

# “Aber wie soll ich denn aus dem Jiddischen übersetzen?”: Gershom Scholem and the Problem of Translating Yiddish

David Groiser

## I Westjuden, Ostjuden, and the Place of Yiddish

During the First World War, the young Gershom (Gerhard) Scholem (1897–1982) published a typically forceful critique of three recent works of translation from Yiddish into German. His article, “Zum Problem der Übersetzung aus dem Jidischen [sic]” [On the Problem of Translating from Yiddish] (1917), reveals important dimensions of the cultural place of Yiddish in this period.<sup>1</sup> Of general importance for understanding the development of Scholem’s conception of language, the article and the exchange that it inspired also show in particular how, even within the camp of those sympathetic or devoting themselves to greater understanding of the Ostjuden, in some cases also converting their sympathy into practical action, there were widely differing approaches to the correct means and method by which this should be achieved.

The positive cultural response of German-speaking Jews to the East European Jews around the beginning of the twentieth century is largely the work of a minority active in the Jewish renaissance in one form or another. It is important to remember that this development, even its Zionist dimension, like the Jewish renaissance itself only ever embraced a fraction of German Jews. Most continued to follow patterns established by the processes of emancipation and acculturation begun in the late eighteenth century. For such Jews, assertions of a distinctive Jewish identity – ethnic, political or national – were not on the agenda. Worse still, they were perceived as positively detrimental to the hard-won place of Jews in German society and vehemently criticised. Even if a distinct social and cultural existence was the daily reality for many, at the ideological level Judaism was supposed to have merely a confessional place in the lives of modern Jews, who were to be, in the words of the C. V. (the *Centralverein* or Central

---

1 First published in *Jüdische Rundschau* XXII/2 (12.1.1917), 16–17; repr. in Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher I. 1913–1917*, ed. Karlfried Gründer and Friedrich Niewöhner (Frankfurt a. M.: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995), pp. 493–499. Page references for quotations are to both editions. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

Organisation, 1893–1935), *deutsche Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens*, German citizens of the Jewish faith.

The idea of the East European Jew as it developed in this period was not a geographical one. As Nathan Birnbaum, a champion of the cause of Yiddish and its speakers, noted in 1902: “Ultimately, the word is not meant to be nearly as geographically precise as it sounds” (Endlich ist das Wort gar nicht so streng geographisch gemeint, wie es lautet).<sup>2</sup> More accurately, he comments, the terms East and West in this context are “for the purposes of orientation, completely relative” (für Orientierungszwecke ganz relativ). In his riposte to Theodor Lessing’s *Eindrücke aus Galizien* (Impressions from Galicia), which depicted, in sweeping generalisations and with a good deal of standard anti-Semitic cliché, a corrupt and debased East European Jewry, the publicist Benjamin Segel, himself a Jew from Eastern Europe, recalls the relative nature of these apparently fixed coordinates. The German Jews who now use “Ostjuden” for the “Polish” and Russian Jews were, he writes, not so long ago themselves “Ostjuden”. In the eyes of the Sephardi Jews of France – “the West European Jews of that time” (die damaligen “Westjuden”), having settled there considerably earlier – the Ashkenazi Jews returning to German-speaking lands were Ostjuden and looked upon with contempt and antipathy.<sup>3</sup> Similarly untouched by this crude typology is, for example, the fact that Jews of Warsaw referred to Russian and Lithuanian Jews as Ostjuden.<sup>4</sup>

The acquisition of German was seen as a key index of acculturation, civilisation, and citizenship.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, inasmuch as the society in general set store by a feature such as linguistic competence, this went beyond mere perceptions and became something real. Even if, frustratingly, the criteria kept changing during the hundred and twenty years after emancipation began, Jews knew at any point more or less what was supposedly required of them, in order to be judged acceptably German. They did not dream up the idea that acquiring German and losing Yiddish, together with any trace of it in German, were crucial to their efforts towards integration. In terms of both legislation (specifically relating to Judaism and, more generally, to the end of state-building) and anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic rhetoric, the message had long been clear. The importance which much modern nationalism – a true child of the Romantic period – accorded

---

2 Nathan Birnbaum, “Was sind Ostjuden? Zur ersten Information”, *Ost und West* 2 (1902), 235–240; repr. in *Ost und West. Jüdische Publizistik 1901–1928*, ed. Andreas Herzog (Leipzig: Reclam, 1996), pp. 9–25 (p. 9).

3 Benjamin Segel, *Die Entdeckungsreise des Herrn Dr. Theodor Lessing zu den Ostjuden* (Lemberg [Lvov]: Verlag Hatikwa, 1910), p. 57.

4 Andreas Herzog, “Die Ostjuden. Kulturelle Wirklichkeit und Fiktion”, in *Ost und West*, pp. 252–279 (p. 252).

5 See Jacob Toury, “Die Sprache als Problem der jüdischen Einordnung im deutschen Kulturraum”, in *Gegenseitige Einflüsse deutscher und jüdischer Kultur von der Epoche der Aufklärung bis zur Weimarer Republik*, ed. by Walter Grab (Tel-Aviv: University of Tel-Aviv, 1982), pp. 75–95.

language in the development and the cultivation of national identity placed increasing pressure on linguistically heterogenous groups within the state to conform to a newly standardised linguistic norm. Linguistic cohesion became coterminous with national unity and – in reduced form, an argument still with us today – with the cohesion of society as such. Achieving the one was seen as a precondition of achieving the other. Yet alongside the replacement of Yiddish with German was also a constant reminder of the historical connection of these languages and, by extension, of the people speaking them: Ostjuden and German Jews. Linguistic filiation raised the spectre of ethnic filiation. It threatened to reconnect German Jews with their own past as well as with its apparent walking embodiment in present-day East European Jewry.

How actively did those engaged in renewing Jewish culture and Jewish consciousness in Germany at the time respond to East European Jews and their rather different version of Judaism? Journals devoted to fostering understanding between East and West had been growing since the turn of the century.<sup>6</sup> An interest in the culture and the actual existence of Jews further East grew steadily. There was considerable popular interest in Yiddish theatre, especially in the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> Also peaking then, though far more modest in their impact, were publishing of Yiddish and scholarly activity on the language and its literature. In the main, this existed briefly and in isolation, eliciting marginal interest from mainstream German Jewry.<sup>8</sup> We see a marked preference for traditional or traditionalist authors (Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, Shalom Asch, Mendele Moykher Sforim) – most of whom were also “known for their sensitivity to Western European trends”<sup>9</sup> – while modernist Yiddish authors, whether abroad or in Berlin (Bergelson, Der Nister), were largely ignored. The receptivity to modernist or even avant-garde forms was greater in the theatre, with the Yiddish theatre companies such as the Moscow Jewish Academic State Theatre or the Vilna troupe, like Habimah in Hebrew, successfully and popularly fusing traditional folk themes with daringly experimental stagings.<sup>10</sup> In general, translations from Yiddish tended to play down negative elements and emphasised the idealised, sentimentalised, harmonious community of the Jewish East. Following the tendencies of nineteenth-century fictional treatments of the Pale and its ghettos,

---

6 *Ost und West* (1901–1923); *Die Freistatt* (1913–); *Neue Jüdische Monatshefte* (carrying translations of Yiddish literature in its pages from at least 1917 onwards).

7 Trude Maurer, *Ostjuden in Deutschland 1918–1933* (Hamburg: Christians, 1986), pp. 730–741.

8 Delphine Bechtel, “Cultural Transfers between ‘Ostjuden’ and ‘Westjuden’: German-Jewish Intellectuals and Yiddish Culture 1897–1930”, *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* XLII (1997), 67–83.

9 David A. Brenner, “Making Jargon Respectable: Leo Winz, *Ost und West* and the Reception of Yiddish Theatre in Pre-Hitler Germany”, *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* XLII (1997), 51–66 (57).

10 Cf. Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 190.

the translations frequently moved their sources in the direction of aestheticising the shtetl and its inhabitants, in this way answering Martin Buber’s call for a new Jewish art, a new aesthetic culture (*neue Schönheitskultur*), to bring about a “redemption from ghetto and Golus”.

Does the reception of Yiddish compare with the apparent openness to the culture of the Ostjuden and professed belief that it could serve to revitalise West European Jewry? The renaissance of Jewish life in Germany during these decades commonly held up East European Jewish piety and community as a mirror to German Jews, the use of supposedly authentic Jewish languages playing in this a vital part. Nonetheless, it is rare to find among the numerous manifestations of a new cultural community indications that the attitude of German Jews towards the Ostjuden moved beyond admiration and fascination. Whereas the study of modern Hebrew becomes a serious business after the First World War, not least among German-Jewish Zionists, we find little comparable readiness to embrace Yiddish as a living Jewish language.

Issues of translation practice are inseparable here from broader cultural assumptions. Yiddish played a significant part in the German Jews’ changing perception of the East European Jews since the Haskalah.<sup>11</sup> The representation of Yiddish and its speakers in German literature, or “literary Yiddish”,<sup>12</sup> and the place of Yiddish within a psychology of stereotypes<sup>13</sup> document this shifting set of attitudes to what became known as the Ostjuden or East European Jews, and as the *Ostjudenproblem*, the problem of them. Like beauty, their difficulty was in the eye of the beholder. One astute contemporary observer, Franz Rosenzweig, noted that the supposed problem of the *Ostjuden* was in truth merely the threat which they posed as potential West European Jews, and as such really a *Westjudenproblem*.<sup>14</sup> Alongside the perceptions of the East European Jews, encountered in situ or as migrants in Germany, the actual reception in Germany in political, social, and economic terms reveals some unexpectedly

---

11 Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The Eastern German Jews in German and German Jewish Consciousness* (1982) (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

12 Among a growing literature on this topic, see Peter Freimark, “Sprachverhalten und Assimilation”, *Saeculum* 31 (1980), 240–261; Hans-Peter Bayersdörfer, “Das Bild des Ostjuden in der deutschen Literatur”, in *Juden und Judentum in der Literatur*, ed. Herbert Arthur Strauss and Christhard Hoffmann (München: dtv, 1985), pp. 211–236; Mark Gelber, “Das Judentum in der deutschen Literatur”, in *Juden in der deutschen Literatur. Ein deutsch-israelisches Symposium*, ed. Stéphane Mosès and Albrecht Schöne (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 162–178; Matthias Richter, *Die Sprache jüdischer Figuren in der deutschen Literatur (1750–1933): Studien zu Form und Funktion* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1995).

13 See Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

14 Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und Sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1: *Briefe und Tagebücher* (2 Vol. 1900–1929), ed. Rachel Rosenzweig and Edith Rosenzweig-Scheinmann (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1979), p. 189. (7.6.1916).

positive policies and practical steps, active solidarity where it was less expressible at a discursive level.<sup>15</sup>

Although in no sense exhaustive of the range of responses to East European Jews or their languages that can be found at this time, the specific forms which positive engagements with Yiddish took in these years may be viewed as presenting one instance of a useful limit case. Programmatic statements regarding the relationship between German and Yiddish in any act of linguistic exchange are often marked by an interesting tension between a commitment to the value and autonomy of the Yiddish language and a desire, variously motivated, to see this made accessible to German Jews. The demands of integrity and accessibility regularly conflict. When it is Yiddish that has long been held to contaminate the Jew's German and call into question the appearance of integration, the act of translating from Yiddish into German will not be a neutral one.

## II Scholem's Encounter with Yiddish and East European Jews

What was Scholem's familiarity with Yiddish at this point in his life? By 1915, he seems to have been acquiring a respectable familiarity with the language, recording in his notebooks an evening in which he and two friends "spoke Yiddish" (gemauschelt) and adding that he managed for the first time not to flag.<sup>16</sup> He had come into direct contact with Ostjuden through the Jüdisches Volksheim in Berlin, founded in 1916 by Siegfried Lehmann and the same centre at which Kafka encouraged his then fiancé, Felice Bauer, to work.<sup>17</sup> He enjoyed even closer contact during his time at the Pension Struck in 1917, which housed many Jewish students and intellectuals from Eastern Europe (mainly from Russia, but also from Galicia).<sup>18</sup> "At the table", Scholem remembers, "we heard a mixture of German with a Russian accent, Yiddish, and Hebrew" (bei Tisch hörte man deutsch mit russischem Akzent, jiddisch und hebräisch durcheinan-

---

15 See Jack Wertheimer, *Unwelcome Strangers: East European Jews in Imperial Germany* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Maurer, *Ostjuden in Deutschland*.

16 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 77 (9.12.1915).

17 Gershom Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem. Jugenderinnerungen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), pp. 101–105; rev. edn based on the expanded Hebrew version (1982), as Gershom Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem. Jugenderinnerungen*, trans. Michael Brocke (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1994), pp. 84–87 (unless otherwise stated, references are to the original German edition of this work; references to the German translation of the expanded Hebrew edition (1981/1982) are indicated by a preceding [rev.]). On Kafka's interest in the activities of the Volksheim, see Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Felice, und andere Korrespondenz aus der Verlobungszeit*, ed. von Erich Heller and Jürgen Born. (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1998), p. 696–698 (12.9.1916), and Scholem's comments in *Von Berlin*, pp. 102–104 [rev. p. 85–86]; on the Volksheim, see Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers*, pp. 193–197, and Brenner, *Renaissance of Jewish Culture*, pp. 186–187.

18 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, pp. 110–123 [rev. p. 93–107].

der).<sup>19</sup> In the expanded version of his memoir, Scholem inserts a long reflection on the impact which the news of the Russian revolution and the transformed prospects for Russian Jewry had on those living at the Pension. Events were followed hopefully in Yiddish and Hebrew newspapers sent via Stockholm to the editor of the *Jüdische Rundschau*, Max Meyer, and brought into the Pension by Salman Rubashov.

Shneur Salman Rubashov (1889–1974) – later Shneur Salman Shazar, leading Socialist Zionist and President of Israel from 1963–1972 – is a figure whose importance for the young Scholem is typical of this generation and provides an insight into Scholem’s response to the Ostjuden that is the context for his ideas about Yiddish. Rubashov impressed Scholem deeply, not least on account of his fluency in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian, and the lectures which he delivered in German, Yiddish, and Hebrew.<sup>20</sup> The revised version of Scholem’s memoir places even greater emphasis on Rubashov’s Hasidic background, noting the “Hasidic enthusiasm” (chassidischer Begeisterung) with which he spoke. The word “authentic” (echt) appears frequently in this connection. He was, Scholem reports, “an authentic discovery” (eine echte Entdeckung), and spoke “from an authentic knowledge of the Jewish world” (aus echter Kenntnis der jüdischen Welt).<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly for the analysis to follow, Scholem also adds at this point a comment on how moving into the Pension brought him into contact for the first time with a world very different from the bourgeois milieu in which he had grown up, different “as regards not only the life-style and the houses, but also the Berlin dialect that was spoken there” (nicht nur, was den Lebensstil und die Häuser, sondern auch, was die Berliner Mundart betraf, die dort gesprochen wurde).<sup>22</sup> This reveals that linguistic sensitivity extended beyond the Jewish languages of the time. If his time in the Scheunenviertel immersed Scholem further in the principal language of the Jewish people, it also exposed him to the dialect of his home city, Berlin. The underlying connection here seems to be that both are viewed as truly popular forms of speech, in contrast to the acquired, correct discourses of the educated middle classes. Even Scholem, the bibliophile who spent much of his life among manuscripts, seems to follow here a common preference for emphasising the spoken character of Yiddish: references to it tend, significantly, to concern mainly oral contexts (conversations, lectures, theatre)

---

19 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, p. 111 [rev. p. 94] (rev. edn: “Bei Tisch hörte man Deutsch mit slawischem Akzent – zu Ehren der Frau Struck [owner of the Pension], Jiddisch und Hebräisch durcheinander.”)

20 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, pp. 112–113 [rev. p. 96–98]. Interestingly, Scholem later refers only to hearing him lecture “in three languages” (*in drei Sprachen*) [rev. p. 98], perhaps preferring to remove the reference to German (this revision appears to have been overlooked by the editors, who are otherwise scrupulous in tracking Scholem’s changes).

21 *Ibid.* [rev. p. 98].

22 *Ibid.* [rev. p. 93].

or to journalism that is consumed collectively and discussed. Much less often is Yiddish observed in a written form.

In his autobiography and in other writings, Scholem attests to the impact which the encounter with the East European Jews had on a small number of young German Jews, especially Zionists. "These encounters and friendships with East European Jews have" he writes, "played a large rôle in my life" (In meinem Leben haben diese ostjüdischen Kontakte und Freundschaften eine große Rolle gespielt).<sup>23</sup> He recalls a "true cult of the 'Ostjuden'" (ein wahrer Kultus der "Ostjuden") as one of the reasons for the enthusiastic response of young German Jews to the Hebrew writer S. J. Agnon, who hailed from Galicia.<sup>24</sup> Every Jew from Russia, Poland, or Galicia appeared to Scholem and his contemporaries "something like an incarnation of the Baal Shem [the founder of modern Hasidism] and, in any event, of an undistorted Jewishness that fascinated us" (etwas wie eine Inkarnation des Baalschem und jedenfalls des unverstellten und uns faszinierenden jüdischen Wesens).<sup>25</sup> Scholarship has followed Scholem in ascribing this cult in no small part to a reaction against the attitudes of the acculturated German-Jewish milieu. Scholem picks out a common "arrogance and superiority" (Hochmut und Überheblichkeit) on the part of German Jews in relation to the East European Jews, which made championing them an act of dissent.<sup>26</sup> What he describes as a reaction against the general environment of German Jewry also came together with a more targeted rebellion against the parental generation, perceived as bourgeois and assimilated.<sup>27</sup> Recalling the Jewish youth organisation, Jung Juda, of which he was part, he writes, for example:

The more we encountered in our own families a rejection of East European Jewish ways, by no means uncommon and sometimes assuming very flagrant forms, the greater was our attraction to precisely this form of existence. (Je mehr wir in unseren eigenen Familien auf die gar nicht seltene Ablehnung ostjüdischer Art stießen, die manchmal sehr flagrante Formen annahm, desto stärker zog uns gerade dieses Wesen an.)<sup>28</sup>

There is more than coincidence in the fact that Scholem moved into the Pension Struck on the heels of a rift with his assimilationist father and resulting departure from the family home.

A similar dynamic, though without the moving out, can be observed in the case of Kafka's fascination with East European Jews.<sup>29</sup> His attraction to them is

23 Ibid., p. 61 [rev. p. 49].

24 Scholem, "Agnon in Deutschland" [Hebrew lecture 16 November 1966], *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 12.2.1967; repr. in Scholem, *Judaica II* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 122–132 (p. 124).

25 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, p. 60 [rev. p. 49].

26 Scholem, "Agnon in Deutschland", p. 124.

27 Cf. Michael Brenner, "A tale of two families: Franz Rosenzweig, Gershom Scholem and the generational conflict around Judaism", *Judaism* 42 (1993), 349–361.

28 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, p. 60 [rev. p. 48].

29 In addition to the letter to Felice Bauer mentioned above, see Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher 1910–1923*, ed. Max Brod (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1996), p. 339 (11.3.1915); Franz Kafka, *Tage-*



often closely juxtaposed with repulsion from his father.<sup>30</sup> Not only in his famous lecture on Yiddish, but elsewhere, Kafka focalised this contrast through the lens of language: the relationship of German and Yiddish.<sup>31</sup> The clash of father and son was, of course, a prominent motif of German modernism at this time, especially in movements such as Expressionism, where it also went together with a fierce criticism of bourgeois values.<sup>32</sup> Arguably, it could assume even more drastic dimensions in a Jewish context, where, with the pace of legal and social changes, of the project of integration and then its traumatic setbacks, the difference in identity between one generation and the next could be stark. East European Jews such as Rubashov or Agnon figured significantly in a deepening sense of distance on the part of German Jews from the assumptions and ideals inherited from the previous generation. “In contrast to this [the superior attitude in assimilated circles]”, Scholem writes, “every Ostjude was, for us, as it were a bearer of the Jewish mystery [...]” (Für uns war im Gegensatz dazu, jeder Ostjude gleichsam ein Träger des jüdischen Mysteriums [...]).<sup>33</sup> It is difficult to overestimate the role of East European Jews in a Western tendency towards dissimulation.<sup>34</sup> In this, Scholem was as radical and unsparing as the best.

### III German Jews and the Question of Language

Scholem’s autobiography registers the part which Yiddish also played in a wider centrality of the language question for German Jewry. From an uncle who could embarrass his relatives by teasingly using Yiddishisms at family gatherings to his mother’s retaining and liking to use certain earthy Yiddish expressions, many examples attest to the persistence of Yiddish within German-Jewish circles.<sup>35</sup> It is testimony to the significance of language in German-Jewish self-understanding that these often humorous anecdotes begin the discussion of the extent to which Scholem’s family had moved away from Judaism. It is Yiddish, rather than Hebrew, that functions as the true marker of social and cultural difference: the most important of what Scholem terms “perceptible relics of things Jewish”

---

*bücher in der Fassung der Handschrift, Vol 1: 1909–1912*, ed. Hans-Gerhard Koch (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1996), p. 56 (8.10.1911).

30 For example, Kafka, *Tagebücher in der Fassung der Handschrift*, p. 167–168 (31.10.1911).

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 81–82 (24.10.1911).

32 See Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture. The Outsider as Insider* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), pp. 107–124.

33 Scholem, “Agnon in Deutschland”, p. 124. Scholem presents Agnon here as “one of the most perfect incarnations [...] of the mystery of Jewish existence”.

34 On the category of dissimulation, see Shulamit Volkov, “The Dynamics of Dissimulation: Ostjuden and German Jews”, in *The Jewish Response to German Culture: From the Enlightenment to the Second World War*, ed. Jehuda Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1985), pp. 195–211.

35 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, pp. 19–20 [rev. p. 16–17].



(wahrnehmbare Relikte des Jüdischen).<sup>36</sup> The unease which its use readily produced stood in direct relation to the prominent place which Yiddish had long occupied in anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic propoganda, as well as in admonitory literature by German Jews advocating assimilation.

Scholem's interest in Yiddish is often barely mentioned in the secondary literature, where it seems to be all but obscured by his primary concern with the promotion and condition of Hebrew. The editorial introduction to the recent English translation of his letters is not untypical when it refers to the Pension Struck as a place "filled with eastern European Jews, many of them Hebrew speakers".<sup>37</sup> While the impact of his encounter with the Ostjuden is duly registered, there seems to be almost studious avoidance of his particular concern with Yiddish at this time.

Language issues were at the heart of Scholem's intellectual development during these years, and would to a large extent remain so. The period 1915–1920 marks the growing friendship and intellectual affinity with Walter Benjamin, whose thinking on language spoke to and allowed him to extend his own concerns. At the time of composing the essay on Yiddish translation, Scholem – like many readers since – was struggling to understand the sixteen-page letter from Benjamin that would, in revised form, become his *Sprachaufsatz*, "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen" (On Language as such and on the Language of Man) (1916).<sup>38</sup> A week after writing the first version of the Eliasberg critique, Scholem announces that he can finally read Benjamin's letter properly and that, as so often with Benjamin, he can now "identify completely with these ideas and develop them" (mich mit jenen ganz identifizieren und sie fortbilden).<sup>39</sup> This is always especially true, Scholem observes, of the "reflections on the philosophy of language" (den sprachphilosophischen Überlegungen), an area in which, he adds with ironic understatement, he is himself "no complete innocent" (nicht ganz unschuldig).

Another entry from this time, attempting to summarise the basic law of the mystical conception of language, does so in terms, such as "Gottesnamen", strongly reminiscent of Benjamin's essay, which envisages an uncorrupted naming distinct from objective judgement and knowledge.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, this elicits the comment that nobody has as yet done justice to the "Sprachtheorie der Kab-

---

36 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, p. 19 [rev. p. 16].

37 Anthony David Skinner, "A Jewish Zarathustra, 1914–1918", in *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters, 1914–1982*, ed. and trans. by Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge, MA./London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 15.

38 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1972–1989), II.1, p. 140–157 (henceforth *GS* followed by volume number). The *Sprachbrief* was sent to Scholem on 11 November 1916 (see Benjamin, *Briefe*, I, 128).

39 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 467 (7.1.1917).

40 Benjamin, *GS* II.1, p. 153.

bala”, in the same way that the Kabbalah as a whole still awaits proper study.<sup>41</sup> Scholem expects to have much to do. More widely still, Judaism as such is held at this time to have philosophy of language at its heart:

In Judaism, philosophy of language is a centre, to be sure one that is quite, indeed (quite)<sup>6</sup> veiled, and it has been at work wherever Torah was learned and passed on. (Im Judentum ist die Sprachphilosophie ein freilich durchaus, ja (durchaus)<sup>6</sup> verhülltes Zentrum, das überall wirksam gewesen ist, wo Thora gelernt und weitergegeben wurde.)<sup>42</sup>

Effectivity and esotericism are here directly related. The exoteric sign is Torah, active tradition. In the handing down and appropriation of tradition, language is the bearer of revelation and thus of truth, the meeting of particular and universal truth in applied form. As for a writer such as Kraus, language and truth are, for Scholem at this point, profoundly connected in some common root or centre, one which he expects is susceptible of being demonstrated.

Sure enough, when Scholem decided early in 1919 to write a dissertation on the Kabbalah, he initially planned to devote himself to the theory of language in Jewish mysticism.<sup>43</sup> This clearly spoke to his preference – a preference which would persist into his later scholarship – for seeing philology and philosophy, even metaphysics, as profoundly connected. Although he soon abandoned the project as overly ambitious, it eventually reemerged, some fifty years later, in the form of a long essay on Kabbalistic ideas of language, thus indicating the undiminished importance of the theory of language in Scholem’s writing.<sup>44</sup> In a later essay on Benjamin, when discussing his friend’s familiarity with Jewish texts, particularly with Franz Rosenzweig’s *Der Stern der Erlösung* (1921), he writes of the insight which this book, like the Kabbalists, offers into “the profound attachment of genuine Jewish theological thinking to language” (die tiefe Bindung des echten theologischen Denkens der Juden an die Sprache).<sup>45</sup>

This focus extended beyond specifically Jewish concerns. In November 1914, Scholem began reading one of the most influential works of language philosophy at the time, Fritz Mauthner’s *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (1906–1913). Scholem discussed Mauthner with Benjamin, along with related writings by

41 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 472 (3.2.1917).

42 Ibid., p. 420–421 (18.11.1916). The superscripted number 6 occurs in the original.

43 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, p. 148: “In the summer of 1919, I had devised a theme [(rev.) of the kind that I wished to pursue] that was suggested by my reading of this literature up to that point and which seemed to me fruitful in practical terms and philosophically relevant, namely the theory of language in the Kabbalah” (Im Sommer 1919 hatte ich mir ein Thema [(rev.) ganz in meinem Sinne] ausgedacht, das durch meine bisherige Lektüre dieser Literatur nahegelegt wurde, mir sachlich fruchtbar und philosophisch relevant schien, nämlich die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala).

44 Gershom Scholem, “Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala”, [lecture held 1970; publ. 1972] in Scholem, *Judaica III. Studien zur jüdischen Mystik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), pp. 7–70.

45 Gershom Scholem, “Walter Benjamin”, *Neue Rundschau* 76 (1965), 1–12; repr. in Scholem, *Judaica II* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 193–227 (p. 219).

authors such as Gustav Landauer, Wilhelm Wundt, and Henri Poincaré.<sup>46</sup> Even if he soon came to reject Mauthner's language scepticism, describing it, in a manner reminiscent of Karl Kraus, as a "refined ideology of journalism" (raffinierte Ideologie des Journalismus) – a philosophical cloak for the journalistic equivalence or interchangeability of words – the attention which Mauthner's work received is typical of Scholem's intense engagement with the question of language.

#### IV The Task of Translating Yiddish

Scholem's essay on the problem of translating Yiddish first appeared in January 1917 in the *Jüdische Rundschau* and uses the publication of three translations by Alexander Eliasberg as an occasion to raise wider points about the challenges facing the translator of Jewish and especially Yiddish works. The subtitle, "Also a book review" (Auch eine Buchbesprechung), gives clear warning that Scholem intends to use the occasion to offer a more fundamental account. The works in question were *Jüdische Geschichten* (Jewish Stories [1916]), a collection of stories by J. L. Peretz; an anthology of writings by Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, and Sholem Asch, titled *Ostjüdische Erzähler* (Jewish Storytellers from Eastern Europe [1916]); and a collection of texts relating to Polish Jewry, *Sagen polnischer Juden* (Legends of the Polish Jews [1916]).<sup>47</sup> Eliasberg, who would soon publish volumes of Peretz' Hasidic stories as well as translated novellas and popular songs from Eastern Europe, was already known as the translator of Russian literature, including volumes of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Chekhov, anthologies of contemporary Russian poetry, and works on Russian art and art history.

Scholem offers in this text important clues about his attitude towards Yiddish. In doing so, he employs, without ever adequately explaining, several concepts central to his work, especially in these early years – including the distinctively emphatic use of "Torah", "(intellectual and spiritual) centre" (geistiges Zentrum), and "intellectual and spiritual orders" (geistige Ordnungen) – whose background and context cannot be addressed here.<sup>48</sup>

The principal claim and assumption of Scholem's essay is that Yiddish is first and foremost determined in some way by Hebrew. Seemingly unconcerned by

46 Discussion of Mauthner in Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, pp. 52 (17.11.1914), 105 (11.5.1915), 107 (21.5.1915), 118 (22.5.1915), 136–140 (28/29.7.1915), 271 (2.3.1916), 420 (18.11.1916). Cf. Scholem, *Von Berlin*, pp. 71–72 [rev. p. 60–61].

47 Jizchok Lejb Perez, *Jüdische Geschichten*. Aus dem Jidischen übertragen von Alexander Eliasberg (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1916); *Ostjüdische Erzähler: Jizchok Lejb Perez, Scholem Aleichem, Scholem Asch*, ausgewählt und aus dem Jidischen übersetzt von Alexander Eliasberg (Weimar: Kiepenhauer Verlag, 1916); *Sagen polnischer Juden*. Ausgewählt und übertragen von Alexander Eliasberg (München: Georg Müller, 1916).

48 On the early polemical idea of an "Ordnungslehre" see Daniel Weidner, *Gershom Scholem. Politisches, esoterisches und historiographisches Schreiben* (München: Fink, 2003), pp. 176 ff.

the evidence regarding the historical development of Yiddish in relation to German, its lexical composition, or the reciprocal influence on each other of Yiddish and Hebrew, Scholem asserts that Yiddish is “a reproduction of the spirit of the Hebrew language in German” (eine Abbildung des hebräischen Sprachgeistes im Deutschen).<sup>49</sup> Although he speaks of a “friction” in practice between Hebrew and German within Yiddish, the argument is structured around the seemingly unshakeable, metaphysical conviction that the “intellectual and spiritual orders” (geistige Ordnungen) of Judaism are indissolubly bound up with Hebrew. As a result, Scholem characterises the inner form of Yiddish as essentially determined by Hebrew, as a copy of the religious and popular spirit expressed in the Hebrew language.

The inner form of Yiddish, whose highest and most determining intellectual and spiritual orders derive not from itself, but from Hebrew, is a reproduction of the spirit of the Hebrew language in German, German having formed, as it were, its material; and hence anyone who wishes today to translate from Yiddish into German must repeat once more that process of reproduction. (Die innere Form des Jidischen, dessen oberste und bestimmendste geistige Ordnungen nicht ihm selber, sondern dem Hebräischen entstammen, ist eine Abbildung des hebräischen Sprachgeistes im Deutschen, das gewissermaßen seine Materie gebildet hat, und so hat jeder, wer heute aus dem Jidischen ins Deutsche übersetzen will, jenen Abbildungsprozeß noch einmal zu wiederholen.)<sup>50</sup>

Hence Yiddish is not to be viewed as self-contained, as something which can be understood adequately from within, but as dependent on Hebrew. Yiddish is held always to refer outside itself, to be derivative on another, proper language. Perhaps surprisingly, Scholem’s account seems in this respect analogous to the frequently made claim that Yiddish is parasitic on some other language. This claim may be taken to have positive implications, as in Kafka’s notorious assertions that Yiddish “consists of nothing but foreign words” (besteht nur aus Fremdwörtern) and “consists of nothing but dialect” (besteht nur aus Dialekt), on which he bases his assurance that German-speaking listeners will be able to understand it, but also his judgement that it is impossible to translate Yiddish into German “For you cannot translate Jargon into the German language” (Man kann nämlich den Jargon nicht in die deutsche Sprache übersetzen),<sup>51</sup> and that it possesses a “true unity” (wahre Einheit) beyond its apparent hybridity, one capable of overturning the existential calm of the acculturated Western Jew;<sup>52</sup> or the German nationalist argument for the Germanic loyalties of the

49 Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 16/p. 495. In purely quantitative terms, Hebrew/Aramaic lexical components constitute about 18 percent of Yiddish, Slavic lexical components (Czech, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian) about 16 percent, with additional elements coming from Old French and Old Italian.

50 Ibid.

51 Franz Kafka, “Rede über die jiddische Sprache”, in Kafka, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlaß*, ed. Max Brod (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1994), pp. 306–309 (pp. 306–307).

52 Ibid., p. 309.

East European Jews. Equally, the idea of Yiddish as derivative may be viewed as having negative implications, including its relegation to a dialect of German or – related, but more extreme – even proof of the fundamentally uncreative and deforming activity of a parasitic people who, lacking a land, also have no language of their own. Both Scholem's perspective here and the view of Yiddish as a dialect of German are given to compromising the autonomy of Yiddish as a linguistic system.

That said, Scholem's references to "geistige" and "Sprachgeist" remain rather nebulous and do not immediately betray their precise implications for philology. At best, these terms would allow Yiddish a qualified independence. Scholem's schema of distinct intellectual orders certainly seems to confer on Yiddish a basic autonomy. The almost metaphysical dualism appears to permit him to defend in practice the integrity of Yiddish. Yet the fact that one set of such orders may in its entirety be predicated on another simultaneously undercuts that autonomy more radically than any demonstration of point-for-point derivation of Yiddish from German or Hebrew could achieve. The integrity of Yiddish thus amounts at most to the internal relations between its parts. Taken together, however, these are said to derive from and be comprehensible only with reference to Hebrew, no space being given, for example, to the possibility that Hebraisms adopted in Yiddish might acquire a modified meaning in the process.

Much of the difficulty rests with the fact that Scholem develops a neo-Aristotelian, hylomorphic conception of language in this essay, distinguishing the form from the content of Yiddish. This allows him to maintain that Yiddish takes its form from Hebrew, even while acknowledging that its content, which he calls here "its material" (*seine Materie*), is constructed from German. Yiddish is, then, literally German *informed* by Hebrew. The main conclusion which Scholem draws from this idea is that a firm grasp of Hebrew is a prerequisite for successful translation from Yiddish. The translator must be able to "repeat", in the act of translation, that meeting of form and matter, Hebrew and German, that produced Yiddish in the first place. To be ignorant of Hebrew means having no access to the "highest and most determining intellectual order" of Yiddish.

It is clear from Scholem's essay that he shares a belief in allowing the Ostjuden to speak for themselves. It is perfectly self-evident to him that their world has value and dignity. The original tales possess a "greatness in part extraordinary" (*teilweise außerordentliche Größe*), but a greatness also needing no elaboration.<sup>53</sup> Each is "a fully living and formed thing" (*ein ganz lebendiges und gestaltetes Wesen*).<sup>54</sup> The Zaddik is "an intellectual and spiritual order" (*eine geistige Ordnung*) in his own right, one certainly travestied in translating his title as "Wunderrabbi" (miracle-working rabbi).<sup>55</sup> In his account of the

---

53 Scholem, "Zum Problem", 16/p. 497.

54 Ibid., 17/p. 498.

55 Ibid., 16/p. 496.

path that brought him to Hasidism, Buber, whose work was central to the new veneration of East European Jewry, expresses a similar impatience with the condescension of this term. Educated people of culture (die “Gebildeten”) may speak of “wonder-working rabbis” (“Wunderrabbis”), but such language merely reveals their superficial knowledge of this and all similar subjects, one which cannot appreciate how, for all the indisputable decline of the Hasidic line, its innate qualities persist: “the radiance of their foreheads” (Leuchten ihrer Stirn), their “sublimity” (Erhabenheit) and “involuntary nobility” (unwillkürlicher Adel).<sup>56</sup> Although one would, Scholem tells us, not know it from these translations, the things of which the original tales tell have an “innate dignity” (eingeborenen Würde).<sup>57</sup> Conversely, Scholem perceives in those he criticises an embarrassment about the Jewishness of the material being translated, a desire to render this less noticeable. Things thought to be “all too Jewish” (“allzu jüdische”) are omitted. This matches a recurrent contrast in the essay between the authentically Jewish world of the Ostjuden and deracinated Western European Jews. For the purposes of Yiddish and its translation, the latter may be treated the same as non-Jews. Scholem seems, on the one hand, to deride the fact that these translations appear to be aimed primarily at non-Jews. Yet on the other, he is sufficiently resigned to this fact to want to show that precisely such a target readership makes the translations hopelessly inadequate and renders it even more imperative that the translator know Hebrew, consulting, in the case of the collection of legends, the extant Hebrew edition as well.

The disagreement with Eliasberg and translators like him centres, in one important respect – as Eliasberg himself points out in his defence – on the idea of translation as such. This is focused on two questions: that of the appropriate target audience and that of the demands of comprehensibility. Eliasberg protests that Scholem has ignored the works’ obvious aim and imposed his own ideal of translation, one that effectively serves to undercut the very meaning of translation as Eliasberg practiced it. “I wanted, however”, Eliasberg writes, “to provide the non-Jewish reader with a comprehensible *translation* and have done so.” (Ich wollte aber dem nichtjüdischen Leser eine verständliche Übersetzung liefern und habe es auch getan.)<sup>58</sup> Scholem’s ideal, he continues, apparently does not extend beyond transcribing the original in Latin characters. This reply forces Scholem, as we shall see, to bring out more clearly the understanding of translation implicit in the essay.

The idea of translation underlying Scholem’s criticisms is of something that should be demanding and uncompromising. It is governed by an ideal of rigour

---

56 Martin Buber, “Mein Weg zum Chassidismus”, in Buber, *Die chassidischen Bücher* (Berlin: Schocken, 1927), pp. 655–672 (p. 659).

57 Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 17/p. 498.

58 Alexander Eliasberg, “Zum Problem der Übersetzung aus dem Jidischen. Erwiderung”, *Jüdische Rundschau*, XXII/4 (26.1.1917), 35–36; repr. in Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, pp. 499–500 (36/p. 500).

that can be found in various contexts throughout his earlier writings. It is revealed here best perhaps by a word that recurs constantly: “concessions” (Konzessionen). As far as Scholem is concerned, translation should make no concessions to the reader’s wish not to be challenged, not to be confronted with something initially surprising, difficult, and elusive. “Pardon me for saying so”, he writes in his reply to Eliasberg, “but I am of the opinion that a translation has the *right* to be difficult.” (Ich bin aber, mit Verlaub, der Meinung, daß eine Übersetzung das Recht hat, schwer zu sein.) The preference for ease, familiarity, safety, takes on a specific social sense in the essay. Translations such as these pander to something essentially bourgeois: in trying to translate Hebrew terms that necessarily defy rendering in German, “the translator [betrays] here also his attitude to language, which must be rejected fundamentally and which makes significant concessions to the bourgeois attitude” (der Übersetzer [bekundet] auch hier seine prinzipiell abzulehnende, dem bürgerlichen [read: Bürgerlichen] bedeutende Konzessionen machende Stellung zur Sprache).<sup>59</sup> “Gelehrsamkeit” (“learning” or “erudition”) for the original’s “Torah” is an “as it were bourgeois word” (gewissermaßen bürgerliches Wort). It is also modern: concessions are made to “the ‘modern sensibility’” (dem “modernen Gefühl”),<sup>60</sup> in a sense that is clearly not meant to recommend it to the reader.

It is worth noting at this point the ironic inversion by which the modern, bourgeois sphere, itself normally the epitome of order for both its champions and its detractors, figures in the essay as a source of disorder. At an intellectual level, it sows only confusion, tearing asunder the organic unity of the intellect and of language, to leave a chaotic assortment of disconnected elements. Scholem’s metaphors offer a distant echo of Nietzsche’s cultural criticism, which dissected *Biedermeier*, post-unification complacency and the deadening, fragmenting effects of positivistic modern science on a life which was once, and could again be, unified in aesthetic and mythical terms.

If Nietzsche wrote after a series of wars, the Franco-Prussian wars, Scholem is writing in the middle of one, a war which he opposed from the beginning, and this context seems to make itself felt in his essay. Scholem records his “anti-war sentiment” (kriegsfeindliche Gesinnung) in his memoirs.<sup>61</sup> Acknowledging that the First World War was, historically, the “most important event of my youth” (das wichtigste Ereignis meiner Jugend), he writes of being, with his brother, Werner, in “common opposition to everything that was going on” (in gemeinsamer Opposition zu allem, was da vorging).<sup>62</sup> The letter which he and other

---

59 Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 16/p. 496. The form “Bürgerlichen” is found in the draft of the essay (Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 460).

60 Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 17/p. 497.

61 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, p. 80 [rev. p. 65].

62 *Ibid.* p. 70 [rev. p. 59].



members of Jung-Juda (a radical Zionist youth organisation based in Berlin<sup>63</sup>) sent to the *Jüdische Rundschau* in January 1917, in protest at an article which had recently appeared in the paper by Heinrich Margulies supporting the war, employs pointed refutations of Buber’s infamous speech of 1914, “Die Tempelweihe”, celebrating the war.<sup>64</sup> Scholem wickedly calls Margulies’ essay an example of “the most complete Buberty” (vollster Bubertät).<sup>65</sup> Yet it is worth noting that the article by the members of Jung-Juda denounces less the war as such than attempts to understand it in Zionist terms. At most, it implicitly denounces the war itself, in its reference to “those who think otherwise” (Andersdenkenden), but are prevented from speaking out by censorship, though this denunciation is not explicit. While clearly distinguishing German nationalism (Deutschlands Sache) from Zionism, it leaves open the question of a common interest (eine Frage, über die sich durchaus streiten läßt). In the draft version, which reveals that the article was largely Scholem’s work, the distinction is less clear cut and the interest, shockingly, in some sense a shared one. Here Scholem grants that German Jews are fulfilling a “child’s duty” (Kindespflicht) in defending the land of their birth and its “threatened culture” (bedrohter Kultur), and that in doing so, as Germans, they “experience” (erleben) not Jewish, but certainly “German community” (die deutsche Gemeinschaft). The most striking difference from the published article is the positive connection that he envisages here between the German war effort and the future establishment of a Jewish state. In “Die Tempelweihe”, Buber had welcomed the outbreak of war as the chance for Jews

63 On Scholem’s involvement in the Jewish youth movement, see David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 56–69.

64 Heinrich Margulies’ letter, “Der Krieg der Zurückbleibenden”, appeared in *Jüdische Rundschau* XX/6 (5.2.1916), 46–47. The response from Scholem and others is reprinted, together with a partially deleted earlier draft, in Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, pp. 89–90. Cf. Martin Buber, “Die Tempelweihe” (speech delivered on 19.12.1914), published in *Jüdische Rundschau* XX/1 (1.1.1915), 2–4; repr. in Buber, *Die jüdische Bewegung. Gesammelte Aufsätze und Ansprachen. 1900–1914. Erste Folge* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1920), pp. 229–242, which Scholem calls a “scandalous speech” (*Schandrede*) – in doing so, connecting it verbally with Margulies’ article – and which contributed to his conclusive break with Buber (Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 324 [26.6.1916]). Scholem describes the Margulies incident, which led to his expulsion from school, in a letter to Buber of 10.7.1916 (Martin Buber, *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten*, ed. Grete Schaeder (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1972–1975), I, pp. 445–447 (hereafter BI–III)). See also his later reflections on the war and on this article in “With Gershom Scholem: An Interview (1975)”, in Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays* (New York: Schocken, 1976), pp. 1–48 (pp. 13–15). Scholem was particularly incensed by the closing lines of the article’s main section: “So kam es, daß wir in den Krieg zogen, weil wir Zionisten waren, nicht aber: obwohl wir Juden sind” (p. 47), though he regularly misquotes this, presumably for emphasis, as “Wir zogen in den Krieg, nicht obgleich wir Juden, sondern weil wir Zionisten waren”, as in his letter to Buber of 10.7.1916 (Buber, *Briefwechsel* I, p. 446) or a similar inversion in the diary entry for 22.6.1916 (Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 317).

65 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, p. 80 [rev. p. 65]. Elsewhere, it is termed a “disgraceful article” (*Schandartikel*) (Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 96).

to experience the reality of community (Gemeinschaft) and thereby rediscover their own rootedness and belonging, translating the ardour of secular national community into a greater receptivity to religious, ethnic community.<sup>66</sup> In a way reminiscent of this – though with considerably greater reservations about the idea of a “leaping of the flame of enthusiasm over on to us [the Jews]” (Überspringen der Begeisterungsflamme auf uns) that he ascribes to the intellectuals and “race mystics” (Rassenmystiker)<sup>67</sup> and later terms “the great lie about community” (die große Gemeinschaftslüge)<sup>68</sup> – Scholem envisages that the German community, now experienced in war, will one day animate the Jewish longing for a homeland, permitting a new “children’s land” (Kinderland) to arise from “our fatherland” (unserem Vaterland), “from Germany a Palestine” (aus Deutschland ein Palästina).<sup>69</sup> The crucial thing, in Scholem’s eyes, is that there be no supposed direct connection between national feeling for Germany and Zionism, that the war not be viewed in any sense as an arena for the expression of Jewish national sentiment or the realisation of a Zionist homeland. Further analysis would be needed, in order to trace the exact nature of the indirect connection which Scholem seems willing to countenance. However, the mere suggestion allows us to hear the careful phrasing of Scholem’s later observation that he wrote against the publication in a Zionist journal of essays glorifying the war.<sup>70</sup> Not pacifist per se, but unwilling to yoke their Judaism, their Zionism, to the German cause, these young Jews, under Scholem’s intellectual leadership, could nonetheless contemplate a schooling of energies: from the community of Germany to a future community of Palestine.

---

66 See Martin Buber, “Die Tempelweihe. Rede, gehalten bei der Makkabäerfeier der Berliner Zionistischen Vereinigung am 19. Dezember 1914” (Consecrating the Temple. Speech delivered at the Maccabees celebration of the Berlin Zionist Organisation on 19 December 1914), *Jüdische Rundschau* XX/1 (1. Januar 1915), 2–4 (3); repr. in *Die Jüdische Bewegung*, pp. 229–242: “In the storm of events, the Jew has experienced with elemental force what is meant by community. He did not remain an atom; he was caught up in events; passionately, he joined the community that revealed its life to him in this way, – the community *which had most need of him in this moment*. Will that alienate him further from the community *which needs him for all eternity*, the profound community of his blood and his kind? I believe that it will bring him closer to it again.” (“Im Sturm der Begebenheit hat der Jude mit elementarer Gewalt erfahren, was Gemeinschaft ist. [...] Er blieb nicht Atom; er wurde mitgerissen; er schloß sich glühend der Gemeinschaft an, die ihm so ihr Leben offenbarte, – der Gemeinschaft, die ihn in diesem Augenblick am stärksten brauchte. Wird ihn das der Gemeinschaft, die ihn in der Ewigkeit braucht, der tiefen Gemeinschaft seines Blutes und seiner Art weiter entfremden? Ich glaube, daß es ihn ihr wiederbringen wird.” Cf. Martin Buber, “Die Losung”, *Der Jude* 1 (IV. 1916), 1–3 (1).

67 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 102 (3.5.1915). Scholem makes a disparaging reference in the same entry (p. 101) to Buber’s speech, “Die Tempelweihe”, in the context of an imagined “Zionist theory in times of war”, which would take to task the specious ideas of German and Jewish community current during the war.

68 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 508 (January 1917).

69 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

70 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, p. 80 [rev. p. 65].

The context of war makes itself felt in the essay not explicitly, but in terms of the language used to describe the poverty of translation that he sees around him. For the confusion beneath the surface order of the bourgeois world has an effect on language and thought that appears in terms suggesting an eerie parallel to the devastation then being wrought by the advanced bourgeois nations of Europe.

The translator makes concessions to the “modern sensibility” which contribute thoroughly to bringing about the collapse of the Jewish orders, on the basis of which all these things are formed, leaving a scene of devastation and confusion. (Der Übersetzer macht dem “modernem Gefühl” Konzessionen, die durchaus dazu beitragen, die jüdischen Ordnungen, von denen her alle diese Dinge gestaltet sind, zusammenstürzen zu lassen zu einem Trümmerfelde von Verwirrung.)<sup>71</sup>

The spectre of war, its destruction and rubble, seems to haunt Scholem’s account. The confusion produced by misconceived, bourgeois translation of Yiddish is here connected at some level with the chaos and devastation of war, which many, especially among the younger generation, took to reveal the truth of the old bourgeois order, laying bare its rotten core and misplaced ideals. In the belief that it is facilitating smoother relations between languages, translation that obliges bourgeois sensibility in fact wreaks havoc.<sup>72</sup> In an emphatic, intellectual sense, such literature, in its very concern not to shake the established order, becomes a true *Trümmerliteratur* or rubble literature, decadent complacency assuming the character of active decline. There is in Scholem’s depiction a strong distaste for compromise and accommodation. This is not only absoluteness for its own sake, but also the result of his perception that anything less than the meeting of Yiddish and German as independent languages with equal claims will destroy the integrity of both.

This linguistic perception parallels Jewish religious and cultural discourses of the period which seek to foster a robust dialogue between German and Jewish spheres and argue that this presupposes a strong sense of Jewish identity and culture. This type of discourse, which often understood itself as opposed to assimilation, can arguably be seen as renewing the idea and practice of assimilation in the era of emancipation. The notion of separateness fostered here can encompass a spectrum of positions, from separatist Zionists (such as Scholem)

---

71 Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 17/p. 497.

72 The term “Verwirrung” figures repeatedly in Scholem’s writing from this time, sometimes as an almost independent condition or demonic power, as in “Wesen der Verwirrung”, (Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 474 [15.5.1917]). It is also applied (in analogy to the Kabbalistic idea of the *olam ha-tohu* [world of formlessness]) to the popular notion of *Erlebnis* or heightened experience, formulated most influentially by Buber, of which Scholem would become increasingly critical, and specifically in reference to the war, which Buber had greeted as the chance to discover an ecstatic experience of community (*Gemeinschaftserlebnis*) (*ibid.*, p. 508 (January 1917); see also Scholem’s letters, e.g. to Buber of 10.7.1916 (Buber, *Briefwechsel I*, p. 445–447).

through to those advocating a symbiosis of German and Jewish worlds (such as Franz Rosenzweig); from dialogue between Jews and Germans (Buber) to the dialogue of Jew and German within the individual (Rosenzweig). As with the argument that Jewish nationalism can benefit from the experience of German nationalism, so, conversely, there is a frequently-met conviction that the better Jew one is, the better German one will be. Both propositions assume a meaningful and marked distinction between Jewish and German worlds.

The context of the war is important for Scholem's essay in a further sense. In addition to providing the images that haunt the essay, it might well underlie the position that Scholem adopts. Behind the scorn for accommodation and the principled attack on anything that impugns the separate status of each language, we hear perhaps also a condemnation of the war-time attempts by nationalist German Jews to connect German and Yiddish, as part of a case for the close cultural and historical affinity between Yiddish-speaking East European Jews and the German occupiers.<sup>73</sup> As well as promoting the German war effort, those who advanced such arguments were, it should not be forgotten, often also motivated by the benign intention to dispose the German military to treating the Jews in these territories favourably.<sup>74</sup> For Scholem, nonetheless, there seems to be a fateful entanglement here of bourgeois compromise, bad philology, and war.

What emerges from this are disconnected tatters of language, "bits torn off, children of a quite internal confusion of language" (losgerissene Stücke, Kinder einer ganz innerlichen Sprachverwirrung).<sup>75</sup> If the confusion is contemporary, like war, it is also mythical. It partakes of the origin of languages as such. In *Sprachverwirrung* there lies almost certainly an allusion to the *Sprachverwirrung*, that primordial first confusion of tongues described in Genesis 11. Bourgeois compromise gives rise to disorder and confusion that is figured implicitly as the edifices of myth and history, buildings incomplete and buildings returned to rubble: the tower of Babel and the ruined landscape of the present war.

We find support for this apparent connection with biblical myth in a diary entry from the same period, in which Scholem understands the "original Fall of language" (Sündenfall der Sprache) as a "confusion in the intellectual and spiritual orders of language" (Verwirrung in den geistigen Ordnungen der Spra-

---

73 Cf. Zosa Szajkowski, "The Struggle for Yiddish During World War I: The Attitude of German Jewry", in Joshua A. Fishman (Ed.), *Never Say Die! A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters. Contributions to the Sociology of Language 30* (The Hague: Mouton, 1981), pp. 565–590; Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers*, pp. 158, 192.

74 Scholem criticises the arguments concerning the liberation of Jews from Tsarist oppression by pointing to Germany's readiness to enter into an alliance with Rumania (Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, pp. 101–102 [3.4.1915]).

75 Scholem, "Zum Problem", 17/p. 497.

che).<sup>76</sup> This takes up the accusation of “Verwirrung” which he directs, initially, at the Jewish youth movement.<sup>77</sup> With the possible exception of Hebrew, he writes, every language is fallen, is a language “entangled in the Fall” (in den Sündenfall verstrickte). However, he also contends that every language is capable of giving rise to a view of itself that is not bourgeois and that may then allow it to be elevated once again to “the orders of language” (die sprachlichen Ordnungen). Scholem excoriates the bourgeois view of language, revealing the influence of his discussions with Benjamin, and especially of Benjamin’s 1916 essay on language, which similarly underscored the postlapsarian condition of language as communication, rather than as pure naming – “Words are meant to communicate *something* (apart from themselves). That is the real Fall of the spirit of language.” (Das Wort soll etwas mitteilen (außer sich selbst). Das ist wirklich der Sündenfall des Sprachgeistes.)<sup>78</sup> – and set itself against the “bourgeois conception of language” (die bürgerliche Auffassung der Sprache).<sup>79</sup> A bourgeois understanding of this kind is deemed, by Scholem, “reprehensible” (verwerflich) and the root of every superficial understanding of philosophy. It is said to consist in seeing language as nothing more than a means of communication. A true conception of language, by contrast, knows that language as such is its own content.

Scholem also identifies his own criticism with destruction. A critique of such vehemence is necessary particularly at the present time, he avers, because the growing interest in all things Jewish has brought with it an increasing tendency towards uncritical adulation. Interest alone is dangerous, when what is needed is an engagement with Jewish subjects “beginning from the ultimate centre” (vom letzten Zentrum her).<sup>80</sup> As though almost reassuring himself, Scholem, in a coda to the first draft of the essay, shifts between claiming that the piece is as mild as it could be and insisting that the contemporary enthusiasm leaves one no choice but to “find the courage to tear down a book destructively” (den Mut zum vernichtenden Herunterreißen eines Buches). Much later, in his autobiography, he recounts a meeting with Salman Rubashoff, in which Rubashoff, then trying to persuade a reluctant Scholem to undertake a translation from Yiddish, reminds him that he had only two months previously “destroyed” (vernichtet) Eliasberg for his terrible translations.<sup>81</sup> Immediately after writing the critique, Scholem registers its violence when noting that “it is only possible to deal the man [Eliasberg] a death blow at the level of first principles” (Den Mann kann

---

76 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 466 (6.1.1917); cf. p. 457 on “Verwirrung” of the “intellectual and spiritual orders of Judaism” (geistigen Ordnungen des Judentums).

77 For example, “Jüdische Jugendbewegung” (1917), which Scholem began writing in June 1916, in *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, pp. 314–328 (6.1.1917), especially pp. 320 ff.

78 Benjamin, *GS* II.1, p. 153.

79 Benjamin, *GS* II.1, p. 144.

80 Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 17/p. 499. This *Zentrum*, both intellectual and political at once, is connected at this time with his emphatic use of terms such as *Torah*, *Tradition*, and *Zion*.

81 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, p. 115 [rev. p. 100].

man nur prinzipiell totschiagen).<sup>82</sup> In the draft of his reply to Eliasberg's defence, Scholem adds a coda in which he understands the critique (Kritik) furnished in his essay as exactly the kind of iconoclasm – "Reverence for idols – dreadful! (Ehrfurcht vor Götzen – entsetzlich!) – that is needed in all areas of contemporary Judaism."<sup>83</sup> If there is a context of destruction by the war and a scene of devastation wrought by misconceived translations, there is a different, positive idea of destruction at work not just here, but throughout Scholem's writings, which remain ever alive to the intimate connection between destruction and creation, the dialectic, to which religious and mystical ideas in particular attest, that creation or regeneration might have to be preceded by a moment that destroys.

The observation that he had reined in his often intemperate style appears to be connected as much as anything with Scholem's hope that there would not be much editorial censorship. This wish seems to have been fulfilled when, after meeting with the editor, Max Meyer, to prepare the proofs, Scholem proudly reports that none of the sharp severity was taken out of the essay. (Die Schärpen haben wir in nichts gemildert.)<sup>84</sup> The seemingly innocuous accompanying reference to their having "changed a few things" (einiges geändert) masks, however, the even more radical formulations of the first draft, as we shall see, when we compare it with the published article.

As a corollary of his rejection of the "bourgeois" idea of language, with its dictate of comprehensibility, Scholem dismisses the notion that a translation should seek to accommodate itself culturally to the reader's world. It should, he argues, confront the reader instead with something new and strange. His ideal of translation is one which places above bourgeois compromise either "resolute freedom" (entschiedenen Freiheit) or, higher still, "the greater courage to be completely literal" (den größeren [Mut] zur ganzen Wörtlichkeit).<sup>85</sup> It is the want of such courage that causes the translator to suppress excessively Jewish elements or add small details of bourgeois propriety, in a manner often inadvertently comical.

The formulations of this ideal of literal translation remain at a rather general level, and it is not easy to define more precisely what Scholem thinks literalism should consist in and what kind of translation practice it should produce. It is clear that achieving it depends on the translator's knowledge of the intellectual and spiritual (Hebrew) orders or structures informing the Jewish (Yiddish) life that is the subject matter of the stories. As is often the case with Scholem, and particularly in this essay, we are better placed to say what literal translation definitely is not. Even in the most literal sections of *Sagen polnischer Juden*, for example, clarity and order are seen as being sacrificed "in favour of an, as it were,

---

82 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 458 (29.12.1916).

83 Ibid., p. 470 (20.1.1917).

84 Ibid., p. 466 (7.1.1917).

85 Scholem, "Zum Problem", 17/p. 497.

literary diction” (einer gewissermaßen literarischen Diktion zuliebe).<sup>86</sup> In other words, literalism is certainly not literariness.

Hebrew is held to be the only true medium for expressing the ultimate matters of Judaism; an insight which Scholem ascribes to the “popular spirit” (Volksgeist).<sup>87</sup> He seems to acknowledge here that Yiddish is a language of the Jewish people, in as much as that people’s spirit decides the composition of Yiddish. Any uncertainty this might leave regarding the extent to which Yiddish as a whole is authentically popular, rather than just the Hebrew elements determining the “orders of German” (Ordnungen des Deutschen) that are its material content, is removed when Scholem goes on to call Yiddish the “language of the people” (Volkssprache).<sup>88</sup> He also follows the spirit of the people, however, in conceding that there might at least be some process in German of approximation to the original sense of Jewish religious words such as “Torah”, even if it is one that is endless and circumlocutive, a necessary asymptote of translation. If Scholem proceeds to repeat his contempt for bourgeois translations, the notion of possible approximation does suggest a middle ground between the betrayal of Yiddish through bourgeois accommodation and absolute literalism or non-translation.

Equally opposed to literalism is an arbitrary approach to the original arrangement of the material. In Scholem’s opinion, the volume of *Sagen* includes tales which for the most part have nothing to do with the category of the legend simply because of some putative loose connection.<sup>89</sup> Joining the unimportance of comprehensibility as crucial aspects of adequate, literal translation are, then, two further criteria: a style that is not concerned with meeting notional ideas of belles lettres, and a rigorous approach to genre.

This anticipates Scholem’s later work on Jewish mysticism, which would remain attentive to the many ways in which his source material did not necessarily fit the established categories of modern Western scholarship, while at the same time employing what was best about that scholarly tradition. Even when selecting ideas for his reconstruction of a particular aspect of the Kabbalah, Scholem rarely allows the reader to forget the context in which they arose and on which they depend. For example, Jewish mysticism is continually returned to its place within rabbinic tradition, never allowed to float free of Jewish law and normative practice, whose guardians are frequently none other than those self-same Kabbalists. His criticisms of Buber’s interpretation of Hasidism as anti-rabbinical and an exclusively mystical ethos are based on this awareness and still important, even if, having charged Buber with playing down the social and magical aspects of the movement, he has in turn been criticised for one-

---

86 Ibid., 17/p. 498.

87 Ibid., 16/p. 496.

88 Ibid., 17/p. 498.

89 Ibid., 17/p. 499.



sidedness, in focusing on the theosophical Kabbalah at the expense of its ecstatic and theurgical or practical dimensions.<sup>90</sup>

The task of translating Yiddish gives these ideas a specific inflection and further clarifies Scholem's view of the language. The bourgeois attitude to language is said to make these translations comparatively "cold" and "soulless", lacking the Yiddish originals' "warmth" (Wärme).<sup>91</sup> Such terms could at first glance easily be misleading, since they are staples of the nostalgic, sentimental attitude that prevailed among German Jews in their ideas of the Ostjuden and of Yiddish. However, Scholem calls this a "warmth of a most peculiar kind" (Wärme höchst eigentümlicher Art), which stems from a tension in Yiddish between Hebrew and German. That this warmth is not the stuff of cliché is confirmed when he observes the tendency of the Eliasberg translations to suffuse the texts with a sentimentality absent from the originals and "in no sense appropriate to Yiddish" (dem Jidischen überhaupt nicht angemessen).<sup>92</sup> In an accompanying note on his translation of David Pinski's proletarian Yiddish drama, *Eisik Shefiel* (1905), Buber likewise avoids a cosy idealisation of Yiddish as "warm". He offers more detail than Scholem, characterising Yiddish as "warmer" than Hebrew, but going on to define this as being a curious combination of qualities such as soft and coarse, tender and malicious.<sup>93</sup> The following year, Buber would describe the Yiddish of Rabbi Nachman in strikingly similar terms, writing of "that tenderly coarse, melancholy and bitter idiom, that the European calls Jargon" (jenem zärtlich derben, schwermütigen und bitteren Idiom, das der Europäer Jargon nennt).<sup>94</sup> The warmth of Yiddish is, for these authors, not a simple and pleasant balm, but the product of a dynamic and tense process.

The "spirit of the originals" which Scholem misses in these translations is not easy to capture, but it has something to do with this complicated warmth, which appears to reside in stories that are organically whole and formed creations. It might seem possible to infer something more of its meaning negatively, from the adjectives which Scholem applies to its antonym, cold. The German is said to radiate an "objectivising, indifferent coldness" (objektivierende, gleichgültige Kälte), in true West European fashion.<sup>95</sup> In the context, we could thus take

---

90 For Scholem's challenge to Buber, see Gershom Scholem, "Martin Bubers Deutung des Chasidismus", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Beilage: Literatur und Kunst, 20 and 27 May 1962; repr. in Scholem, *Judaica* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1963), pp. 165–206. Sustained criticism of Scholem's approach from this perspective can be found in Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

91 Scholem, "Zum Problem", 16/pp. 496–497.

92 *Ibid.*, 17/p. 498.

93 Martin Buber, "Geleitwort", in David Pinski, *Eisik Shefiel. Ein jüdisches Arbeiterdrama in drei Akten*, trans. Martin Buber (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1905) p. 8; repr. in Buber, *Sprachphilosophische Schriften*, bearb., eingel. und kommentiert by Asher Biemann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003) (Martin Buber Werkausgabe 6), pp. 73–74.

94 Martin Buber, "Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman", in Buber, *Die chassidischen Bücher*, pp. 1–123 (p. 21).

95 Scholem, "Zum Problem", 16/p. 497.

warmth to imply a more personal – though not necessarily subjective – character, and some degree of attachment to, or engagement with, the things being described. Uncharacteristically, the language for capturing this quality seems finally to elude Scholem, and he admits that the description of a general impression will have to stand in for a precise formulation.

## V The Different Versions of Scholem’s Essay on Translating Yiddish

There are three substantial differences between the original notebook draft of the essay and the final version.<sup>96</sup> One is a continuation to the sentence regarding Eliasberg’s translation of Poskim as *Bibelsprüche*, which is said here to be particularly wrong on account of the “not uncommon connection in Yiddish between Talmud and Poskim” (im Jidischen doch nicht seltenen Verbindung Talmud und Poskim).<sup>97</sup> Even this apparently technical gloss is nonetheless revealing, inasmuch as Scholem is willing to offer his own understanding of the Yiddish, one which points to the post-biblical rabbinic context for the term, rather than simply calling into question what is offered, as he tends to do in the rest of the essay. In addition, it indicates a concern with traditional Judaism, to which, as he added in his later account, he was in these years as close he would ever come.<sup>98</sup>

Also omitted from the printed version, which speaks in general terms about an ignorance of things Jewish, is another, more direct reference to Western Jews and Europeans not speaking Yiddish. Where the article speaks merely of those “alienated from Jewish things” (dem jüdischen Dingen entfremdeten), the draft refers specifically and emphatically to those “*not* speaking Yiddish” (*nicht* jiddisch redenden).<sup>99</sup> For such people, Scholem contends, Hebrew, or the “Hebrew tradition”, apparently of only secondary importance as a source, must in fact take priority. In these circumstances, relying on the Yiddish originals alone will not do to communicate the essential order of the original.<sup>100</sup> The draft is indeed bolder in its claim for the importance of the Hebrew editions in such circumstances, arguing that non-Yiddish speakers must be given a version drawn from the Hebrew tradition, whereas the article recommends merely that both Yiddish and Hebrew editions should be used concurrently. In his attack on Siegfried Lehmann from October 1916, Scholem had insisted even more exclusively on the Hebrew essence of Hasidism: its soul, he wrote, is “*bound up*

---

96 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, pp. 459–464. This would appear to be a fair copy of the very first version written a day earlier, on 29 December 1916. The stylistic harshness of the first version is also softened in the second (see below).

97 *Ibid.*, p. 462.

98 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, [rev. p. 86].

99 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, pp. 498–499 and p. 463, respectively.

100 *Ibid.*, p. 463.

with the magical form of language and is deformed at its very core by translation” (*mit der magischen Form der Sprache verbunden, und wird durch eine Übersetzung im Zentrum gebeugt*).<sup>101</sup> Differences of emphasis notwithstanding, these formulations share a consistent idea: the less Hebrew is known, the greater the care which must be taken to make its determining presence for Yiddish palpable.

Underlying this and most radical of all is the formulation here of the central premise of the essay. If the published version states clearly enough the ultimate determining role of Hebrew for Yiddish, this is carefully qualified, as we have seen, by a dualistic conception: “inner form” and a “spirit of the language” are opposed to linguistic material. What in the later version appears in this way as a mediated reproduction of the spirit of Hebrew in Yiddish is offered here in more shockingly immediate terms. Not the inner form of Yiddish, but Yiddish as such is said to be “in itself a translation into German” (an sich eine Übersetzung ins Deutsche).<sup>102</sup> More than just a linguistic hybrid or parasite, Yiddish is described as a full translation from another language. In Scholem’s most unguarded phrasing, then, to translate Yiddish amounts to a translation of a translation.

## VI Eliasberg’s Defence and Scholem’s Reply

If we now turn to Eliasberg’s defence of his work and Scholem’s reply to this, printed in the same issue of the *Jüdische Rundschau*, we find Scholem reader to acknowledge that translation is possible, that the task of a translation is “to translate the original correctly” (das Original richtig zu übersetzen).<sup>103</sup> In this context, he even ventures an example of a warm translation. Scholem had objected to Eliasberg’s rendering of (*anshey shlomenu*, literally “the students of our master”) as “Gesinnungsgenossen” (like-minded people) on the grounds that, typically for these translations, it captured nothing of the “whole warmth” of Yiddish contained in this expression. Eliasberg replies that he can see no reason why “werter Gesinnungsgenosse” should be considered cold, even if he is aware that the sense of the German is not identical to the Hebrew phrase. The only way to achieve a perfect match for such words would, he claims, be to transcribe them in Latin characters, rather than to translate them, something that, as far as he can see, appears finally to be Scholem’s ideal.<sup>104</sup>

---

101 Gershom Scholem, *Briefe I 1914–1947*, ed. Itta Shedletzky (München: C. H. Beck, 1994), p. 48 (9.10.1916); cf. Scholem, *Von Berlin*, pp. 103–104 [rev. p. 86], where Scholem refers to the “bitter correspondence” with Lehmann.

102 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 459. The published version characterises Yiddish as a “reproduction of the spirit of the Hebrew language in German” (ibid., p. 495).

103 Eliasberg, “Zum Problem der Übersetzung aus dem Jidischen. Erwiderung”, Scholem, “Antwort”, pp. 501–502 (here 36/p. 502).

104 Ibid., 36/p. 500.

In his answer, Scholem restates the lack of connection between the Hebrew and German phrases, and confesses amazement that anyone could see the German as “an expression of over-flowing warmth of the heart” (eine Äußerung überquellender Herzenswärme).<sup>105</sup> This condenses what, in the draft of the essay, is an attempt to give a concrete example of the heart’s overflowing warmth, one which, interestingly, was not allowed to stand in the published version. Scholem writes:

With ‘our people’ the concept could in some measure have been translated warmly and correctly, but ‘where shall wisdom be found? and where *is* the place of understanding?’ [Job 28, 12] (Mit “unsere Leute” hätte sich der Begriff einigermaßen warm und richtig übertragen lassen, aber “die Weisheit, von wo wird sie gefunden, und wo ist der Ort der Einsicht?”).<sup>106</sup>

In turn, of course, the English “our people” cannot quite capture the effect of “unsere Leute”: a particular sense of identification, of solidarity and mutual responsibility. It is, we might therefore conclude, presumably this kind of naming from within that he is thinking of when he finds not warmth, but indifferent coldness in Eliasberg’s German.

The removal of the biblical quotation from Job from the final version is perhaps not only due to an evident wish to remove excessive sarcasm and gratuitous insult from the reply.<sup>107</sup> It is tempting to connect it also with the decision to replace the closing Hebrew phrase of the previous sentence with Latin: the Hebrew exclamation “*mi lo!*” (who not), is dropped in favour of “*habeat sibi!*” (let him do as he likes).<sup>108</sup> Important here, above all, is Scholem’s greater willingness to concede the possibility of successful translation of Yiddish into German. The reply operates more freely with terms such as “correct” and “incorrect” than the essay itself, which tends to favour rhetorical questions, humorous phrases such as “an atmosphere of impossibility” (eine Atmosphäre von Unmöglichkeit), or descriptions of the feeling provoked (astonishment, horror etc.).<sup>109</sup> A significant use of “falsifying” (fälschend) in the draft is, in the same vein, substituted by the milder “distorting” (umbiegend) in the published version.<sup>110</sup> Unsurprisingly, given the rider of approximation which we have seen him attach to the idea that Yiddish may be circumlocuted in German, the correctness is qualified as being “to some extent” (einigermaßen).

---

105 Scholem, “Antwort”, 37/p. 502.

106 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 470.

107 For example, Scholem also dropped the sentence: “Dr. Alexander Eliasberg has an astonishingly bad memory” (*Herr Dr. Alexander Eliasberg hat ein erstaunlich schlechtes Gedächtnis*) (Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 469).

108 *Ibid.*, p. 470 (“*mi lo!*”); Scholem, “Antwort”, 37/p. 502 (“*habeat sibi!*”).

109 Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 16/p. 497.

110 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 462 (“fälschende”); Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 17/p. 498 (“umbiegende”).

Finally, Scholem gives additional shape here to his ideal of translation. He concedes that the dictionary definition might well support Eliasberg's choice of "Privatgottesdienst" for *minyán*, but he dismisses such one-for-one lexical correspondence as irrelevant next to the requirement of "organic intellectual and spiritual coherence" (organischen geistigen Zusammenhanges). The notion of courageous literalness (Wörtlichkeit) set out in the essay would seem, once again, to have nothing to do with slavish literalism. Such mistakes reveal, for Scholem, the way in which something of inestimable value is debased as mere currency. The translations make, he writes, "out of the profound truths of language a cheap commodity of the markets" (aus den tiefen Wahrheiten der Sprache eine billige Ware der Märkte).<sup>111</sup> Scholem's style here visibly works against such cheapening. In "Ware" there sounds a curtailed echo of "Wahrheiten", at the same time as it aches for the truth itself, *das Wahre*, its homonym and now lost. Moreover, the chiasmic structure of plural and singular nouns (Wahrheiten – Sprache – Ware – Märkte), where repeating the sequence (i.e. Waren – Markt) would have better satisfied sense, not only permits the loss to be audible, but also compounds the debasement, as truths are reduced to a single commodity, and heightens the sense of fragmentation, as an organic language fractures across an unspecified number of markets. The odium of bourgeois compromise which the essay detects on every page of the translations resurfaces in this association of translation with commodification.

Bourgeois attitudes to language yield translations fit for the market, but anathema to everything connected with *Geist*, the intellect or spirit.<sup>112</sup> This notion of the contamination of language use by the social and economic structures, the rampant spread of inauthenticity and reduction to the commodity of market forces, has by this time already a venerable history. Though its specific class marker is more acute here and its venom more directed, it may be seen as continuing a broad contrast within modernist culture between pure experience or expression and the commerce of everyday life. Out of what is, for example, from around the turn of the century generally termed by Buber the "Getriebe" nothing whole and authentic can come. What issues from the bustle of modern existence, especially in its quintessential urban form, is language debased as chatter ("das Gerede" (Kierkegaard to Scholem)) or as empty journalistic cliché ("die Phrase" (Kraus)). As will be seen, this aspect of the critique of language and translation practice connects with certain dominant concerns in Scholem's writing.

Scholem views his attack as directed against only "translation that is uncongenial to the intellect and spirit" (die geistwidrige Uebersetzung), not translation as such, and as a call for translation that manages to render every word "in its appropriate intellectual and spiritual sphere" (in der ihm angemessenen geistigen Sphäre). Such a translation, while by rights difficult, would actually open

---

111 Scholem, "Antwort", 37/p. 502.

112 Ibid., 36/p. 501.

up the Jewish world of the stories to the uninitiated reader, whereas Eliasberg ensures that it will remain closed forever. The more difficult the translation initially seems, the greater, ultimately, is the prospect of real understanding, since there will be no residual suspicion that the translator has suppressed this or that “essential content” (wesentliche Inhalte) in the name of comprehension.

Scholem’s reply, and in particular these omitted elements from the first version, give some substance to what the essay had described sparingly as a translation that would permit the Yiddish world of the Ostjuden to speak “from within” (von innen heraus).<sup>113</sup> Setting itself against “a purely external paraphrase” (einer rein äußerlichen Umschreibung), the reply calls for an engagement of the translator’s “deepest empathy” (tiefste Einfühlung) with the “inner structure” (innere Struktur) or “orders” (Ordnungen) of the Jewish ideas at work in these and all Yiddish texts.<sup>114</sup> With the exception of Judaism’s highest concepts, such as Torah, this empathy, this naming from within, is said in unambiguous language to permit exceptional translations even of the very different, very Jewish and Yiddish world of the East European Jews.<sup>115</sup>

## VII Anticipations of the Essay in Scholem’s Diary

Anticipations of key phrases in the essay can be found in Scholem’s diaries from this period. These allow us to reconstruct fundamental connections between the ideas raised in his reflection on translating Yiddish and other discursive fields, connections that are less obvious on the surface of the essay itself.

Two key phrases from the essay’s closing paragraph appear to rework diary entries from November 1916. In the first of these, Scholem inveighs against the academic philosophy of his day, which seems to be infected by cowardice in metaphysics and poverty of language. Using a pejorative term common in his early writings, he condemns the philosophical establishment by association with “the sphere of chatter” (die Sphäre des Geschwätzes).<sup>116</sup> Here as elsewhere, one of the most objectionable manifestations of chatter is, for Scholem, the neomystical enthusiasm for an idea of *Erlebnis* or heightened experience. Scholem’s turn against this notion, whose use at this time derived initially from the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, goes hand-in-hand with his increasingly critical response to the person whom he viewed as its most influential Jewish exponent, Buber. The

113 Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 16/p. 496. As the subsequent exchange between Scholem and Eliasberg makes clear, the phrase comes from the publisher’s note on the dust jacket of *Ostjüdische Erzähler* (“Antwort”, p. 501).

114 *Ibid.*, 36/p. 501.

115 It is striking that at this point the reply, despite its more openly optimistic account of translating Yiddish, deems “Torah” and similar concepts untranslatable, whereas the essay gives it as an example of a term that could be captured, even if only through paraphrase and an infinite process of approximation (“Zum Problem”, 16/p. 496).

116 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 425 (21.11.1916).

term “chatter”, taken over from Kierkegaard, matches the negative reference to a mistaken veneration of Kierkegaard as “the greatest philosopher of *Erlebnis*”.<sup>117</sup> Such chattering philosophy has, he avers, no conception of a system grounded on the “holiest dogmatism of truth” (heiligsten Dogmatismus der Wahrheit), preferring instead to content itself with mere “communication” (Mitteilung).

Occurring as it does a matter of just ten days after Scholem received Benjamin’s *Sprachbrief*, we may assume that this reacts to Benjamin’s negative and positive uses of the term “Mitteilung”. There Benjamin writes of the fallen state of language being manifest in its reduction to a supposed instrumental employment for transmitting a given content. Pitted against this reduced version of language as communication is a higher, purer one, whose restitution is envisaged in redemptive terms. Pure language is described as a completely self-referential act: “*There is no content of language; language, as communication, communicates an intellectual and spiritual essence, i.e. a communicability as such.*” (Einen Inhalt der Sprache gibt es nicht; als Mitteilung teilt die Sprache ein geistiges Wesen, d.i. eine Mitteilbarkeit schlechthin mit.)<sup>118</sup> This pure language or expressiveness occurs in the act of naming, in which instrumental, objective, and communicative functions fall away.<sup>119</sup> As for Benjamin’s metaphysics of language, so for Scholem here on an historical level, corruption and chaos are necessarily also, and often profoundly, linguistic. This conviction that language will always betray intellectual or moral confusion, and the related belief that such confusion may therefore be addressed through a purification of language, approaches being axiomatic for many thinkers of this period.<sup>120</sup> In a line of argument running from Nietzsche through to Wittgenstein and beyond, bad use of language is coterminous with a confusion of thought.

For Scholem, contemporary philosophy or theology devoted to the idea of *Erlebnis* is similarly identified with a contamination of language. It is manifest in an “incapacity of modern writers to use the German language” (deutsche Sprachunfähigkeit der Modernen).<sup>121</sup> A lack of total involvement, almost existential necessity, means that

117 Ibid., p. 425 (21.11.1916).

118 Benjamin, *GS* II.1, 145–146 (emphasis in original).

119 Ibid., 144.

120 On the specific form that this takes in the context of multi-lingual Austro-Hungary, see Josef Peter Stern, “Words are also Deeds”, in Stern, *The Heart of Europe: Essays on Literature and Ideology* (Oxford/Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 44–60; Miroslav Hroch, “Sprache, Literatur und nationale Identität”, in *Die Wiener Jahrhundertwende: Einflüsse, Umwelt, Wirkungen*, ed. Jürgen Nautz and Richard Vahrenkamp (Wien: Böhlau, 1993), pp. 377–388; Ernest Gellner, *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Peter Kampits, “Sprachphilosophie und Literatur als Sprachkritik im Wien um 1900”, in *Wien um 1900. Aufbruch in die Moderne*, ed. Peter Berner et al. (München: Oldenbourg, 1986), pp. 119–126.

121 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 425 (21.11.1916). The sentence held up for ridicule by Scholem is “Y, who never writes a word that he has not experienced personally” (Y, der kein Wort schreibt, das der nicht erlebt hat).



these people give away something that is a matter of indifference, for it is *because* they give it away, that is, wish to offer it as cheaply as possible, that they leave out the spirit, since a thing that has *within* itself spirit simply cannot be had for any less than the *full* price (diese Leute verschenken etwas, was gleichgültig ist, denn weil sie es verschenken, also so billig geben wollen wie nur möglich, lassen sie den Geist draußen, denn eine Sache, die den Geist in sich hat, gibt es nun einmal nicht billiger als für den ganzen Preis).<sup>122</sup>

This recurs in lightly modified form at the end of the Eliasberg critique. There Scholem urges an approach to Jewish subjects that takes its orientation from the centre of Judaism and will thus restore the truly Jewish insight: “that Jewish things cannot be offered for one penny less than their *full* price, if what is essential, the spirit, is not to be left out” (daß die jüdischen Dinge um keinen Pfennig billiger gegeben werden können als ihr ganzer Preis ist, wenn nicht das Wesentliche, der Geist draußen bleiben soll).<sup>123</sup> The existential commitment that the diary entry finds wanting in German philosophy also surfaces again in the final sentence of the essay, in which Scholem defines the price that must be paid as “*our life*” (unser Leben).

The proximity of these two formulations demonstrates how Scholem’s arguments about the principles that ought to govern translation of Yiddish, and no less the approach to all things Jewish, belong to a wider discourse about the recovery of a proper relationship to language and a language use adequate to the highest order of truth. The betrayal which the diary narrates, of the younger generation by a staid, academic manner of philosophising, connects with the essay’s animus against a bourgeois attitude to language. The claim that the academy complacently avoids what is difficult, but therefore also essential, finds its counterpart in the charge that the Eliasberg translations make life too easy for themselves and that a translation has the right, in this case the duty, to be challenging. Employing the existential language of Kierkegaard, Scholem demands that the student not be spared the anxiety, passion, agitation, and difficulty experienced by the philosopher who first engaged with the idea being studied. One must relive the pathos of thinking. Similarly, the essay argues for the path of greatest resistance as the one by which a translation (of Yiddish) will ultimately succeed in teaching the uninformed reader about the innermost reality of the text.

The second anticipation of the essay parallels this one closely, for it also draws on a section in the diaries concerned with language. Describing critically the unprecedented enthusiasm for learning Hebrew which he sees around him in Berlin, Scholem contrasts the superficial, fashionable reasons for most of this interest – now “matter for the drawing room” (Salonangelegenheit) – with a serious relationship to the language. As in the previous example, seriousness entails a form of existential necessity, “learning beginning from the absolute depths

122 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 425 (21.11.1916).

123 Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 17/p. 499.

of our soul, transformation through Hebrew” (das Lernen aus dem Nullpunkt unserer Seele, die Umwandlung durch das Hebräische).<sup>124</sup> Against an “absolutely supra-personal” (absolut überpersönlichen) imperative to learn Hebrew he places a superficial motivation based on, at best, ideas about national renaissance and the like, which are termed impersonal, yet by no means objective.<sup>125</sup> “Every form of handling Jewish things [...] not from the centre, but from some peripheral point or other, is utterly soulless” (Alle die Art und Weise, wie jüdische Dinge [...] nicht vom Zentrum her, sondern aus irgendeinem peripherischen Punkt betrieben werden, ist ganz seelenlos). Though not the only instance of such terminology in the diaries, this anticipates more or less precisely the essay’s observation that a rigorous critique is called for now more than ever, since the reigning fashion for everything Jewish tends to proceed “not from the ultimate centre, but from the peripheral perspective of its being ‘interesting’ for someone or other, in a way that is quite irrelevant” (nicht vom letzten Zentrum her, sondern von den peripherischen Gesichtspunkten eines völlig irrelevanten “Interessantseins” für irgendjemand).<sup>126</sup> This parallel suggests, then, that the demands which Scholem places on the translator of Yiddish are connected with, and no less arduous than, those applying to the acquisition of Hebrew.

His argument concerning the relationship between the two languages – which resurfaces at the end of the essay, in the reference to works claiming derivation from “intellectual and spiritual orders” (geistigen Ordnungen) – makes it comprehensible that earlier expressions of rigour regarding Hebrew should come to inform his stipulations for the reception of Yiddish. Hebrew’s relationship to the defining elements of Judaism is immediate, tantamount to a relation of identity: Judaism’s central religious ideas “can be described and expressed in no other way than through themselves and in the language most their own, Hebrew” (nicht anders beschrieben und ausgedrückt werden können als durch sich selber und in ihrer ureigensten Sprache, dem Hebräischen).<sup>127</sup> The relationship of Yiddish to Judaism’s ultimate concerns is, as we saw, said to be mediated through its determination by Hebrew. However, this difference does not alter the fact that both are Jewish languages, participating in the central ideas of Judaism, and thus equally subject to the criteria which Scholem establishes.

Yiddish no less than Hebrew takes its revenge on those approaching it for any secondary reason. An attraction to Hebrew or some other element of Judaism that is not in this way central is misconceived. By central, Scholem seems to mean the highest concerns both of Judaism and of the individual seeking a

---

124 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 430 (22.11.1916). The older orthography of “Umwandlung” – soon relatively uncharacteristic for Scholem, who prefers a more sparing, modernist style – seems to combine here with the term and its sense to suggest Nietzsche as an important source.

125 Ibid., p. 431 (22.11.1916).

126 Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 17/p. 499.

127 Ibid., 16/p. 496.

relationship to them. The term is at once topical and existential, to do with ideas and with attitudes. If the power with which Scholem invests the notion of the centre (Zentrum) is to be taken seriously, it can appear only consistent that origin and process, object and subject, coalesce in this way. Within a loosely voluntarist framework, a decision to commit oneself to something Jewish will be held to involve more than a choice, in the customary sense of a more or less arbitrary act of the will. Instead, it possesses the person with a completeness and ineluctable force that, while leaving them free, resembles compulsion. It is, in other words, the freedom of inner necessity. This necessity would appear to draw its power from the very centre of Judaism with which it is in relation (hence Scholem’s repeated construction “vom Zentrum her”). Put another way, the decision alone, if genuine, is already Jewish, central in a metaphysical or religious as well as in an existential sense, inasmuch as it actualises tradition. The somewhat open terms used to describe what is brought about are common to both passages: if a superficial approach produces, in the case of Hebrew, something “quite soulless” (ganz seelenlos), it manages to make the Yiddish material equally “soulless” (seelenlos).<sup>128</sup> Ignoring Hebrew where it is required is as bad as lavishing attention on it for the wrong reasons. The spirit (Geist) of Yiddish, bound up as it is with Hebrew, can be conjured only by the purity of intention and principle due to all things Jewish.

In both of these correspondences between the essay and diary reflections, a random, dilettantish approach to Jewish questions, an approach in which modishness is matched by vagrant arbitrariness, is condemned by association with soulless historicism. The chattering, *Erlebnis*-ridden philosophy of the academic establishment is held to produce an arid “history of philosophy” (Philosophiegeschichte).<sup>129</sup> Although his reputation has long rested on his serious historical research into Jewish mysticism, the young Scholem took over from Kierkegaard a suspicion regarding historical consciousness. In the context of his vitalist enthusiasm for life – “Long live life” (Es lebe das Leben) – and admiration for Kierkegaard, he is thus capable of announcing in 1914: “Away with the historical viewpoint” (Weg mit der geschichtlichen Betrachtung).<sup>130</sup> By 1916, however, something more differentiated has emerged. Rather than a blanket denunciation of historicism, Scholem objects to the particular form taken by this historical approach. It is held to empty the student’s relationship to the material of any passion, of the kind that must be grounded in philosophical structure. His metaphysical proclivities still draw Scholem towards something that seems to pull away from history. Yet a simplistic opposition between philosophy, or life, and history has now been replaced by an awareness that metaphysical truth may emerge from a proper engagement with tradition. Scholem

---

128 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 430 (22.11.1916); Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 16/p. 496.

129 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 425 (21.11.1916).

130 *Ibid.*, p. 43 (15.11.1914).

rarely incorporated metaphysical speculation into his historical enquiries, but the often implicit philosophical inferences in this work, and the parallel essays in direct metaphysical reflection based on Kabbalistic ideas, reveal the abiding conviction that history and truth are facets of one and the same thing.

### VIII Yiddish as a True Vernacular

Scholem's article criticises translation that is perceived to assimilate Yiddish literature and culture to the norms of High German and of German culture. Like other champions of Yiddish, he identifies it as an authentic expression of the Jewish people, a true vernacular. It is not a mark of the diaspora, something shameful and fit to be superseded as quickly as possible, as many Zionists and Hebraists cast it at the time. Rather, it is a legitimate Jewish language. Scholem differs from others attempting to represent the claims of Yiddish, such as for example Buber, in his emphasis on the Hebrew component in Yiddish, and in that respect reveals perhaps his particular Zionist commitments. It is understandable that Scholem, writing at a time when the Germanic filiation of the Yiddish language and the Germanic affiliation of Yiddish culture were prone to being exaggerated and exploited, should have polemicised in the name of a Hebraic Yiddish.

Scholem's account lacks the plethora of negative clichés with which even the most ostensibly positive defences of Yiddish and East European Jewish life are often littered. In contrast to a figure such as Buber, for example, he does not write about the Yiddish tongue and its written documents as fragmentary or corrupt. Scholem's essay and other writings of this period are refreshingly free of the typical narratives of decline and routinisation, and the corresponding idealisation of an early phase of Yiddish or Hasidic culture. They also dispense with the characterisation of Yiddish written culture as uncivilised, rough, even primitive, encountered frequently in condescending writing about the uncultured Jews of Eastern Europe or in those holding them up as the expression of a vital, raw, and powerful Jewish culture. For Scholem, the documents of Yiddish writing do not need "civilising", as it were, rendering presentable for a cultured German audience by a skillful reteller or redactor;<sup>131</sup> not because it is salutary for German Jews to confront something shockingly unrefined, but for the simple reason that they are perfectly formed works in their own right. Whether they need approaching with a different aesthetic measure is not a question that

---

131 On this point the contrast with Buber is particularly evident, Scholem not subscribing to a hermeneutics of historical recovery of the kind inspired by Dilthey; on Buber's attitude to Yiddish and its translation into German, see David Groiser, "Translating Yiddish – Martin Buber and David Pinski", in *The Yiddish Presence in European Literature*, ed. Joseph Sherman and Ritchie Robertson (Oxford: Legenda, 2005), pp. 45–71.

Scholem raises here, but he is sure of the craft that has gone into each story and their collective arrangement.<sup>132</sup>

Scholem holds unquestioningly that Yiddish is a language whose value is intrinsic and autonomous. This is matched by a guiding conviction that the Yiddish-speaking world of the Ostjuden is a dignified and legitimate expression of the spirit of Judaism, one which West European Jews can profitably observe. Scholem's criticism of Eliasberg thus shades easily from linguistic on to cultural and historical terrain. As Eliasberg commits one translation solecism after another, he also betrays, according to Scholem, a fatal ignorance of that important element in the culture of East European Jewry dealt with in many of the tales, Hasidism.<sup>133</sup> Their use of Yiddish, like their and the Sephardic use of Hebrew, witnesses to their authenticity as embodiments of an uncorrupted Jewish existence.<sup>134</sup>

The place of Yiddish in Scholem's work at this stage forms part of a wider criticism of contemporary German Jewry in both its assimilated and dissimilating or radicalised forms. To a degree, both he and writers like him, such as Buber, use shock tactics, being drawn as he admits to the Eastern Jews and Yiddish because they were subjects inspiring ambivalence, fear and rejection, and conversely taking the measure of German Jewry against Jewish life in Eastern Europe.

In doing so, Scholem does not succumb to the temptation to simplistic sentimentalisation or idealisation of the Ostjuden as the bearers of a lost spirituality.<sup>135</sup> His approach to the issue of translating the documents of this culture is sober compared with the heady and, at least initially, floridly neo-Romantic work of Buber and those whom he influenced. If it is clear that the valourisation of Yiddish and serious engagement with its texts are part of a reaction against the prejudices of the German-Jewish milieu, there is in Scholem too much of the scholar to allow appropriation to dominate over accuracy. Where Buber, in his approach to translating from Yiddish, is prepared to alter the original for the sake of making it more comprehensible, Scholem condemns nearly all such changes as concessions. The idea that guides Buber's retelling of Hasidic legend

132 Each story is, according to Scholem, a “*goma shlemah*” (a divine perfection) (Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 17/p. 497).

133 *Ibid.*, 17/p. 498.

134 Cf. Brenner, *Renaissance of Jewish Culture*, pp. 136–137, 185.

135 A classic instance of this misty idealisation would be Arnold Zweig's *Das ostjüdische Antlitz, in Herkunft und Zukunft. Zwei Essays zum Schicksal eines Volkes* (Wien: Phaidon, 1929), pp. 5–161. Cf. Sander Gilman, “The Rediscovery of Eastern Jews: German Jews in the East, 1890–1918”, in *Jews and Germans from 1860 to 1933: The Problematic Symbiosis*, ed. by David Bronsen (Heidelberg: Winter, 1979), pp. 338–342; Bernd Hüppauf, “I have travelled to the Jews: Encounters of German Writers with Eastern Jews”, in *From the Emancipation to the Holocaust: Essays on Jewish literature and history in Central Europe*, ed. Konrad Kwiet (Kensington, New South Wales: University of New South Wales, Faculty of Arts, 1987), pp. 103–126.

also animates his attitude to rendering Yiddish, and it is not by chance that the two emerge more or less concurrently.<sup>136</sup> By contrast, Scholem's view of how Yiddish must be rendered all but precludes the notion of its being retold. The principles that emerge from his critique of Eliasberg militate firmly against the sacrifice of objective analysis and appreciation in the name of some pneumatic appropriation of the Yiddish-speaking world. The letter of this lore must prevail, not over the spirit, but as the only means of conveying it. The opposition between letter and spirit, literal and free translation, is thus already undercut. A straightforwardly literal approach to translation is complicated by the idea that the texts are compounded of German matter and Hebrew form or, in its most radical formulation, that they are already a translation of Hebrew into German. It is at this point, we might say, that the scholar merges with the cultural and linguistic Zionist or ideologue, yielding metaphysical as much as historical linguistics. Scholem understands the task of the translator from Yiddish as being to reproduce for the reader of the translation the original meeting of Hebrew and German, whose tension produced the difficult warmth that is in large part the distinctively original aspect of these works. Depending on the readership, achieving this will entail different use of the sources, in order to recover a sufficiently direct relationship to Hebrew. Literalness on these terms will look unlike anything that has gone by that name before.

In describing Agnon's formative years, Scholem focuses on a dual inheritance of rabbinical learning and Hasidic piety, which in the Galicia of Agnon's childhood expressed itself in literary terms as the Hebrew promoted by the Haskalah and Yiddish, respectively. In the light of the essay on translating Yiddish, and the distinction drawn between the language's essentially Hebrew form and German matter, it is little surprise to find Scholem claiming that Agnon's "sense of form" (Sinn für Form) was better satisfied by Hebrew and that, having begun publishing in both Hebrew and Yiddish journals, Agnon eventually abandoned Yiddish and its "incomparable anarchic vitality" (unvergleichliche anarchische Lebendigkeit).<sup>137</sup> There was some sympathy for Scholem's approach. In a letter of 28 January 1917 to Buber, he expresses his delight at Buber's agreement with the essay on Yiddish.<sup>138</sup> He mentions in addition his regret that he had at the time not yet laid eyes on Max Strauß' translation of Agnon's *Und das Krumme wird gerade* (And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight) (Berlin, 1918), which he takes as a confirmation of his principles.<sup>139</sup> These principles evidently hold equally or at least mutatis mutandis for translation from Hebrew, something indicated in the essay itself, when he names Micha bin Gorion's *Sagen der Juden*

136 See Groiser, "Translating Yiddish", pp. 60–64.

137 Gershom Scholem, "S. J. Agnon – der letzte hebräische Klassiker?", pp. 94–95.

138 Buber, *Briefwechsel*, p. 467 (28.1.1917).

139 The claim recurs in a letter to Harry Heymann (Scholem, *Briefe I 1914–1947*, p. 65 [27.1.1917]). After this early enthusiasm, Scholem's correspondence goes on to document an increasingly critical view of Strauß.

as an example of a book which, “from a related sphere” (aus einer verwandten Sphäre), meets in the profoundest sense the demands adumbrated there.<sup>140</sup> In his notebooks, Scholem records how on the day after his critique of Eliasberg had appeared he received a telephone call from Strauß, offering him the Agnon translation to read in manuscript and claiming its consonance with Scholem’s position.<sup>141</sup> As well as recommending Strauß’ work, Scholem justifies having singled out the *Sagen der Juden* for praise, rather than the same author’s *Born Judas*, because in the former, especially in its first volume, “the sphere appears to be a metaphysically purer one” (die Sphäre eine metaphysisch reinere zu sein scheint).<sup>142</sup> The ultimately, if not exclusively, metaphysical pitch of Scholem’s attitude to translation is here openly declared.

For Scholem, the end of the encounter with Yiddish is more sharply critical than that envisaged by a number of his contemporaries. If he, too, holds up Yiddish and the culture of the Ostjuden as a mirror for German Jewry, it is not with the idea of thereby saving German-Jewish life in reinvigorated form. For the most part, Scholem was convinced that the symbiosis of German and Jewish worlds was a conclusively failed experiment, the choice now lying between complete assimilation and Zionism; more bluntly, between non-Jewish and Jewish solutions.<sup>143</sup> It is difficult not to see at least some justification for Eliasberg’s belief that what would most suit Scholem’s taste would be no translation at all, even though Scholem insists that this is not the case and could point to his own considerable translation work in support. Like other radical Jews of his generation, Scholem places extremely rigorous demands on the translator. As in the Bible translation undertaken by Buber and Rosenzweig from 1925 onwards, a higher form of literalism is seen as the means by which to expose the target language to the pressure of the foreign source.<sup>144</sup> This can satisfy the demand for something accessible and yet, within the terms of the target culture, linguis-

140 Scholem, “Zum Problem”, 17/p. 499. Micha bin Gorion [Micha Josef Berdyschewski], *Die Sagen der Juden. Mythen, Legenden, Auslegungen*, 6 vols (Frankfurt: Rütten & Loening, 1913–1927).

141 Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, p. 468 (14.1.1917).

142 Buber, *Briefwechsel I*, p. 468 (28.1.1917).

143 For later summaries of this position, which Scholem arrived at early and with typically rare clarity and resolve, see Gershom Scholem, “Wider den Mythos vom deutsch-jüdischen Gespräch”, “Noch einmal: das deutsch-jüdische Gespräch”, and “Juden und Deutsche”, in Scholem, *Judaica II* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 7–46; Scholem, “Zur Sozialpsychologie der Juden in Deutschland 1900–1930”, in *Die Krise des Liberalismus zwischen den Weltkriegen*, ed. by Rudolf von Thadden (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), pp. 256–277; repr. in Scholem, *Judaica 4*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 229–261.

144 Cf. Martin Jay, “The Politics of Translation: Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin on the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible”, *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 21 (1976), 3–24; Klaus Reichert, “‘It Is Time’: The Buber-Rosenzweig Bible Translation in Context”, (1993) in *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 169–185.



tically distinctive – in other words, for a translation, but one that at first shows itself such – as well as addressing the belief in a universal language whose eventual redemptive restitution translation anticipates and promotes.<sup>145</sup> Translations are to foster a culture in which they have the chance to become superfluous.

Scholem's criticisms of the attempt to render key terms (usually religious) of Yiddish culture into German, while correct, are not accompanied in the published texts by any suggestions as to how this might be done better. There are hints at a model of gradual approximation and paraphrase in German. For certain terms, the task of translation is conceived of as endless or even hopeless, and the rhetorical burden of his analysis tends to fall elsewhere, seeming to invite a pessimistic conclusion. Yet Scholem never says outright that translation is impossible. In his reply, he even asserts that impressive results may be achieved, if the foundational principles adumbrated in his essay are observed.<sup>146</sup> Moreover, he was himself responsible for a number of important translations, published and unpublished. We need think only of his rendering of Hebrew texts such *Shir Ha-shirim* as *Das Hohe Lied. Alt-Hebräische Liebeslyrik* (1915), selected *kinot* or "Klagelieder" (poems of lament) (1915–1919), the *M'oz tsur* and other texts relating to the *Hanukkah* liturgy (1918), Bialik's famous essay on Jewish law and lore, "Halacha und Aggada" (1919), as well as stories by Agnon (1920–1921), poems by Judah Halevi (1923), and the translation of *Sefer Ha-Bahir* that formed part of his doctoral dissertation and eventually appeared in 1923 as *Das Buch Bahir*.

In 1918, Scholem devoted three months to translating the expanded Yiddish version (published in New York) of a Hebrew memorial book for those killed defending Jewish settlements in Palestine during the First World War, *Jiskor – ein Buch des Gedenkens an gefallene Wächter und Arbeiter im Lande Israel*. Deutsche Ausgabe [*Yizkor – a Book of Remembrance for the Fallen Guards and Workers in the Land of Israel. German Edition*] (1918), his first – and, as he notes, anonymous – book publication.<sup>147</sup> When Rubashov initially approached him about this commission, Scholem reacted with interest, but also with hesitation. "His offer was tempting", he recalls, "yet I also had my doubts. I said to Rubashov: But how am I supposed to translate from Yiddish?" (*Sein Angebot war verlockend, aber ich hegte auch meine Zweifel. Ich sagte zu Rubaschow: Aber wie soll ich denn aus dem Jiddischen übersetzen?*)<sup>148</sup> Reminding Scholem of his essay on Eliasberg and his other relevant languages, Rubashov assures him that he is up to the task. Although his compunction about accepting appears to have been based on a sense that it was one thing to subject translations to

145 Most famously argued by Walter Benjamin in "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers", in Benjamin, *GSIV.1*, p. 9–21 (resp. 13–14).

146 Scholem, "Antwort", 36/p. 501.

147 Scholem, *Von Berlin*, p. 115. More information about the work's history is given in *Von Berlin* [rev.], pp. 99–100.

148 *Ibid.* [rev.] 100. The first sentence is added in the rev. edn.

scrutiny and quite another to translate, it is conceivable that Scholem havered for reasons not just practical, but also to do with principle. For the dispute with Eliasberg revealed a tension in Scholem’s thinking between a commitment in principle to translation from Yiddish and a methodological rigour that puts it in practice almost beyond reach.

Scholem requested that his name be suppressed on account of expressions of excessive militarism in some of the contributions to the memorial volume. The context of war which was seen to inscribe itself into his essay on the translation of Yiddish thus also figures in his first practical effort to render Yiddish into German. The European war that furnishes the essay’s metaphors of destruction – a bourgeois conflict matching a bourgeois confusion, battlefield and intellect similarly chaotic – is echoed here by the incipient war that was Palestine of the early settlements and particularly the Second Aliyah (1904–1914). Scholem’s Zionist convictions do not get the better of his anti-militarism, grounded in an immediate repulsion from the confusion of war in bourgeois Europe. The tone of patronising censure with which he later recounts this youthful act of conscience points only to the distance from which he was by then viewing the events of World War One and perhaps to subtle shifts in his attitude to military action in relation to Palestine-Israel, notwithstanding his prior and primary commitment to a religious activist conception of Zion and his involvement with Brit-Shalom (Covenant of Peace), the movement founded in 1925 in Jerusalem to promote a peaceful, bi-national solution to the Arab-Jewish question.<sup>149</sup> While the Zionist executive was troubled by strategic considerations vis-à-vis the Turkish authorities, Scholem’s distaste for what he calls the “bloodthirsty” (blutrünstig) excesses of political Zionist rhetoric on display here was surely inseparable at this point from his reaction to the unholy alliance of bad translation, bourgeois nationalism and war.<sup>150</sup>

A politics of translation in the emphatic sense attaches to Yiddish in Scholem’s early work. Just as linguistic chaos is to be kept from the translation of Yiddish, so ideological chaos is intolerable. In the figures of military destructiveness, analogically as metaphor or thematically as the celebration of political violence, both are anathema to the spritual and intellectual order, itself potentially revolutionary or anarchistic, whose realisation Scholem sought.

---

149 For background, see Biale, *Gershom Scholem*; Harold Bloom (Ed.), *Gershom Scholem* (New York: Chelsea House Pub., 1987); George Mosse, “Gershom Scholem as a German Jew”, *Modern Judaism* 10 (1990), 117–133; Rivka Horwitz, “Franz Rosenzweig and Gershom Scholem on Zionism and the Jewish People”, *Jewish History* 6 (1992), 99–111; “Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, ‘Ben Brit Shalom’ uven bet hamikdash: Hadi’alektikah shel geulah umeshihiut be’akevot Gershom Sholem”, in *Teoria veBikoret* 20 (2002), 87–112.

150 For “bloodthirsty” and the attempt to halt the publication, see Scholem, *Von Berlin*, p. 116/[rev.] 101.