trace of all traces. He makes the connection between the book, death, origins and God.

By turning their backs on the Tables, the chosen people gave Moses a master-lesson in reading. From instinct - for is the book not prior to man? - they raised the rape of God to the level of original death. And, rising up against the letter, their independence consecrated the fracture in which God writes Himself against God (EL 39).

Despite his secular intent and agnostic stance, Jabès cannot escape his sense of the divine, his concept of God. In a passage concerning death and God, Jabès continues with the statement,

(IL) legibility of the Original Text IL,  
'He' is perhaps the key.

Rosmarie Waldrop comments:

Jacques Derrida is wrong to find, at the end of his important essay, that under all the questions of The Book of Questions there is one nonquestion ... It is because Jabès's thinking is bold enough to come to this absolute borderline that his writing naturally turns 'back' on itself - there is no way forward after this point. And it is on turning back to examine its own process that the thought and the writing of The Book of Questions concludes that 'being is a Grammar' insofar as it is accessible to us at all.<sup>81</sup>

Derrida has suggested that Being could only reveal itself in an illegibility, in a transcendence which lies beyond the book. In the Zohar, one of Gods manifestations is as *Binah*, Divine Intelligence, in which he appears as the eternal subject. He is the great who, *Mi*, the end of every thought and question. Scholem notes that in the end, meditation reaches the point where one may question "who", but an answer is no longer possible. "In the domain of *Mi*, of the great Who, in which God appears as the subject of the mundane process, can at least be questioned, the higher sphere of divine wisdom represents something positive beyond the reach of questioning, something which cannot even be visualized in abstract thought."<sup>82</sup> One of the names of God *Elohim* guarantees the existence of creation insofar as it represents the union of the hidden subject *Mi* and the hidden object *Eleh*. (In Hebrew *Mi* and *Eleh* have the same

---

<sup>81</sup>Waldrop pp. 141-142.

<sup>82</sup>Gershom Scholem, Major Trends p. 221.

consonants as *Elohim*). Thus, *Elohim* is the name of God after the division of the primary idea into the Knower and Known. Man can contemplate the lower sphere, but he can only attain an occasional intuitive flash of a knowledge of God as the mystical *Mi*. It seems, then, that a paradigm for Derrida's Being beyond the book is contained in Kabbalah and thus, in a sense, reinscribed within the Book.

It would seem that Derrida's radical illegibility is related to his concept of the trace. "The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the difference which opens appearance and signification."<sup>83</sup> The history of metaphysics has been, according to Derrida, the attempt to reduce the trace, and there thereby writing, to the presence of logos. Yet, by reinstating the trace, are we not once again in the theological? In his final essay on Jabès entitled "Ellipsis", Derrida notes that the book must be closed as the text is opened, "If closure is not the end, we protest or deconstruct in vain." Derrida seeks the trace, the writing of the origin, writing that "traces the origin."<sup>84</sup> He doubles back on his text, the return having an elliptical nature; with the center no longer exactly the same, "the origin has played."<sup>85</sup> Derrida's question about

---

<sup>83</sup>Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) pp. 64, 66.

<sup>84</sup>Derrida. "Ellipsis" Writing and Difference p. 295.

<sup>85</sup>Derrida p. 296.

closure is an echo of Paul's, "If Jesus is not risen, our faith is in vain" (1 Cor. 15:14). This play on Paul is a variation of the Jewish heretical hermeneutic, but for Derrida, it is not an incarnate God which will supplant Scripture, but a writing beyond the book. For Derrida closure is the central point, because without this concept, deconstruction would be unnecessary.

In truth, Derrida's final question about closure cannot be asked of the book. He must defer his own question because the final attack on the book will lead to his own dissolution and silence. It is this silence which neither Jabès nor Derrida will allow. For both writers, one of the questions to emerge from the silence at the center is history. Derrida writes, "the only thing that begins by reflecting itself is history. And this fold, this furrow, is the Jew, the Jew who elects writing which elects the Jew ... The breaking of the Tables articulates, first of all, a rupture within God as the origin of history."<sup>86</sup>

Jabès confronts the problems of history in his writing in the form of an impossible question. If The Book of Questions is about writing, about the Jews and their past, it is also about their present, the Holocaust and the impossibility of writing about it. The question, implicit in Jabès's book, is whether it is morally feasible, indeed possible, to write about the Holocaust.

---

<sup>86</sup>Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference p. 65.

Yet Jabès chooses to write about the Holocaust, though only indirectly. As Beryl Lang points out, Jabès never gives name to the Holocaust. The S.S. man, the yellow star, the number tattooed on an arm are presented without any amplification or explanation; it is the reader who must supply the significance of these elements. In Jabès's work, we have moved beyond writing that is representational, even beyond what Barthes calls "intransitive" writing which escapes representation only by denying historical reference. Jabès has collapsed the subject in the medium. Lang contends that what we have is Writing-the-Holocaust:

Here, in contrast to intransitive writing, the object, not the author, is written: in effect, the object writes itself. The narrative voice - so far as we refer at all to what is now quite clearly an anthropomorphism - is the voice of history; the object itself takes over, construing the form and means in addition to the literary content ... substantive issues (moral, cognitive) turn into, are, literary form. Thus for Jabès, writing is not detachable from what is written about, but an immediate function or appearance of it ... There is no subject distinct from the medium's, there is only the event, the span of history.<sup>87</sup>

It is here that Lang has difficulty accepting Jabès's writing. He claims that as Jabès has the "voice" of the event speak, the reader is obliged to measure the discourse of this voice as one that claims reality for itself. There

---

<sup>87</sup>Beryl Lang, "Writing-the-Holocaust: Jabès and the Measure of History," The Sin of the Book pp. 196-197.

is no protection behind the shield of fiction if this voice diverges from fact. It is with the voice of Jewish history as presented in The Book of Questions that Lang is at odds. He claims the whole of Jewish history is not one of alienation or doubt. There is a strong sense of affirmation and assurance in Judaism.

Aspects of Lang's criticism are problematic. It is not accidental that the Jew is so intimately involved with language and the book. In The Book of Questions language is also symptomatic of life on the abyss, of holocaust. For Jabès, absence and the abyss both shape and threaten language. Lang is willing to accept the analogy between the Jew and language, but he is not willing to base it on alienation and rupture. The language of the Jews was transformed by the covenant; as it became adequate to making promises, it became self-conscious. It thereafter became a means of dispelling the alien, not incorporating it. It is silence, not language, which is precarious and contingent. Lang questions Jabès's view of language; he is at odds with the content of Jabès's thinking. It remains a question whether literary criticism should be engaged with the point of view of the author. But even if one concedes that Lang can disagree with the idea of rupture at the center of language, his criticism raises another problem.

Commenting on the problems of post-holocaust writing, Jabès states that:

Auschwitz has radically transformed our vision of things. Not because such a degree of cruelty was unthinkable before. The unthinkable was the near total indifference of both the German and the Allied populations which made Auschwitz possible. This indifference continues to defy any previous notion of the human. After Auschwitz, the feeling of solitude that lies at the core of each human being has become considerably amplified ... To Adorno's statement that 'after Auschwitz one can no longer write poetry', inviting a global questioning of our culture, I'm tempted to answer: Yes, one can. And, furthermore, one has to. One has to write out of that break, out of that unceasingly revived wound.

(DL 61-62)

Jabès has chosen to write about exile in Jewish life, the rupture and the pain of it. Does it not necessarily follow that language must reflect the ontology of a writer's thinking, or indeed even proceed from it? If there is limitation in language as a vehicle, not only of expression, but also of knowing, then how are we to understand our lives and transform it into discourse? Language itself must contain this rupture. These are the questions raised by Jabès's writing. One might even go so far as to say that Jabès presents the Holocaust through absence. We do not have an actual portrayal of the events, but of their effect, the after of the occurrence. We are left with the void of the Holocaust, presented as absence, the detritus of human history. The Holocaust is not allowed to speak itself as Lang contend so much as it is allowed to be seen in the

negative spaces around the events, the interstices of history.

To write - the Holocaust, to have the writer serve as medium and have the subject speak for itself, this, according to Lang, is the task Jabès has set for himself. If the Holocaust fails to write itself, then Jabès as its scribe is a failure. And if his view of Jewish history is mistaken, then the voice with which it speaks is a misrepresentation. What Lang fails to see in his criticism is the act of affirmation in Jabès's writing.

One leaves the work of Jabès with the sense of writing as a "religious act" because poetry seeks to "elevate humanity above its sundered condition. Poetry is (in Paul Tillich's phrase) 'ultimate concern.'"<sup>88</sup> But one need not invoke all of poetry to "vindicate" Jabès's work. His work itself can be seen as a challenge, his writing as a protest against despair. The word, even in its most negative aspect, is expressive. "An even though it is denied a referent, even though it may all be stabs in the void, there is real blood."<sup>89</sup>

'A sabre stroke in the void, this is the image of my life and writing I would like to leave behind' he said. 'And if drops of my blood have more than once soiled the ground, you must understand

---

<sup>88</sup>Edward Kaplan, "The Problematic Humanism of Edmond Jabès," The Sin of the Book p. 123

<sup>89</sup>Waldrop p. 145.

that each of them is an unknown book.'  
(EL 122.)

## Chapter 6

## From The Kabbalah to Bloom

"Jewgreek is greekjew". The two may turn into one another in Joyce's writing, but in the history of Western thought, the Jewish and Greek represent alternative modes of thought. Modern criticism, despite its secular content, has its roots in both theological interpretation, particularly in Biblical hermeneutics and in Greek philosophy. In the West, problems of the text have most often been mediated within the context of Biblical tradition. As Christianity severed its ties with Judaism and spread over Europe, it became allied with Greek philosophy and formed a link that became a matrix for Western culture. As Susan Handelman has pointed out, the history of interpretation has been determined by the schism between Jews and Christians as well as between Jews and Greeks over the question of the proper interpretation of texts. It is necessary to expand at length on the Jewish/Christian differences in order to see how Judaism, and Kabbalah in particular, offer an alternative hermeneutic to much of Western thought. Only then can we truly see what is at stake in post-structural theory which has developed under the influence of Kabbalistic Judaism.

In the *Cratylus*, Plato asserts that words, usually as names are instrumental signs not for the thing itself, but for the form of things. The question is thus one of the correctness of names, not the innate truth value of what is said. Hans Georg Gadamer explains that by this approach, in all discussion on language, the concept of image (*eikon*) has been replaced by sign (*semia*). *Sign* indicates an abstract relation of a "pointing", not an entity with content of its own. For Plato, language is not truth, but a vocal imitation that leaves us with an irremediable gap between words, the imitation and the thing itself. Plato ignores the independent cognitive function of language and proffers a language in which the arrangement of parts corresponds to a connection between forms. This approach is based on a thinking which is mathematical.

While differing from Plato concerning his theory of forms, Aristotle agreed that words are not in themselves meaning or truth. Discourse and being are not conterminous; the act of knowing is beyond discourse. Aristotle postulated an "inner" and an "outer" discourse, the former consisting of mental experience and passions, the outer expressing these passions in sound. The outer verbal discourse is significant by convention. He places writing at an ever further remove.

Although Aristotle had separated poetics and rhetoric from metaphysics, he was unable to repress metaphysical

assumptions from entering therein. Because of metaphor, we remain locked in the metaphysical. When Heidegger claimed that "the metaphorical exists only within the metaphysical", he was speaking of the "transgression" of metaphor. Both operate on a transfer that is basic to Western thought; the transfer from the "proper" to the "figurative" involves a movement from the "sensible" to the "non-sensible" realm. Derrida points out in The White Mythology that the ontological tradition of Western metaphysics is based on the Platonic transfer of the soul from the visible to the invisible world.

According to Aristotle, the central act of knowing is a movement beyond discourse to the *ousia*, the essential "what" of a thing. This *ousia* can be formulated through discourse in *logos*, but this formulation is not identical with the thing itself. In Aristotle, *logos* does not really mean word, but rather *reason, discourse, definition or formula*.<sup>1</sup> Science aims to find connections between the properties and the essence of the subject, that is, it attempts to find a thing's *logos*. However, "true knowledge" is not obtained through *logos*, but rather through *nous* (mind or intellectual vision, as opposed to speech). *Nous* is described in visual, not in linguistic terms. This stands in marked contrast to kabbalistic or Rabbinic thought. Greek thought emphasizes seeing, Rabbinic thought stresses hearing. Handelman notes

---

<sup>1</sup>See Susan Handelman. The Slayers of Moses p. 8.

that for the Greeks, things are not exhausted by discourse; for Rabbis, discourse is not exhausted by things.

The Hebrew term for word is *davar*; it is important to recognize that it is also the term for *thing*. It must be stressed that *thing* does not have the Greek connotation of *substance*, but rather it means reality. The Hebrew word is not an arbitrary designation, but an aspect of the continuous divine creative force itself. Names are not merely conventional, but are intrinsically connected to their referents. The movement is from the thing to the word which creates and sustains it. Thus the word of God was more than a saying; it was the creative force, a concentration of power.

Early Christianity took the Hebrew concept of word as essential reality and combined it with the Greek concepts of substance and being to develop the idea of incarnation. As the word became flesh, a distinction had to be made between the incarnate word and the "old" word which merely announced the new. Hebrew scripture then became a sign, prefiguring the word of flesh. True reality was thus substantially being and there developed an opposition between the literal and metaphorical. As Handelman notes often in her work, true reality was not longer verbal, but word made flesh; all interpretation was now directed to the revelation fulfilled by an incarnate being.

It is in the Gospels of John, where these ideas are first articulated, that the Greek term *logos* is used for word. The root of *logos* in Greek means to gather, to arrange or order, only later did it come to mean word. The concept of *gathering* came to mean *in an order*, thus to signify as a reasonable context. Thorlief Boman contends that *logos* is the convergence of many meaning *into one concept*, leading to a comprehensive unity.<sup>2</sup> This "gathering into one" is characteristic of Greek thought. By contrast, Rabbinic thought moves towards differentiation, multiplicity, multiple meaning.

In Judaism, God manifested Himself through the word, and the divine text is at the center of the religion. In contrast, Greek, and later Christianity theophany was visual rather than verbal; movement was to a direct appearance of the god. This Jewish emphasis on the verbal rather than the visual helps explain the Biblical ban on images. The invisible God exhorts his people "Hear O Israel". Handelman notes that revelation was to see what is heard, a voice, not an image. Thus the invisible becomes manifested through sound as the divine word remains unfulfilled in visual terms. As Lyotard states:

In Hebraic ethics, representation is forbidden, the eye closes, the ear opens in order to hear the fathers's spoken word. The image figure is rejected because of its fulfillment of desire and

---

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Handelman, p. 33.

delusion; its function of truth is denied.<sup>3</sup>

For Lyotard, this represents the tragic dimension of thought. As God speaks, he dispossesses the ethical subject through the imperative of the divine word. The difference between himself and the other remains; the gulf between father and son is irrevocable. We do not have a fulfillment of the word in an ontological return to the sameness of father and son as in the Trinity. "In the language of contemporary literary theory, the writing ... is the father's presence-in-absence. Through the text, the subject is taken and possessed: the son is possessed by the voice of the father."<sup>4</sup>

Handelman characterizes Christian thought as lexical and metaphorical and Rabbinic thought as metonymical and propositional. The concept of *literal* and *metaphysical* differ in each tradition as does the idea of multiple meaning within a text. The coexistence of different interpretations allows for the retention of difference on the semantic level. Metaphor depends on resemblance, which passes into substitution, identification and cancellation. It is a process in which differences are effaced. However in Rabbinic thought, the relation of word to thing is not based on substitution, but rather, on contiguity,

---

<sup>3</sup>Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Jewish Oedipus," *Genre*, 10 (1977), p. 402.

<sup>4</sup>Handelman p. 35.

juxtaposition and association. Resemblance does not efface difference; *as if* does not become *is*; the literal is never cancelled. The cancellation of the literal meaning of the Old Testament rests on a metaphorical approach to interpretation.

Using Roman Jakobson's definition of the metaphor and metonymy in Biblical interpretation, Handelman contends that the Rabbis operated metonymically and the Church Fathers metaphorically. And although Jakobson classifies poetry as primarily metaphoric and prose as metonymic, within prose itself there are varying arrangements and degrees of metaphoricity. We may borrow some of the tenets twentieth century critical theory to gain insight into Rabbinic thought. Mimesis, so fundamental to Aristotle, is avoided in Rabbinic concepts of narrative. In traditional Western thought, events are taken to be material and the succeeding text, verbal. In Judaism, this order is inverted as the text is prior and the verbal is material.

When Derrida asserts that nothing exists outside the text, there is the recognition that the text is a "production", not a representation of meaning. "Reading must be a 'metonymic labor' of a text which is a network with a thousand entrances."<sup>5</sup> According to Barthes, reading is a step-by-step commentary, a "decomposition" of the text. His insight that the text practices the infinite deferment

---

<sup>5</sup>Handelman p. 80.

of the signified is seen in Rabbinic writing, particularly in the Midrash.

At the basis of the dispute between the founding Christians and the Jews of their day was a "life-and-death" reading controversy. The culmination of theology for the Greeks was a wordless vision of divine being; while for the Jews it was commentary on the divine text. When the apostle Paul began to preach his new doctrine to Greeks and Jews alike, he was faced with two opposing cultures. That Jesus was thought to be the long-awaited Messiah prophesied in Hebrew texts was of little importance to the Greeks and heresy to the Jews. Therefore, in order to persuade both Jews and Greeks of the truth of his new creed, he had to speak the language of both. Paul presented Jesus as a mediator of irreconcilable oppositions, between Jews and Gentile, soul and flesh, righteousness and sin.

It became Paul's task to explain to the Jews the heretical abrogation of their sacred text while at the same time maintaining the metaphysical importance of Jesus's teaching. He therefore contended that the Judaic prophecies about the Messiah, while not literally fulfilled, were spiritually fulfilled. The distinction between the *letter* and *spirit* was indispensable to the establishment of the Christian faith. The contrast of letter and spirit can be traced back to Protagoras (481-41 B.C.) and Paul was familiar with the techniques of the rhetoricians. As

Handelman notes, Paul put all his Greek and Jewish learning to the task of discrediting Jewish law. He therefore radicalized the antithesis of letter and spirit and reinterpreted the Scripture in a unprecedented way, this despite the fact that Rabbinic interpretation was anything but literal. According to Paul, spiritual meaning totally nullified the literal meaning, and by means of allegory, he used the law to destroy the law. Textual mediation is replaced with personal mediation through the figure of Christ who ended the long metonymy of Jewish history which Paul called the 'curse' of the law.<sup>6</sup>

Kabbalistic and Rabbinic reading of the text is metonymical, retaining differences within identity, stressing contiguity over substitution, preferring the multivocal to the univocal. Because the text in Judaism is a continuous generator of meaning arising from a "divine" language, meaning is not sought outside the text. God's presence is inscribed within the text, not in a human body. The Church Fathers replaced this long meditation on the text with the pure presence of Jesus, who resolved all opposition and collapsed all differentiation.<sup>7</sup> Jesus did not look to language, but to himself as fulfilling signs with his body. Judaism, however, as Lyotard notes, is the mode of non-fulfillment.

---

<sup>6</sup>Handelman p. 84.

<sup>7</sup>Handelman p. 89.

Lyotard asserts that in Judaism, there is an "alliance" between father and son because the son is possessed by the father's voice through the text.<sup>8</sup> Christianity fulfills the desire of the son to take the place of the father. Lyotard notes that in Judaism, the Bible may furnish the symbols, but the Talmud does not fulfill them in the way the New Testament fulfills and prolongs the Old. "The letter for the Jew does not press for fulfillment and transcendence; it refers, instead, to another sign."<sup>9</sup>

For the Jew, there is no division between word and thing, no conception of reality in terms of Greek metaphysics, or of truth as self-identical present being. Instead, the Jew adheres to the sign because reality is constituted linguistically. Margaret Ferguson notes that in Christianity the only important signs are the sacraments, where the sign becomes the flesh. However, Incarnation does not redeem language, rather, the Incarnation guarantees the end of language because it promises the possibility of the ultimate transcendence of time. The end of language is thus the end of the sign, replaced by its referent, the incarnate divinity.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Jewish Oedipus," Genre 10 (1977) pp. 400-402.

<sup>9</sup>Handelman p. 98.

<sup>10</sup>Margaret Ferguson, "St. Augustine's Region of Unlikeness: The Cross of Exile and Language", Georgia Review, 29, (1975), p. 861.

The Rabbinic mode of hermeneutics, based on metonymy and synecdoche was rooted in temporality. Augustine associated a synecdochic mode of knowing with the fall, with the fundamental flaw of earthly epistemology radically separated from the divine word. Yet Jewish hermeneutics adheres to the sign, refusing the consolation of instantaneous presence, remaining within the realm of temporality.

The privileging of both presence and being implies the privileging of speech in the Greco/Christian tradition; and as often noted, the ascendancy of speech implies the privileging of *logos* and the repression of writing from pre-Socratic thought to Heidegger. Because the spoken word was considered closer to the inner truth, writing was dismissed as secondary and exterior. Phonocentrism and logocentrism depend on being as presence, whether as sight, essence or consciousness. Writing is of absence, deferment and difference; Derrida's grammatology seeks out the blindspots of logocentric discourse, and as Christopher Norris notes, these blind spots are the points where writing returns to haunt the scene of its own repression. In place of the 'transcendental signifier', where meaning is beyond the differential play of language, we find that meaning is the 'sign of the sign'.

Kabbalah differs from the Greco-Christian ontological mode of thinking. Preceding Derrida by centuries, it moves

from ontology to grammatology, from Being to Text. Like Derrida, it stresses the interpretative process in which minute details of the text, syntax, shapes of word, are given prominence. Kabbalah is a discourse, an intermediary teaching the Torah, not an embodiment of God. The spiritual is not a substance, but rather an absence, but as is stressed in Judaism, absence does not equal nonexistence.

This absence, or otherness can be seen as Derrida's trace with "Reb Derissa" as the new high priest of the religion of absence. The trace, which is pure difference, precedes all similarity, it is outside plenitude and anterior to all signs. The trace opens signification. It is the absolute origin, except that there is no origin. It is the means by which *nothing* has begun. Derrida writes in "Ellipsis" that when the "book" is closed, what will supplant Scripture is a Text, a "writing beyond the Book", one not enveloped within the volume. It is "the writing of the origin, writing that retraces the origin, tracking down signs of the disappearance, the lost writing of the origin."<sup>11</sup>

Handelman finds in this writing a "slaying of Moses", a kind of dispossession of the father and reappropriation of both father and origin, a typically Jewish form of heresy

---

<sup>11</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Ellipsis," Writing and Difference, p. 295.

found also in the writing of Freud, Scholem and Bloom. It is a hermeneutic of identification and displacement.

Derrida's specific form of Jewish heresy is not metonymy become metaphor but metonymy run amuck, metonymy declaring itself to be independent of all foundations and yet claiming to be the origin and law of everything ... Derrida will have the last laugh on all pretenders to his new throne of writing. No one can slay this new Moses ... Derrida is the prodigal son, but unrepentant, enjoying his escapade.<sup>12</sup>

And yet although Derrida will stand as arch-deconstructionist and playful nihilist, Bloom recognizes him as performing Rabbinic revisions, "correcting" Western philosophy by substituting *davar* for *logos*:

Though he nowhere says so, it may be that Derrida is substituting *davhar* for *logos*, thus correcting Plato by a Hebraic equating of the writing-act and the mark-of-articulation with the word itself. Much of Derrida is in the spirit of the great Kabbalistic interpreters of Torah, interpreters who create baroque mythologies out of those elements in Scripture that appear least homogeneous in the sacred text.<sup>13</sup>

In a sense, what we have in Derrida is a return of the Rabbinical repressed. Handelman places him in the line of Jewish prodigal sons who try to perpetuate the law through its own transgression. She finds in Derridean deconstruction a repetition of the structure it seeks to analyze.

---

<sup>12</sup>Handelman p. 175.

<sup>13</sup>Harold Bloom, A Map of Misreading p. 43.

One important aspect of Rabbinic thought is the ability to produce and absorb its own inversions. Handelman cites instances of a precursor text asserting its priority by embracing its own revision. This is the ability to absorb interpretative reversal and the sufferings of history back into itself, making it appear as if they had been hidden in the precursor text all along. The study of Kabbalah is a prime example of this as Gershom Scholem's work shows.

Scholem investigates what he calls the "cellar" of Jewish history, the subterranean, esoteric tradition that runs counter to normative Rabbinic Judaism. While they can be irrational and heretical, Scholem contends that these impulses are vital to Jewish monotheism; that they are the secret of Jewish survival. He saw the dialectic of contrary trends, of the rational and unrational, of monotheism and myth as the means to revitalize Judaism.

Scholem's critics saw in his revision of Jewish history a manifestation of his own antinomianism, "an attempt to disguise his own subversion by reinterpreting the tradition itself as subversive, and a project to make his own secular interpretation of Judaism part of the normative Jewish tradition."<sup>14</sup> Yet according to Scholem's work, the "heretical" is truly a part of "normative" history, thus the "antinomianism" is a kind of return to tradition. By Handelman's concept of the heretical hermeneutic, Scholem's

---

<sup>14</sup>Handelman p. 199.

work represents not a break from tradition, but a vision of heresy as deeply traditional. Through heresy there is a return to tradition.

Throughout this dissertation, Scholem's work has been the prime source for information about the Kabbalah. The reason for this twofold. He has so dominated his field of study that one could say that he singlehandedly created the historiographic study of Jewish mysticism. Secondly, his approach to Kabbalah is largely linguistic, giving his work greater relevance for the study of poetry and literary theory. Because of the great indebtedness to his work, it is necessary to examine his underlying approach.

Gershom Scholem attempted to achieve a completely immanent historiography. He questioned whether an extra-mundane God would preclude an immanent historiography. A transcendent God, the central tenant of 19th century Jewish belief was a force outside of history. Immanent history unfolds without outside interference. In his work, Scholem attacked the centrality of belief in a transcendent monotheistic God, showing that mythical ideas, verging on pantheism and even polytheism, accompanied transcendent monotheism throughout Jewish history. By throwing doubt on the centrality of the transcendent god, Scholem was able to avoid some of the problems of 19th century Jewish scholarship. Instead of progressing toward an ever more abstract reflection of a single idea of God, Jewish history

represents the continual conflict between contradictory ideas of God.

In the Talmudic period, there was discomfort with biblical anthropomorphisms, giving rise to an antimagical theory of legal commandments. Scholem saw the biblical text as the record of the struggle between mythical and transcendental religion. He tried to show that halakhic (legalistic) Judaism remained alive, but its sources of vitality were the irrational forces within it. Each commandment was a "rite of remembrance" by which the Jew evoked the historical event that established the law.

Greek philosophy introduced to Judaism theological issues and a philosophical vocabulary which rendered a naive monotheism problematic. The attraction of Greek philosophy lay in its monotheistic assumptions; its sophisticated vocabulary helped crystalize the sense of God's transcendence. Yet this abstract God of philosophy was incompatible with the personal God of the Bible who created the world out of his own free will in time.

Jewish mysticism started with the idea of a hidden God (*deus absconditus*) and harmonized him with the God of the Bible. But the new synthesis could not naively resurrect anthropomorphic myths of the Bible. Instead, a symbolic reinterpretation of biblical text was attempted and mythical images became mystical symbols.

The myths of the Kabbalah are a form of Gnosticism, which is a source of a potential problem in Judaism because the gnostic myths of dualism were heretical. The orthodox reinterpretation of Gnostic dualism ensured God's unity while at the same time employed anthropomorphic images. The gnostic challenge was met by transforming myth into monotheism and monotheism into myth.

Nietzsche was the "original" deconstructor who in a sense laid the groundwork for the study of Kabbalah. His work led to a radical counter-history, a transvaluation of values. He wrote that we need history for life and action and that only a counter-history could dialectically transform monumental history by finding its models from the past in unconventional or heretical phenomena.

The Kabbalah itself was an underground movement for revival in Jewish history; yet it accomplished its work by appropriating the normative tradition and transforming it. Because it represented "freedom under authority", the Kabbalah proposed bold and far reaching new interpretation of the tradition without destroying the tradition altogether.

Much of the criticism of Scholem's work centers on the Kabbalah itself. Baruch Kurzweil contends that Scholem's unquestionable fascination with the more esoteric episodes

in Jewish history is evidence of his subjective bias.<sup>15</sup> Kurzweil maintained that Scholem had substituted one bias for another, antibourgeoise irrationalism for bourgeois rationalism. Scholem identifies his own anarchism with certain irrationalist trends in Jewish history while claiming to speak objectively for all Judaism. Scholem's anarchism only made explicit the antinomianism implicit in the historical enterprise from the outset. The question remains, however, has Scholem imposed modern concerns and categories upon the historical sources he studied?

Perhaps the best study of Scholem's work is David Biale's *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*. Biale defines counter history as the theory that there is a continuing dialectic between an esoteric and a subterranean tradition and the normative tradition. According to his theory, the true history lies beneath the surface and often contradicts the assumptions of the normative tradition.

Scholem rejected the Nietzschean counter-history of writers like M.Y. Berdichevsky and Martin Buber. He attacked their approach, labeling it "naive" because it holds that the history of Jewish myth is independent of official Judaism. He proposed a more subtle theory in which the mainstream and underground traditions are connected. More important, Scholem objects to the antihistoric

---

<sup>15</sup>David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* Second ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) p. 95.

mythopoeic approach of the Nietzscheans and their rejection of actual tradition. Against the subjective fabrication of historical myths, Scholem attempts to restore legitimacy to tradition by exhaustive immersion in historical sources.

Scholem's friend, Walter Benjamin, contended that only by "brushing history against the grain" can the message of the oppressed class be saved from anonymity. By reading sources against their class intent, history demythologizes the past, exposing the visible world for the reality it is. Where "reality" is a myth, the esoteric tradition becomes the true reality. But "counter-history" is not merely a revision of bourgeois historiography, the substitution of one bias for another, but an inversion of all conventions. While Scholem was highly critical of Benjamin for distorting the true metaphysical nature of his thought by cloaking it in materialist terms, he did adhere to his basic insight.

Scholem made Kabbalah accessible by the affinity he has suggested between the Kabbalah's incipient anarchism and modern secularism. Because the Kabbalah adhered to a pluralist theory of tradition, it is a key to understanding Judaism. Hence, focusing on the Kabbalah is *unparteiisch*, because the Kabbalah is the antithesis of dogma. It must be a source of vitality in Judaism precisely because it was ridiculed and suppressed by later writers trying to impose a single definition of the religion. Scholem objected to the idea that the counter-tradition has no connection with the

mainstream. On the contrary, he claimed repeatedly that Jewish mysticism was at the very heart of Rabbinic Judaism and not at its periphery.

Scholem himself was not a Kabbalist. Biale is careful to point out that the anarchistic theology which underlies his philosophy of history is not identical to the position of the Kabbalah. Because they believe in the authority of Jewish law, the Kabbalists (of the 12th - 16th centuries) were not anarchist. Anarchism lurked *in potentia* in their theology and therefore, Scholem "sees the Kabbalists as his precursors and Kabbalistic theology as the precursor to his theological anarchism - but they are not the same."<sup>16</sup> Scholem does not fully identify with his sources, but maintains historical detachment.

From Biale's analysis, one can infer that Scholem was obliquely writing a covert modern Jewish theology even while he attempted to adhere to critical historical philosophy. Others, like his student Joseph Dan, saw him as an objective historian, perhaps a Jewish nationalist, but not a theologian. Whatever the view, however, one must admit that Scholem wrote under the influence of German aesthetic ideology.

Scholem's nineteenth-century predecessors in academic kabbalistic scholarship (i.e., Nachman Krochimal and M. Landauer) were influenced by German idealism. Jürgen

---

<sup>16</sup>Biale p. 135.

Habermas has noted that the Kabbalah was itself a source of German idealism where the "spirit of Jewish mysticism lives in a hidden way."<sup>17</sup> Scholem operated on the romantic opposition of symbol/allegory, mysticism/philosophy, apocalyptic/normative, and rational/anarchistic. This last dualism is at the foundation of Scholem's thought because of his assertion that there were a few vital forces within *halakah* (law) itself. The only way for *halakah* to remain vital was to engage in a dialectical opposition with anarchism.

Scholem depicts the catastrophic and apocalyptic aspect of Jewish messianism, reflecting the nature of German-Jewish thought at the turn of the century. Handelman criticizes this emphasis even as she admits that Scholem repudiated any notion of German-Jewish symbiosis.

Handelman argues that there is an uncritical "romantic unconscious" in Scholem's phenomenology of religion. This is most apparent in his work on religious language when he asserts that the symbol is the fittest form of mystical expression. There is a connection between Scholem's interpretation of the word of God as "contentless" and "meaningless", yet the source of all meaning with French symbolist and German romantic theories of art. One need

---

<sup>17</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Profiles* in Susan Handelman *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literacy Theory in Benjamin Scholem and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) p. 93.

only think of Mallarmé, where the pure form of language reaches the absolute through the dissolution of all concrete meaning into *le Nèant*.

Both German romanticism and French symbolism had absorbed various esoteric philosophies through the Christian Kabbalah. It is not surprising, then, that Schlegel should write that "the true aesthetic is the Kabbalah."<sup>18</sup> As Jewish ideas about language and symbol were transformed in the Christian Kabbalah, they were absorbed into a symbolic theosophical system and aestheticized in German romantic thought. When Scholem contends that Kabbalah is a revitalizing upsurge of "creative myth" in the heart of rational Rabbinic Judaism, he evidences to what degree he is heir to German romanticism.

Handelman contends that Scholem defines kabbalistic linguistics as an expression of the "*symbolic*" nature of language and identifies the symbol as that which tries to communicate the incommunicable. This contention is compatible with the Romantic aesthetics which was permeated with a nostalgia for a lost organic unity. The symbol would be able to overcome the gap between the noumenal and phenomenal realms, the finite and the infinite, the material and the spiritual. For Scholem, the symbol places the finite in relation to formless absolute truth. Yet he himself does not claim that the symbol can do this, but

---

<sup>18</sup>Handelman p. 76.

rather, that the mystic believes it can. He also states that in a world which does not believe in God, only the poets have a belief in the symbolic power of language.

It is rather surprising that Handelman herself does not note this distinction, but rather, repeats the de Manian position on the Romantic symbol. For the religious mystic and the poet, de Man's criticism is irrelevant. Both use the symbol with the belief that it can express the ineffable.

The harshest criticism of Scholem's work comes from Moshe Idel. He argues that Scholem's philologic textual approach diminishes the "practical-experimental" aspects of mysticism. He rejects the view of Kabbalah as a form of gnosis or speculative theory, precisely those aspects which are of interest in literary study.

It should be noted that in Slayers of Moses, Susan Handelman is generous in her praise of Scholem's work. Her second book, Fragments of Redemption, written under the influence of Idel's work, is far more critical of Scholem. Idel's criticism will be presented before assessing the validity of his positions.

Idel offer a phenomenological analysis of Kabbalah, as opposed to Scholem's more theoretical approach. Idel feels that Scholem overstressed the theoretical at the expense of the practical and experimental side of Kabbalah. He defines two trends in the Kabbalah, the "theosophical theurgical"

and the "ecstatic". The first deals, in a "ritualistic and experimental way", with the structure of the divine world. Theurgy was based on the performance of traditional esoteric commandments of Jewish law. Scholem asserted that most kabbalistic ritual was derived from *halakhah*, but saw a shift in emphasis away from law.

Idel contrasts this "nomian" or theosophical Kabbalah with the ecstatic form which focuses on mystical experience. The ultimate aim of this practice was *devekuth* or union with God. The greatest disagreement between Idel and Scholem centers of this point. Idel assents to the pervasiveness of Kabbalistic symbolism for the normative theosophical Kabbalah, but insists that the ecstatic Kabbalah, particularly the work of Abulafia, was interested in the direct intuitive experience of God. However Idel, in an effort to stake out a separate position from Scholem, greatly oversimplifies Scholem's writings.

Scholem himself says that in the writings of Jewish mystics, we do not find that ecstatic experience plays the role that one would expect.<sup>19</sup> He states clearly that it is extremely rare that ecstasy signifies actual union with God, maintaining that the Jewish mystic almost invariably retains a sense of distance between himself and God. The word *devekuth*, which means "adhesion" or "being joined" can mean ecstasy, but it is a far more comprehensive term. "It is a

---

<sup>19</sup>Scholem p. 122.

perpetual being with God, an intimate union and conformity of the human and divine will."<sup>20</sup> Yet even this rapturous state of mind retains a sense of distance or incommensurateness. Scholem acknowledges that there have been instances of total *unio mystica*, but such tendencies are not typical of Jewish mysticism as a whole.

The only major Kabbalist of the ecstatic school was Abraham Abulafia. Scholem devotes an entire chapter in Major Trends to this Rabbi. He shows that Abulafia himself viewed his own doctrine of prophetic ecstasy as the doctrine of prophecy advanced by Jewish philosophers like Maimonides, who defined prophecy as "a temporary union of the human and the divine intellect, deliberately brought about through systematic preparation."<sup>21</sup> Scholem felt, however, that his teachings were a Judaized version of the ancient spiritual technique of Yoga. Its aim was the achievement of ecstasy with the mystical transfiguration of the individual in which one experiences an identification with one's master, and indirectly with God. Scholem is careful to note that nowhere does Abulafia write about it with utter frankness.

Both Idel and Handelman contend that the two correlates axes comprising the epistemological and ontological components of Scholem's work were the importance of symbolism and the denial of *unio mystica* and pantheism.

---

<sup>20</sup>Scholem p. 123.

<sup>21</sup>Scholem p. 139.

Scholem does not deny that the practice of *devekuth* is central to Abulafia's thought, yet Idel keeps using Abulafia, and only Abulafia, to prove this practice did exist. The overwhelming majority of Kabbalistic texts, including the Zohar, are not of this nature.

The criticism that Scholem's view of the symbol was derived from Romantic aesthetics seems to be more accurate. The symbol is a literary term of variable meaning; it can encompass the theology of German romantic criticism. Handelman contends that Scholem applies it as if it were an "objective" category in historiography. While this may be an accurate assessment, Scholem's use of the symbol renders Kabbalah very accessible in terms of poetry. Romantic aesthetics was saturated with a nostalgia for a lost, prior unity which could be restored through the symbol. Thus the symbol becomes the form wherein the absolute could be experienced in an unmediated way as it overcomes the gap between the noumenal and phenomenal realms, the material and spiritual. Scholem identifies the symbol with Jewish mysticism while he allocates the allegorical mode of thought to Jewish philosophy. Scholem places allegory in the gap between form and content giving rise to an infinity of meaning. He characterizes allegory as "immanent" in contrast to the "transcendence" offered through the symbol. (Both Benjamin and de Man invert this priority of symbol

over allegory, valorizing allegory as faithful to the "otherness" of language.)

Because Scholem felt that mystical experience was formless, he looked to the symbol as a means of expressing an experience that was beyond expression. He asserted that Jewish mysticism, unlike other forms of mysticism which depend on personal experience, retains a metaphysically positive attitude towards language. By means of symbolic reinterpretation of the Torah, one can transcend history and attain the absolute. Allegory treats the object it allegorizes as an "empty shell", whereas the object symbolized retains its original form as it makes another reality transparent. As Handelman notes, Scholem is thus making a metaphysical and ontological distinction between allegory and symbol, using the symbol to repair the breach opened by Kant's theory of knowledge. The symbol is able to reflect "true transcendence" while allegory cannot. Thus mysticism, through the symbol, is able to bridge the gap between the human and the divine. As Handelman states, "In effect, the symbol itself has here become an agent of redemption, itself theologized in that high romantic displacement of philosophy and theology into aesthetics."<sup>22</sup> Here the symbol both is and signifies.

Because Scholem's achievement was so daunting, his research so comprehensive, anyone working on Kabbalah must

---

<sup>22</sup>Handelman p. 109.

depend on his scholarship. This is why Idel's criticism, if accurate, is disturbing. Idel's work is not a complement to or continuation of Scholem's work. It is, instead, an attempt to supplant it.

Robert Alter has found Idel's work to be one-sided, tendentious, arbitrary and misleading. Often it is based on strained reading of source material and misrepresentation, occasionally based on false either/or alternatives. Idel wished to make the Kabbalah experiential, stressing mind altering techniques to achieve a dissolution of the self. Yet this involves the question of what historical weight one must assign to Abulafia, who alone among major Kabbalists was a radical ecstatic. Scholem does not down-play his importance, but shows that the preponderance of Kabbalists were of a theosophic outlook. Even where performance is a concern of the mystic, it does not preclude a reliance on the symbol as the means for unveiling the ineffable. Alter notes that:

in his zeal to make a place for himself by overturning the founding figure of the modern field of Jewish mysticism, [Idel] ... reduces his subject to a chain of ecstatic fits and starts and theurgic manipulation detached from the larger realm of historical experience and conceptual creativity to which it belongs.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup>Robert Alter. "Jewish Mysticism in Dispute". Commentary, Vol. 88, No. 3, (Sept. 89), p. 59.

Idel contends that Scholem underrated the role of allegory in the expression of psychological processes and as a means of expression in the mystical mode. Idel sees the Kabbalaistic symbol as an invitation to action rather than as a theosophy. It was not a romantic sublime or an attempt to express the inexpressible, but rather an attempt to express relationships. He seeks to return Jewish mysticism to its ethical imperative and make it more in line with traditional Jewish thought. Yet Scholem himself often noted the deeply traditional aspect of Kabbalah. However it is his constant return to language and to what the majority of the Kabbalists did with language that is relevant to poets and theorists of literature.

Kabbalah is of interest for the modern poet in part because of the centrality of symbolism. Not only does the Kabbalah use symbols, but it provided the theoretical justification for their use. This was seen most clearly in the work of Yeats, who saw the symbol as the only means of expressing a "higher" reality. Criticism like de Man's, which rejects the use of the Romantic symbol to bridge the ontological gap is not incorrect, but is beside the point because it evolves from an entirely different ontology.

Handelman may be accurate when she notes that Scholem's mode of distancing himself from Kabbalistic texts was through the use of historical-philological methods, even as he employed philosophical assumptions of a symbolic-mythical

hermeneutic. He saw the expulsion from Spain as the generator of the messianic expectation that the Lurianic Kabbalah articulated. But despite his historiosophic vision, perhaps Scholem was actually writing a "metaphysic". Like Benjamin, Scholem approached history as a "constellation", bringing together the "dialectical" images which flared up during times of danger. Much of his writing was done under the danger of Nazism and Fascism and these pressures illuminated relations with the past.

Scholem saw Kabbalah as a theoretical "knowing", a form of gnosis. Because of this, his work has considerable appeal for contemporary literary critics, poets and writers as it holds out the possibility of a modern gnosis. Harold Bloom has defined Scholem as a gnostic in a historian's disguise. Even Handelman, in her largely negative reinterpretation of Scholem in Fragments of Redemption, acknowledges that much poststructuralist theory and literature is conceived as a kind of gnosis. From the Russian Formalists to de Man, the human arena is conceived as "an intersection of linguistic and semiotic forces, the human is the subject of the language."<sup>24</sup> Scholem's historiographical work has itself become the source material for poets and critics in search of a new myth. For the post-Holocaust generation, his writings on the Kabbalah have provided material for a new "myth" for alienated Jews, who

---

<sup>24</sup>Handelman p. 114.

like their precursors in medieval Spain or twentieth-century Germany, had lost faith in rational philosophy and the covenant. Bloom goes so far as to say that Scholem's Gnosticism, masked as historical scholarship, is the basis for an emergent Jewish theology.<sup>25</sup>

Elaborating on the romantic and revisionist tendencies in Scholem's historiography, Bloom finds that the heretical tendencies in Kabbalistic gnosticism are concealed under the guise of the normative. He finds that the authority of identity is not of constancy-in-change, "but the originality that usurps tradition and becomes a fresh authority, strangely in the name of continuity."<sup>26</sup>

Bloom uses Scholem to create a secular Nietzschean counterhistory as Judaism itself becomes interpreted according to his literary theory of revisionism. It becomes the means to overcome the past and become one's own origin. Scholem's studies of the Jewish past with its latent heresies are transformed into a model for a new theology. Both Bloom and Scholem see normative Judaism as an empty legalism which has been vitalized by the high romantic myth of Kabbalah. Yet for Bloom this myth is tempered by an awareness of our belatedness, by the impossibility of ever being original. David Biale recognizes that for Scholem,

---

<sup>25</sup>Harold Bloom. "The Mask of the Normative," Orim: A Jewish Journal at Yale 1, 1985, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup>Bloom p. 9.

the historical study of the sources of Judaism provided a return to Judaism without Orthodoxy. It offered Scholem "his personal solution to the problem of Judaism in a secular age."<sup>27</sup> Scholem, like his friend, Walter Benjamin, was "a theologian marooned in the profane."

Bloom's use of Judaism in his criticism is a move to rethink the entire western cannon, not along traditional Christian lines, but in a Freudian will-to-power of interpretation. Bloom sees the critical arena as a power struggle of poetic and critical relations. He insists on a basic principle of poetic inspiration, namely that no later poet is the fulfillment of an earlier poet. This hostility to the idea of fulfillment, also found in Freud and Derrida, is a Jewish idea. There can be no fulfillment; the Messiah has not come. We are left with the struggle, with deferment, mediation, interpretation and agony. At the root of Bloom's The Anxiety of Influence "is the despair over not having been self-begotten, at not being one's own father; for the question of birth is ultimately an attempt to overcome death."<sup>28</sup> The poet is thrown into a world not his own, and must reverse this fall by recreating that world in his own image, in other words, by becoming his own father. Thus for Bloom, poetry is a conflict with God, an attempt at a rival divination. In his work, Bloom often points to

---

<sup>27</sup>Biale p. 207.

<sup>28</sup>Handelman, Slayers of Moses p. 182.

Milton's Satan as a heroic figure because he refuses creation as ordered by God. Indeed, a look at Bloom's work reveals that this rivalry extend to his own work, as The Book of J reflects Bloom's own anxiety of influence with the Bible; Bloom is locked in battle with God himself.

Bloom's books are filled with Freudian terms of belatedness, discontinuity and revisionism. In the process of usurpation, the new poet clears space for himself by misreading his precursor. Bloom uses Kabbalah as a model for poetry and criticism because it manipulates, misreads and revises tradition according to its own catastrophic vision, precisely what the strong reader and poet must do. Bloom, following Scholem, sees the Kabbalah as a response to historical catastrophe and a means of accommodating new religious insight even when confronted with an already canonized tradition. Kabbalah is used as the paradigm of revisionism because it developed a psychology of belatedness with explicit rhetorical techniques for opening the text.

Bloom developed a concept of an "antithetical" criticism which is achieved by a continual conflict with its opposite. Following Nietzsche, criticism opposes itself to aesthetic idealization. In Kabbalah and Criticism, Bloom takes these ideas to their extreme, claiming that there is only misreading. There are no poems-in-themselves or poets-in-themselves; there are only intertexts. In order to expand this theory, Bloom uses a strange blending of

Kabbalistic, Gnostic, Hellenistic and psychological terms. At times, the equation between Greek tropes and Kabbalistic categories seems strange, particularly when they are also seen to be Freudian defense mechanisms.

Handelman makes the useful observation that for Freud, one of the main tasks was changing repetition to remembrance. Repetition compulsion is traced to the regressive death instinct, repetition to death. (Beyond the Pleasure Principle). She notes that Christian vision involves a repetition of the Christian sacrifice and the centrality of this act leads to textual repetition - that is, to making meaning identical with itself, always present because it constantly reflects the Incarnation Event. Rabbinic Judaism, on the other hand, changes repetition to remembrance. After the loss of the Temple, the Rabbis formulated rules of remembering through study and interpretation. Bloom also follows the path from repetition to interpretation. In The Anxiety of Influence, Bloom sees the poet's task as living the discontinuity of "undoing" repetition even as he lives the continuity of recollecting forwards. (P. 83). Thus the poet breaks forth even as he is tied to the precursor.

Handelman sees Bloom as one of the "heretical hermeneutics", marked by the Christian-Jewish schism. Where Christianity replaced Rabbinic discourse with incarnation, the decisive act of presence, the Jewish thinker rejects

salvation. Bloom, like Derrida and Freud, remains faithful to exile, discontinuity, displacement.

Yet Bloom is more gloomy, less "playful" than Derrida about the possibility of deconstructing the ontotheological tradition of the West. He sees interpretation as a way of opening the text "to the sorrows of time and history."<sup>29</sup> While he rejects the over-spiritualized criticism of Auerbach and Frye, he distances himself from deconstruction, as he seeks to "recenter", not "decenter."

Bloom looks to the pattern that Milton set down in Paradise Lost where Satan rebels against his belatedness and attempts to rival God. Bloom rejects heresy which alters the balance of received doctrine in favor of revisionism which alters the stance through creative correction. In the case of Kabbalah, the precursor-father text is Scripture. Because Rabbinic thought tends to produce and absorb its own inversion, Kabbalah was absorbed into the mainstream of Judaism. So too with Harold Bloom. Bloom's interpretive revisions do not cut him off from his forefathers, but like the prodigal son, return him to that tradition in a dialectical and ambivalent manner. What Bloom said about Derrida applies equally to himself, "In the spirit of the great Kabbalists ... [he is an] interpreter who creates

---

<sup>29</sup>Handelman, Slayers of Moses p. 189.

baroque mythologies out of those elements in Scripture that appear least homogeneous in the sacred text."<sup>30</sup>

Bloom's reason for using Kabbalah as the basis for his interpretive system has to do with the relation of revisionism and heresy in Kabbalah. Bloom bases his understanding of Kabbalah on Scholem's work. Indeed, if Bloom is correct that there are no texts, but only readings and misreadings, then one could see Bloom's work as a strong misreading of Scholem. At any rate, Scholem's notion that in the end Kabbalah was a vision of heresy that was deeply traditional had profound influence on Bloom. Bloom uses Kabbalah as his demonical counter-sublime in an antithetical position to both Jewish and New Critical orthodoxy.

Kabbalah deals with the ultimate precursor text, - Scripture, - the text of unmatched authority in the West. As the Kabbalah is a misprision of Scripture, it opens the massive, long closed canon. Bloom uses the kabbalistic interpretive techniques of revisionary misreadings and displacements. He finds in the Kabbalah "the largest single source for material that will help us to study the revisionary impulse and to formulate techniques for the practice of antithetical criticism."<sup>31</sup>

Bloom's view of Kabbalah differs from Scholem's in one important aspect. Bloom sees Kabbalah as a rebellion

---

<sup>30</sup>Bloom, Map of Misreading p. 43.

<sup>31</sup>Bloom p. 4.

against traditional methods of reading, with normative Rabbinic reading a closed commentary. Scholem, on the other hand, contends that Kabbalah was not separated from normative tradition which was able to absorb it. Bloom must see Kabbalah as antithetical to Rabbinic Judaism, for only then can it be the paradigm for revisionist criticism. Handelman contends that both Freud and Derrida operate similarly, taking structural elements of Rabbinic thought and displacing them against their origins and reappropriating them as New Laws. It was imperative for Bloom to separate Kabbalah from normative Judaism in order to cast it as "Jewish Gnosticism trying to free itself from the anxiety of Sacred Scripture."<sup>32</sup>

Bloom turns the Kabbalah into a rebellion against the Jewish version of a Scene of Instruction "... which means that Kabbalah is a collective psychic defense of the most imaginative medieval Jews against exile and persecution pressing on them inwardly."<sup>33</sup> Bloom molds Kabbalah into a Gnostic exegesis of Scripture in order to achieve "a salutary act of textual violence, transgressive through and through."<sup>34</sup> Because Kabbalah was a mode of interpretation, a form of intellectual speculation, it became for Bloom a critical tradition that was unusual for its inventiveness.

---

<sup>32</sup>Handelman, Slayers of Moses p. 211.

<sup>33</sup>Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism p. 53.

<sup>34</sup>Bloom, "Breaking of Form" p. 6.

Bloom reads Kabbalah deconstructively. He does not view kabbalistic *tikkun* as representation in the classical Greek mode, or as presence or fulfillment in the Christian mode, but rather as restoration and restitution. "What is being mended cannot be meaning, or presence, or form, or unity. Poems don't have any of these, and cannot be transformed into what poems have never been ... Poems cannot retribute, and yet they can lie against time."<sup>35</sup> Bloom views Kabbalistic description of God's emanation (the *sefirot*, *behinot*, etc.) as rhetoric, - nonrepresentational, anti-iconic, linguistic.

Bloom takes from Kabbalah what he needs; he is interested in exile and anxiety, not in redemption or fulfillment. He sees the cosmic catastrophe, not the cosmic unity. Bloom stresses that the act of creation itself becomes exile. God, for Bloom anxiety ridden and isolated, is the model for the poet who must pass through the dialectics of contraction, catastrophe and mending. He uses Luria's theory because he asserts that this theory is "the best paradigm available for the way poets war against one another in the strife of Eternity that is poetic influence."<sup>36</sup> Yet he misreads Luria in a displacement and amends him with influences from Greek rhetoric and Freud.

---

<sup>35</sup>Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism p. 52.

<sup>36</sup>Bloom, Map of Misreading p. 5.

Bloom's constant dialectical shifts are the foundation of his antithetical criticism. They reflect the analogical principle which he claims is found in Freud and which Freud learned from the Poets. By analogical meaning he means a "wandering signification" or "a thinking by *synecdoche*".<sup>37</sup> This "tropism of meaning" is the Kabbalah's great gift for modern criticism.

The great lesson that the Kabbalah can teach contemporary interpretation is that meaning in belated texts is always wandering meaning, even as the belated Jews were a wandering people. Meaning wanders, like human tribulation, or like error, from text to text, and within a text from figure to figure.<sup>38</sup>

Meaning wanders wherever anteriority threatens to take over, both in modern poetry and Kabbalah. Bloom contends that both a poem's images and Kabbalistic hypostases are types of ambivalence that meet the burden of anteriority. Time and history are part of the swerve from origins. Because the Kabbalists know creation as a breaking of the vessels, Bloom feels they know the past as their own creation. In this way, Kabbalah becomes Bloom's paradigm for interpretation; the ancient Rabbis read and interpreted with audacity and extravagance. Even as he concedes that most Kabbalistic interpretations have utterly vanished, he

---

<sup>37</sup>Bloom pp. 168, 169.

<sup>38</sup>Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism p. 89.

upholds them because of their stance toward tradition and their precursors.

Over the course of his many books, Bloom has refined the dialectic of revisionism. He propounds a dialectic of limitation, substitution and representation which becomes a study of the critical cost of self-revision. This last notion, the psychic cost of self-revision necessitates a ruthless self parody. "The reason that Bloom's kind of criticism must end in a demonic celebration of self-parody lies in his operating assumption that poetry speaks the language of the will, and that the will is an apocalyptic antithetical force at odds with all that is not its anti-natural self - even with its own earlier representations."<sup>39</sup>

Daniel O'Hara sees Bloom as engaged in the ironic repetition of the central plot of the "romance of interpretation" for the critic of our culture. This is the story of how the modern individual retains the appearance of the religious representation of reality by transferring its "prestigious aura" to secular texts. In this way the critic functions as priest in the "humanistic vision portraying man as in the process of become a god through the power of his imaginative productions."<sup>40</sup>

In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant argues for the idea of a divine mind as the origin and measure of all

---

<sup>39</sup>Daniel O'Hara, The Romance of Interpretation p. 63.

<sup>40</sup>O'Hara p. 90.

phenomenal reality. O'Hara states that the goal of the critical quest is to approximate in one's life of writing the ideal of the divine mind. In his critical project, Bloom wrestles with this Kantian dragon, not like Nietzsche by revising it and offering the idea of the transfiguration of man into the *Übermensch*, but through parody and inversion. But as O'Hara notes, the irony of revisionism which stems from the post-Kantian critical project, is an irony which cannot be avoided no matter how self-conscious or sublime the critic might be. The oppositional critics of our culture would critique the ascetic ideal both in the work of art or in revisionary interpretation by identifying with their "self-created *phantasmagoria*" found in the void of past texts. "The aim is to reproduce themselves as the divine children of yet another potentially liberating vision that deserves, ultimately, to be parodied, too."<sup>41</sup>

O'Hara would be correct in his assessment of Bloom's use of Kallabah if it were a question of what and how fully he identifies with these texts. Surely Bloom does not approach them as theologically valid, but rather makes use of them as a paradigm to suit his own purposes. It is the working-model for a theory of poetic influence, and as such it escapes the circle of revisionism. As Bloom states, "From our perspective, religion is spilled poetry. Kabbalah seems to me unique among religious system of interpretation

---

<sup>41</sup>O'Hara p. 91.

in that it is, simply, already poetry, scarcely needing translation into the realms of the aesthetic."<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup>Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism, p. 52.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

Yeats's *Happy Shepherd* claims that "words alone are certain good". But the situation is rarely that simple, either for Yeats' other poets or the Kabbalists. Yeats longed to keep a vision of a verbal Eden but much of his poetry, particularly the late poems, deal with a process of desublimation. Even Kabbalistic texts that point to the lost language of God, the *Ursprache* are punctuated with silence and visions of the abyss. There is always that Yeatsean balancing of the antinomies.

For the poets of the "splintered word" there is also a balancing between opposites although the range is narrower. Jabès's poetry, for all its consciousness of the fractured nature of language, is an affirmation of the act of writing. Both Yeats and Jabès, standing for almost opposite views of language, looked to the Kabbalah as a source of poetic insight. Each took what he needed. One used the occult tradition to justify his use of symbols and to provide a paradigmatic structure for his personal mythology. The other plumbed the depth of the Kabbalah, mining the negative strain of its insights.

For Jabès, the withdrawal of God not only engenders the free play of language, it also reveals its abyss. This

'abyss' becomes a nonhuman emptiness - "language's own immanent self-critique rather than its 'depth' as divine plenitude".<sup>1</sup> His questioning of God becomes identified with the writer's own self-reflectivity; it reveals the empty space which produces the space of literature, of words suspended over a void.

In "*Ego Dominus Tuus*", Yeats writes of his trouble seeking after magical truths:

Hic:           A lamp burns on beside the open book  
                  That Michael Robarts left, you.  
                                walk in the moon,  
                  And though you have passed the best of life,  
                                still trace,  
                  Enthalled by the unconquerable delusion,  
                  Magical shapes.

                  .....  
Hic:           And I would find myself  
                                and not an image.  
Ille:          That is our modern hope ....  
                  We are but critics, or but  
                                half create,  
                  Timid, entangled, empty and  
                                abashed,  
                                (V 367)

Yeats well understood the difficulty of offering an art based on the occult to a modern disbelieving world. It seems, however, that belief is not necessary for the audience; the reader need not share the poet's occult vision to enjoy the poetry. Belief was needed by the poet; he had to seek his opposite, create his daimon in order to write

Ille:           Because I seek an imagem  
                                not a book.  
                  Those men that in their writing  
                                are most wise.

---

<sup>1</sup>Handelman, Fragments p. 95.

Own nothing but their blind,  
 stupefied hearts.  
 I call to the mysterious one who yet  
 Shall walk the wet sands by  
 the edge of the stream  
 And look most like me, being indeed  
 my double ...  
 And prove of all imaginable  
 The most unlike,. being my antiself,  
 And, standing by these characters, disclose  
 All that I seek; and whisper it  
 as though.  
 He were afraid the birds, who cry  
 aloud  
 Their momentary cries before it is  
 dawn,  
 Would carry it away to blasphemous  
 men.  
 (V 371)

Yeats is willing to maintain his belief in the face of the unbelieving world for the sake of his poetry. What he took from Kabbalah enabled his poetry:

We seek reality with the slow toil of  
 our weakness and are smitten from the  
 boundless and the unforeseen. Only when  
 we are saint or sage, and renounce  
 experience itself, can we, in imagery of  
 the Christian Cabbala, leave the sudden  
 lightening and the path of the serpent  
 and become the bowman, who aim his arrow  
 at the center of the sun.  
 (Mythologies p. 340)

The bowman whose aim reaches the center of the sun is the poet whose poetry achieves the sublime. Throughout this study, the sublime has been a touchstone, whether we measure it in its negative or positive aspects. And throughout, the criticism of Harold Bloom and Paul de Man have provided contrapuntal voices on this subject. While it often seems that I gave favor to Bloom, I found that it was de Man's

work that put pressure on my thinking and asked the questions that had to be asked.

Bloom's area of concentration is poetry of High Romanticism; he is the critic of the sublime. De Man fears the totalizing tendency of Romanticism and looks not to the sublime, but to irony as the trope of choice. For de Man, allegory comes to represent the archetypal model of deconstructive reading. Handelman notes that de Man displaces the interpersonal dialectic of a subject's relation of a mind to nature onto the impersonal relations of sign in a system. He then makes temporality the major category so that the relation of signs is one of noncoincidence and nonidentity. Although de Man was influenced by Benjamin, there is an important difference. Benjamin did not offer a semiotic conception of language as an arbitrary system of signs. He considered that conception to be a fall from a purer language, a language close to the Kabbalistic model studied by his friend Scholem.

De Man elevates irony as the figure of discontinuity and connects it to allegory. He redefines it as the perception of the nonidentity of the self. The "irony of irony" is finally the act of not becoming the dupe of one's own irony, of maintaining the impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world. Allegory and irony both share an awareness of temporality which forbids a totality. When a writer tries to avoid irony by "a leap out

of language into faith<sup>16</sup>,<sup>2</sup> he is guilty of a deceit. De Man thus implies that "faith" is a realm opposite to language and irony, a realm where the apocalyptic sensibility tries to overcome the temporality of language.<sup>3</sup>

Kabbalah, however, holds out a view of language diametrically opposed to de Man's. There is no leap out of language into faith; language is all there is. As a system, Kabbalah is not greatly concerned with temporality. Time is a modern concern; it becomes central when the transcendent has been lost, when the relation between meaning and life have been disrupted. Kabbalah looks back to primordial times, to the creation before the fall into history.

Bloom defines the sublime as the awe-inspiring alien force which emerges in the act of reading, trailing an impressive aura of innumerable echoes. He uses Yeats as his ironic muse. Bloom did not want, but surely did become the inventor of a private mythology. Bloom shares a common point of intellectual departure with Yeats, "a fiercely ascetic anti-naturalism which ironically manifests itself in the critic as a defensive attack on the poet for distorting the authentic humanistic vision of his romantic ancestors in the tradition of prophecy, Blake and Shelley."<sup>4</sup> In a sense,

---

<sup>2</sup>De Man, Blindness and Insight p. 223.

<sup>3</sup>Susan Handelman, Fragments, p. 135.

<sup>4</sup>Daniel O'Hara, "Yeats in Theory", p. 354.

Bloom would usurp Yeats's position in the tradition of vision, as Daniel O'Hara notes, in much the same way as Satan uses Sin in *Paradise Lost* as the occasion for bearing original witness to a sublimity all his own. While Bloom criticizes Yeats's Gnosticism in his book about the poet, he later elevates Gnosticism into an occult justification of imaginative metaphysics.

In his introduction to Weiskel's book on the sublime, Harold Bloom notes that all theorists of the sublime confront masterpieces of emotional ambivalence. He goes on to note that ambivalence, increased to excess, becomes irony which destroys the sublime. This insight seems to me to provide the basis for the dialectic between de Man and Bloom. The sublime implies a single angle of vision, one so overwhelming and all encompassing that it leaves no room for other perspectives. Irony as a trope means a double vision, a might have been, a seeing from a second perspective. De Man is the critic of irony.

It would be very convenient to set out a sublime/irony dualism and infer a critical dialectic between Bloom and de Man along such a division. While this split does hold true, it is not quite so straightforward. O'Hara finds that in Bloom's writing, the sublime manifests itself as a certain kind of destructive influence, a revisionary irony. He notes that Bloom, like Nietzsche before him, will both critique and fall victim to the demonic form of revisionism.

In revising the past, one becomes like the figure one would understand as one revises that figure. "Like a passive-aggressive magic mirror, the irony of revisionism reconstructs and projects the very things it says it would represent and reflect, or renew and supplement."<sup>5</sup>

O'Hara notes that the spots in the text of apparent indeterminacy, those intervals and interstices whose "void forever craves fresh food," draw out a writer's revisionary tendencies. This is why Derrida attempts to disrupt this process repeatedly in order to keep it going, by flushing out the "hollows" of the text with figures that parody the revisionary impulse. Bloom does not see the irony of revisionism as the play of "différance" like Derrida, but rather as the anxiety of influence. His subject is the sublime and how one would compose a counter-sublime to best the precursor in an endless agony.

Bloom takes Nietzsche's intuition about the will to power as the "necessity of misreading" and offers instead the counter-sublime of the Kabbalah. And while Bloom himself might be caught up in revisionary irony, his work does not valorize this irony even while it provides the patterns. The final danger of revisionary irony is that one will become the antithetical image of all that one originally held dear.

---

<sup>5</sup>Daniel O'Hara, The Romance of Interpretation p. 74.

For de Man, there is an ironic interplay between blindness and insight. He stresses the inability of language even to represent, except ironically by negation. He implies that the attempt to know another writer produces a blindness or error that is also creative. This seems to me in a sense to be close to Bloom's gnostic principle. For de Man what is created is an elaboration of error and we are left with the impossibility of knowing a definitive truth. In the end, he seems to have enshrined nihilism as the principle of critical activity.

Thus we return to the originating insight, namely that a magical theory of language and a nihilistic one will become joined together. The value of Kabbalah is that it provides a model for both modes of interpretation. Because these two theories of language meet at their outer limits as Bloom contends, ideas like Derrida's trace, decentering, intertextuality and interpretive freedom fit comfortably with Kabbalistic theory. But many of de Man's views cannot be reconciled with Kabbalistic language theory. Linguistic nihilism cancels out the transcendence a magical theory offers to language. But in the final analysis, it does not matter if language springs from plenitude or dearth, from a magical theory or from nihilism. What does matter is the poetry that emerges from the theory of language.

In the sixth chapter of this study, we went through an examination of the differences between Western metaphysics

and Judaic thought. Kabbalah has offered ways of thinking not permitted by Western Metaphysics; its God is at once *Ein-Sof* and *ayin*, total presence and total absence, "and all its interiors contain exteriors, while all of its effects determine its cause. But Kabbalah stops the movement of Derrida's 'trace' since it has a point of the primordial, where presence and absence co-exist by continuous interplay."<sup>6</sup> With this point in view, we can ascend the *Sefirotic* tree, and gaze about us with the Kabbalah as theory of language and of poetic influence. The Kabbalah richly confuses rhetorical substitution with magic, relying on the basic trope that God had spoken in order to form the world. Today, we may no longer hold the Kabbalistic reverence for the unutterable Name of God, but we can still celebrate with them the perpetually renewable act of linguistic creation.

---

<sup>6</sup>Harold Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism p. 53.

Bibliography

- Adams, Hazard. Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision. New York: Cornell University, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1983.
- Albright, Daniel. The Myth Against Myth. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Allison, David. The New Nietzsche. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1990.
- Alter, Robert. "Jewish Mysticism in Dispute." Commentary, Vol. 88, No. 3, (Sept. '89).
- \_\_\_\_\_. Necessary Angels: Traditions and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin and Scholem. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Auster, Paul. "Book of the Dead: An Interview with Edmond Jabès." The Sin of the Book ed. Eric Gould. Omaha: University Of Nebraska Press, 1985.
- Aylesworth, Gary. "Deconstruction and Criticism: Preliminary Remarks." The Textual Sublime: Deconstruction and its Differences. ed. Hugh Silverman and Gary Aylesworth. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990.
- Bachchan, Harbands Rai. W.B. Yeats and Occultism. Delhi, India: Motlal Barnasidass, 1963.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author," Image, Music, Text trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

- Benjamin, Walter. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire."  
Illuminations. New York: Schocken Books, 1958.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Reflections. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York:  
Harcourt Brace Jovanvich, 1978.
- Berryman, Charles. William Butler Yeats, Design of Opposites: A  
Critical Study of Yeats's Art and Philosophy. New York:  
Exposition Press, 1967.
- Biale, David. Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counterhistory,  
Second Ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Blackmur, R.P. Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry. New York:  
Columbia University Press, 1981.
- Blanchot, Maurice. "The Absence of the Book," The Gaze of  
Orpheus and Other Literary Essays. trans. Lydia Davis. New  
York: Station Hill Press, 1981.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Interruptions." The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabès. ed.  
Eric Gould. Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.
- Blavatsky, Helen P. Isis Unveiled. California: California  
Theosophy Co., 1925.
- Bloom, Harold. Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism. Oxford:  
Oxford University Press, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Breaking of Form." Deconstruction and Criticism.  
ed. H. Bloom. New York: Seabury Press, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Gershom Scholem: Modern Critical Views, ed. Harold Bloom.  
New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Kabbalah and Criticism. New York: Continuum, 1975.

- \_\_\_\_\_. A Map of Misreading. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Masks of the Normative." Orim: A Jewish Journal at Yale, 1, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Poetry and Repression; Revisionism from Blake to Stevens. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Yeats. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Boyarin, Daniel. Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Bruns, Gerald. Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.
- Bonoure, Gabriel. Edmond Jabès: La demeure et le livre. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1984.
- Burke, Kenneth. The Rhetoric of Religion. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970.
- Carrol, David. Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida. New York: Routledge, 1987.
- Cavanaugh, Catherine. Love and Forgiveness in Yeats's Poetry. Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1986.
- Caws, Mary Ann. Edmond Jabès. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1988.
- Deguy, Michael. "The Discourse of Exaltation." Of the Sublime: Presence in Question. ed. Jeffrey Librett. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.

- de Man, Paul. Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Temporality. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Epistemology of Metaphor." On Metaphor. ed. Sheldon Sacks. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image." Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism. ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Norton, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant." Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects, ed. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica. Amhurst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Rhetoric of Romanticism. "Image and Emblem in Yeats." New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy." trans. John P. Leavy. Semia, 23, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Force and Signification," Writing and Difference. trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "La mythologie blanche." Poetique 5, 1971, translated as "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy", New Literary History, 6, 1974, 5-74, trans. F.C.T. Moore.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Of Grammatology. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

- \_\_\_\_\_. The Truth in Painting. trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Writing and Difference. "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," "Elipsis," trans Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Duncan, Robert. "The Delirium of Meaning." The Sins of the Book. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.
- Ellmann, Richard. Eminent Domain: Yeats Among Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot and Auden. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Identity of Yeats. New York: Oxford University Press, 1954.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Yeats: The Man and the Masks. New York: MacMillan, 1948.
- Faur, José. Golden Doves with Silver Dots. Bloomington: University Press, 1986.
- Ferguson, Margaret. "St. Augustine's Region of Unlikelihood: The Cross of Exile and Language." Georgia Review, 29, (1975).
- Finneran, Richard J. ed. Yeats Annual No. 1. Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1986.
- Flannery, Mary Catherine. Yeats and Magic: The Earlier Works. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.
- Frye, Northrop. Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.
- Gasché, Rudolph. "Indifference to Philosophy." Reading de Man Reading. Ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "On Mere Sight: A Response to Paul de Man." The Textual Sublime: Deconstruction and its Differences. ed. Hugh Silverman. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990.
- Gould, Eric. "Godtalk." The Sin of the Book. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. ed. The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabès. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1985.
- Guglielmi, Joseph. La Ressemblance impossible: Edmond Jabès. Paris: Les Editeurs Français Réunis, 1978.
- Handleman, Susan. Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem and Levinas. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Jabès and the Rabbinic Tradition." The Sins of the Book. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Slayers of Moses. Albany: SUNY Press, 1982.
- Harper, George Mill. Yeats's Golden Dawn. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. "Looking Back at Paul de Man." Reading de Man Reading. ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzick. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. & Sanford Budick. Midrash and Literature. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.
- Hegel, Georg Friedrich. Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts. trans. T.M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

- \_\_\_\_\_. Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Vol. 2. ed. P. Hodgson, trans. R.I. Brown. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Henn, T.R. The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966.
- Hertz, Neil. The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- Hoffman, Ann Golomb. Between Exile and Return: S.Y. Agnon and The Drama of Writing. Albany: SUNY Press, 1991.
- Idel, Moshe. Kabbalah: New Perspectives. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia. trans. Jonathan Chipman. Albany: SUNY Press, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah. Albany: SUNY Press, 1988.
- Jabès, Edmond. The Book of Dialogue. trans. Rosmarie Waldrop. Hanover, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Book of Resemblances 3. The Ineffaceable, The Unperceived. trans. Rosmarie Waldrop. Hanover, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Book of Resemblances 2. Intimations the Desert. trans. Rosmarie Waldrop. Hanover, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. From the Desert to The Book: Dialogues with Marcel Cohen. trans. Pierre Joris. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1980.

- \_\_\_\_\_. Le Livre des questions
- I. Le Livre des questions. Paris: Gillmard, 1963.
  - II. Le Livre de Yukel. Paris: Gillmard, 1964.
  - III. Le Retour au livre. Paris: Gillmard, 1964.
  - IV. Yaël. Paris: Gillmard, 1967.
  - V. Elya. Paris: Gillmard, 1969.
  - VI. Aély. Paris: Gillmard, 1972.
  - VII. ·(El, ou le dernier livre). Paris: Gillmard, 1973.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Book of Questions Vol. II. Yaël, Elya, Aely, El, or the Last Book. trans. Rosmarie Waldrop. Hanover, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Book of Questions II & III. The Book of Yukel Return to the Book. trans. Rosemarie Waldrop. Hanover, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Book of Questions: The Book of Questions. trans. Rosmarie Waldrop. Hanover, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1976.
- Jonas, Hans. The Gnostic Religion. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.
- Jeffares, A. Norman. William B. Yeats: Man and Poet. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966.
- Kaplan, Edward. "The Problematic Humanism of Edmond Jabès." The Sin of the Book. ed. E. Gould. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.

- Katz, Steven. "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism." Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis. ed. Steven Katz. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Kermode, Frank. The Romantic Image. New York: MacMillan, 1957.
- Kline, Gloria C. The Lost Courtly Lover: Yeats and the Idea of Woman. Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, Studies in Modern Literature, 1983.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. "Sublime Truth." Of the Sublime: Presence in Question. ed. Jeffrey Librett. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.
- Lang, Beryl. "Writing-the-Holocaust: Jabès and the Measure of History." The Sin of the Book. ed. E. Gould. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.
- Laruelle, François. "Project d'un philosophie du livre." Les Cahiers Obsidiane, 5, 1982.
- Lentricchia, Frank. After the New Criticism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Levy, Sidney. "The Question of Absence." The Sin of the Book. ed. E. Gould. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.
- Librett, Jeffrey ed. Of the Sublime: Presence in Question. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.
- Longinus. Peri Hypsos. trans. W. Rhys Roberts. The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism. ed. James H. Smith and Ed Windfield Parks. New York: W.W. Norton, 1967.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. "Jewish Oedipus." Genre, 10, 1977.

- \_\_\_\_\_. The Lyotard Reader. ed. Andrew Benjamin. Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Interest of the Sublime". Of The Sublime: Presence in Question. ed. Jeffrey Livrett. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.
- MacGregor, Mathers. The Kabbalah Unveiled. New York: Viking Press, 1991.
- Machin, Richard and Christopher Norris. ed. Post-Structualist Readings of English Poetry. London: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Marin, Louis. "On a Tower of Babel." Of the Sublime: Presence in Question. ed. Jeffrey Librett. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.
- Melchiori, Giorgio. The Whole Mystery of Art. New York: MacMillan, 1961.
- Mittleman, Alan L. Between Kant and Kabbalah: An Introduction to Isaac Breuer's Philosophy of Judaism. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990.
- Moore, Virginia. The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats's Search for Reality. New York: MacMillan, 1954.
- Motte, Warren Jr. Questioning Edmond Jabès. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.
- Norris, Christopher. The Contest of Faculties: Philosophy and Theory After Deconstruction. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Deconstructive Turn: Essays in the Rhetoric of Philosophy. London: Methuen, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Derrida. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.

- \_\_\_\_\_. Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology. London: Routledge, 1988.
- O'Hara, Daniel. The Romance of Interpretation: Visionary Criticism from Pater to de Man. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Yeats in Theory." Post-Structuralist Readings of English Poetry. ed. Richard Machin and Christopher Norris. London: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Tragic Knowledge: Yeats's Autobiography and Hermeneutics. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.
- Patai, Raphael. The Hebrew Goddess. Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1990.
- Raine, Kathleen. Yeats, the Tarot and the Golden Dawn. Second ed. Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1972.
- Ramanzani, R. Jahan. "Yeats: Tragic Joy and the Sublime." PLMA, Vol. 4, No. 3, March 1989.
- Rosenthal, M.L. and Gall, Sally M. "The Evolution of William Butler Yeats's Sequence II (1929-1938)." Critical Essays on W.B. Yeats, ed. Richard Finneran. Boston: G.K Hall, 1986.
- Scholem, Gershom. Kabbalah. New York: Meridian, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism. trans. Ralph Manheim. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. New York, Schocken Books, 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of Kabbalah".  
Diogenes, 90, 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Origins of the Kabbalah. trans. Allan Arkush.  
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962.
- Sacks, Sheldon. On Metaphor. Chicago: Chicago University Press,  
1978.
- Silverman, Hugh J. The Textual Sublime: Deconstruction and Its  
Differences. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990.
- Snukal, Robert. High Talk: The Philosophical Poetry of W.B.  
Yeats. London: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- Stamelman, Richard. "Review of Edmond Jabès The Book of  
Questions." M.L.N. 94, (May 1979).
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Nomadic Writing: The Poetics of Exile." The Sin of the  
Book. ed. Eric Gould. Lincoln: University of Nebraska  
Press, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence  
in Modern French Poetry. Ithaca: Cornell University Press,  
1990.
- Steiner, George. After Babel. London: Oxford University Press,  
1976.
- Tindall, William York. The Literary Symbol. 5th printing.  
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967.
- Unterecker, John. A Readers Guide to William Butler Yeats. New  
York: Octagon Books, 1980.
- Vendler, Helen Hennessey. Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays.  
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963.

- Waldrop, Rosemary. "Mirrors and Paradoxes." The Sin of the Book. ed. E. Gould. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.
- Weiskel, Thomas. The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
- Whitaker, Thomas P. Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1964.
- Wilson, F.A.C. Yeats and Tradition. New York: Macmillan, 1958.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Yeats's Iconography. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1960.
- Wimsatt, W.K. and Brooks, Cleanth. Literary Criticism: A Short History. New York: Random House, 1957.
- Yeats, William Butler. A Vision, Reissue with author's final revisions. New York: Macmillan, 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Autobiography. New York: MacMillan, 1953.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats. New York: MacMillan, 1965.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Essays and Introductions. New York: MacMillan, 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Explorations. New York: MacMillan, 1962.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Ideas of Good and Evil." "Symbolism in Painting." Essays. New York: MacMillan, 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Letters of William Butler Yeats. ed. Alan Wade. New York: MacMillan, 1955.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Letters on Poetry From William Butler Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley. ed. Kathleen Raine. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.

- \_\_\_\_\_. Letters to John O'Leary and His Sister. ed. Alan Wade.  
New York: MacMillan, 1952.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Mythologies. New York: Collier Books, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. William Butler Yeats and T. Sturge Moore 1900-1937. ed.  
Ursula Bridge. London: Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1953
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Variorum Edition of William Butler Yeats. ed. Peter  
Alt and Richard Alspach. New York: MacMillan, 1957.
- Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment. trans., Daniel Chanan Matt.  
New York: Paulist Press, 1983.