

# Theolatriy and the Making-Present of the Nonrepresentable

## *Undoing (A)Theism in Eckhart and Buber*

*Elliot R. Wolfson*

University of California, Santa Barbara

*ewolfson@religion.ucsb.edu*

### Abstract

In this essay, I place Buber's thought in dialogue with Eckhart. Each understood that the theo-poetic propensity to imagine the transcendent in images is no more than a projection of our will to impute form to the formless. The presence of God is made present through imaging the real, but imaging the real implies that the nonrepresentable presence can only be made present through the absence of representation. The goal of the journey is to venture beyond the Godhead in light of which all personalistic depictions of the divine person are rendered idolatrous. Perhaps this is the most important implication of Eckhart's impact on Buber, an insight that may still have theological implications in a world where too often personifications of the God beyond personification are worshipped at the expense of losing contact with an absolute person that cannot be personified absolutely.

### Keywords

dialogue – Eckhart – ecstasy – Ḥasidism – Gustav Landauer – mysticism – realization – theolatriy

In *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania*, I chose as one of the epigraphs a relatively neglected comment from Buber's *Ich und Du*: "Even as the egomaniac does not live anything directly, whether it be a perception or an affection, but reflects on his perceiving or affectionate I and thus misses the truth of the process, thus the theomaniac . . . will not let the gift take full effect

but reflects instead on that which gives, and misses both.”<sup>1</sup> I elicited from this text a crucial term that framed my analysis of the apophatic dimension of several prominent Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century. In this essay, I would like to deepen my indebtedness to this dimension of Buber’s thought by placing him in dialogue with Meister Eckhart. The justification for this juxtaposition is obvious enough. As scholars have long noted, the three most important Christian thinkers to exert an influence on Buber were Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, and Jacob Böhme. The latter two Renaissance theologians were the subject of Buber’s doctoral thesis, “Zur Geschichte des Individuationsproblems” (1904), as well as several other essays, but it was the celebrated Dominican monk whom he proclaimed “the greatest thinker of western mysticism,”<sup>2</sup> an approbation that brings to mind Schopenhauer’s description of Eckhart as “the father of German mysticism.”<sup>3</sup>

Much evidence could be adduced to demonstrate that Eckhart’s appeal was pervasive in the environment in which Buber became of age intellectually. Indeed, we can say confidently that Eckhart served as the gate through which many German thinkers had to pass, a phenomenon that can be traced further back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as is attested by figures like Franz von Baader and Hegel.<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly, for European intellectuals, and especially the Germans, interest in Eckhart was part of the larger attraction to mysticism, which provided, in the words of Michael Löwy, an “alternative to the empty rationalism, materialism and positivism of bourgeois culture.”<sup>5</sup> Even more pertinent is Raymond Blakney’s remark that Eckhart was “credited with being the father of German idealism.”<sup>6</sup> There are many reasons to explain this but the most obvious is that in Eckhart we find the elevation of language to

1 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 164; *Ich und Du* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1974), 136–137.

2 Cited in Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 29.

3 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (Indian Hills, CO: Falcon’s Wing, 1958), 2:612.

4 Cyril O’Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 250–263.

5 Michael Löwy, “Romantic Prophets of Utopia: Gustav Landauer and Martin Buber,” in *Gustav Landauer: Anarchist and Jew*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Anya Mali in collaboration with Hanna Delf von Wolzogen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 65.

6 Raymond B. Blakney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), xiii. More contemporary with Buber, we think, for instance, of Heidegger, whose early study of Eckhart influenced his reflections on the nothing (*das Nichts*) and the notion of

an almost demiurgic capacity, coupled with distrust in the ability of language to disclose the nature of reality.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Eckhart's celebration of the soul as the locus of the coalescence of creation and incarnation, the instantiation of eternity within the temporal, became a cornerstone for the notion of the *anima mundi* and the privileging of the human as the microcosmic analogue to the macrocosm in many idealist and romantic thinkers.<sup>8</sup>

The young Buber was no exception to this trend. Thus, early on he remarked that a lexicon of German psychology cannot be brought into view "without drawing it out from Meister Eckhart page by page."<sup>9</sup> What he meant apparently is that the distinctively German understanding of the psyche could not be thought without taking into account Eckhart's idea of the breakthrough (*Durchbruch*) of the soul to the Godhead, the primal ground (*Urgrund*) or the abyss (*Abgrund*), where the disparity between Father and Son is transcended and the chasm separating human and divine is overcome.<sup>10</sup> As Martina Urban observed,

---

releasement (*Gelassenheit*). Previous works that have contributed to this discussion are John D. Caputo, "Meister Eckhart and the Later Heidegger: The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought: Part One," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 12 (1974): 479–494; idem, "Meister Eckhart and the Later Heidegger: The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought: Part Two," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13 (1975): 61–80; idem, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978); Holger Helting, *Heidegger und Meister Eckhart: Vorbereitende Überlegungen zu ihrem Gottesdenken* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1997); Sonya Sikka, *Forms of Transcendence: Heidegger and Medieval Mystical Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Bret W. Davis, *Heidegger and the Will: On the Way to Gelassenheit* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

- 7 See, for instance, the discussion of the arbitrariness of signs in Jere Paul Surber, *Language and German Idealism: Fichte's Linguistic Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 32–47.
- 8 Miklós Vassányi, *Anima Mundi: The Rise of the World Soul Theory in Modern German Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011).
- 9 Martin Buber, "Bücher, die jetzt und immer zu lesen sind," *Wiener Kunst- und Buchschau* 9–10 (1914): 7, cited in Martina Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal: Martin Buber's Early Representation of Hasidism as Kulturkritik* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 18.
- 10 For a discussion of this topic that takes into account the views of other scholars, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Patriarchy and the Motherhood of God in Zoharic Kabbalah and Meister Eckhart," in *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Ra'anan S. Boustan, Klaus Hermann, Reimund Leicht, Annette Yoshiko Reed, and Giuseppe Veltri, with the collaboration of Alex Ramos (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 1049–1088, esp. 1059–1075.

Buber was inspired by Eckhart's almost heretical transformation of Christian doctrine into an immediate relation of the soul to its divine primal ground. Eckhart's original treatment of the question of unity was seminal for Buber's reading of Hasidism. He would judge all anthological and scholarly presentations of Jewish mysticism according to their insights into the psychological reality of mysticism.<sup>11</sup>

Buber shared his fondness for the paragon of medieval German mysticism with Georg Simmel, who translated Eckhart's signature idea of the birth of the divine in the soul into sociological terms, viewing the soul as the "culture-creating" and "form-shaping reality."<sup>12</sup> Additionally, and perhaps even more importantly, Gustav Landauer's effort to restore the antinomian and anarchic impulse of the mystical was based, in great measure, on the experience of the spiritual birth of the individual elicited from Eckhart,<sup>13</sup> a motif that also

- 
- 11 Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal*, 18–19. The use of the adjective "heretical" is not without complication, both in Eckhart's time and through the centuries up until the present. Eckhart was accused of heresy by the church authorities of his time, since some of his ideas were deemed to be dangerous to orthodox dogma, but that is not conclusive proof of their dissenting or sacrilegious nature. Closer to the bone, as it were, is the observation of Blakney: "Eckhart was a breaker of shells, not as an iconoclast breaks them, but as life breaks its shells by its own resurgent power." Blakney, *Meister Eckhart*, xiv. See, however, p. xx, where the author writes about Eckhart "moving toward heresy, a heresy of degree if not of idea," and p. xxi, where he writes that the "passionate radicalism of his application of the dogma of the God-man" was enough to make "him a heretic, that is to say, one dangerous to the church as an institution." Invoking a distinction made by Wittgenstein, we would say there is a world of difference between bending the branch and breaking it. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. Georg Henrik Von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1, cited and discussed in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Ethics in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 241. Availing myself of the Wittgensteinian language, I would say that Eckhart was a master at bending the tree without allowing it to break. This might serve as a caution against the offensive use made of Eckhart, as we discover in the hands of some exponents of National Socialism, who saw in him the basis for their own nihilism and atheism. See Blakney, *Meister Eckhart*, xv.
- 12 Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal*, 18. See also Yossef Schwartz, "The Politicization of the Mystical in Buber and His Contemporaries," in *New Perspectives on Martin Buber*, ed. Michael Zank (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 205–218.
- 13 See the comprehensive study by Thorsten Hinz, *Mystik und Anarchie: Meister Eckhart und seine Bedeutung im Denken Gustav Landauers* (Berlin: Karin Kramer, 2000), and two essays by Yossef Schwartz: "Landauers Eckhart: Zur Säkularisation des Mystischen in der deutsch-jüdischer Kultur," in *Seelengrund auf Seinsgrund: Gustav Landauers Shakespeare-Studien und seine Übersetzung des Meister Eckhart*, ed. Stefana Sabin and Yossef Schwartz

had substantial impact on Buber's pre-dialogical *Erlebnis* mysticism.<sup>14</sup> Yossef Schwartz rightly noted that Landauer's phenomenological and historical interest in mysticism "relates almost exclusively to Meister Eckhart. It is Eckhart whom Landauer quotes in his writings although he also refers to a long list of other philosophical and religious figures."<sup>15</sup> In Landauer's own language: "The greatest of all these heretical mystical skeptics was our Meister Eckhart, who with tremendous methods, undertook something of which only traces can be found in Spinoza, and which Schelling—Kant's student and Boehme's heir—couldn't seem to manage five years later, namely bringing pantheism and critical epistemology into harmony."<sup>16</sup> Interpreting Eckhart in a decidedly pantheistic vein, Landauer understood his teaching that one can become God, or that the Godhead comes to be in the human soul, as corroborating the view that one can become the world.<sup>17</sup> That the world is to be discovered in oneself means that the individual bears the "expression of the community's desires,"<sup>18</sup> as Landauer explained in "Durch Absonderung zur Gemeinschaft," a talk delivered in 1900, published in 1901, and later incorporated into the second part of the 1903 edition of *Skepsis und Mystik*.<sup>19</sup> In the notes to his modern German translation of a selection of Eckhart's sermons from the Middle High German, completed during his incarceration in the fall and winter of 1899–1900 but not published until 1903, Landauer wrote that *Skepsis und Mystik* is a work that "comes back again and again to Eckhart."<sup>20</sup> The latter's emphasis on God's oneness with all human beings rather than select individuals is interpreted

---

(Berlin: Philo, 2003), 27–45; and "Gustav Landauer and Gerhard Scholem: Anarchy and Utopia," in *Gustav Landauer: Anarchist and Jew*, 172–190, esp. 176–183.

- 14 See the exhaustive analysis in Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber's Transformation of German Social Thought* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 49–82. See as well Löwy, "Romantic Prophets," 64–81.
- 15 Schwartz, "Gustav Landauer," 175.
- 16 Gustav Landauer, *Skepsis und Mystik: Versuche Anschluß an Mauthners Sprachkritik* (Münster: Büchse der Pandora, 1978), 47, translated in Schwartz, "Gustav Landauer," 175 n. 9.
- 17 Gustav Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings: A Political Reader*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Kuhn (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), 100. See Eugene Lunn, *Prophet of Community: The Romantic Socialism of Gustav Landauer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 130–131.
- 18 Landauer, *Revolution*, 105.
- 19 Landauer, *Skepsis und Mystik*, 47–48. See Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue*, 133 n. 21.
- 20 *Meister Eckharts mystische Schriften*, trans. Gustav Landauer (Berlin: Karl Schnabel, 1903), 246, cited in Lunn, *Prophet of Community*, 130.

as an articulation of the identity of the subject as the *Welt-Ich* in which the vectors of community, humanity, and divinity all converge. As Landauer put it, “The more deeply I go into myself, the more I become part of the world. . . . True individuality is deep, ancient, and everlasting. It is the expression of the community’s desires in the individual. . . . I am the cause of myself because I am the world. And I am the world because I am whole.”<sup>21</sup> The neoidealist and neoromantic conception of the self as microcosm fostered the simultaneously held beliefs in “individual self-determination” and “communitarian integration.”<sup>22</sup> On the basis of one’s own nationality (*Nationalität*), one works for the cause of humanity (*Menschheit*).<sup>23</sup> For Landauer, this is the essential message of Jewish utopianism: “like a wild cry to the world and like a voice that is hardly whispering within us, a voice that we cannot ignore tells us that the Jews can only be redeemed together with humanity and that to wait for the messiah, dispersed and in exile or to be the messiah of the peoples is one and the same thing.”<sup>24</sup>

In a 1901 lecture sponsored by the *Neue Gemeinschaft*, Buber echoed this sentiment when he noted that the feeling of community (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*), which arises from the unity of the I and the world, extends the inner commonality (*Gemeinsamkeit*) of the cosmos experienced in those sacred moments to the existential particularity (*Eigenheit*) of each being. In the endless unity of becoming, which is the universe, there is no incongruity between the general and the particular.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, the oneness of the whole is constantly being figured by the ever-evolving manifold. In the introduction to *Ekstatische Konfessionen* (1905), Buber thus described the breakdown of the barrier between self and other occasioned by the experience of ecstasy, the finite individual overwhelmed by the superabundance of infinity:

One cannot burden the general run of occurrences with this experience; one does not dare to lay it upon his own poor I, of which he does not suspect that it carries the world-I; so one hangs it on God. And what one thinks, feels and dreams about God then enters into his ecstasies, pours itself out upon them in a shower of images and sounds, and creates

21 Landauer, *Revolution*, 105–106.

22 Lunn, *Prophet of Community*, 154.

23 Gustav Landauer, “Sind das Ketzergedanken?,” in *Vom Judentum: Ein Sammelbuch* (Leipzig: K. Wolff, 1913), 253.

24 *Ibid.*, 254, translated in Schwartz, “Gustav Landauer,” 182.

25 Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue*, 57–58. See as well Lunn, *Prophet of Community*, 146.

around the experience of unity a multiform mystery (*und schafft um das Erlebnis der Einheit ein vielgestaltiges Mysterium*).<sup>26</sup>

It is worth noting that Landauer chose as one of the epigraphs for the aforementioned essay the oft-cited passage from the sermon in which Eckhart implored God to free him of God, a turn of phrase that has been called with an obvious touch of irony an “atheistic prayer.”<sup>27</sup> I will return to this theme subsequently, but suffice it here to note that even though Landauer does not analyze this statement, it hovers as the leitmotif over his entire discussion and it provides the ideational basis for his radical secularization of Eckhart’s mystical theology and the substitution of the paradigmatic humanity for a pantheistic conception of God.<sup>28</sup> In the same sermon, we find the explicit avowal of Eckhart, which is cited by Landauer as the epigraph of the first chapter of “Das Individuum als Welt” in *Skepsis und Mystik*: “My eternal birth includes the birth of all things, and it makes me the cause of myself and of all things. If I did not want to be, I would not be, and neither would there be any things nor God. It is not necessary to understand this.”<sup>29</sup> The final qualification indicates that Eckhart was well aware of the implicit danger of the idea he was promulgating, the dissolution of the boundary between the one who bears and the one who is borne, and thus it is not for naught that Landauer referred to Eckhart as the “great heretic and mystic.”<sup>30</sup> Eckhart’s mystical teaching is inherently heretical and skeptical,<sup>31</sup> insofar as he identified the soul as the ground of all things, even God, who is thus reduced ontically to the level of created beings, in contradistinction from the Godhead (*Gottheit* in German, *divinitas* in Latin), the ontological source of existence. One can readily see how Landauer took the words of Eckhart concerning the redemption of the individual through ecstatic and unitive knowledge—expressing thereby the deepest meaning of

26 Martin Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr, trans. Esther Cameron (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 4; idem, *Werkausgabe 2.2: Ekstatische Konfessionen*, ed. David Grosier (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2012), 52.

27 Sarah K. Pinnock, “Holocaust, Mysticism, and Liberation after the Death of God: The Significance of Dorothee Soelle,” in *Resurrecting the Death of God: The Origins, Influence, and Return of Radical Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Peterson and G. Michael Zbaraschuk (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 98.

28 Lunn, *Prophet of Community*, 153; Schwartz, “Gustav Landauer,” 174.

29 Landauer, *Skepsis und Mystik*, 1. I have used the translation in Landauer, *Revolution*, 94. See Schwartz, “Gustav Landauer,” 190.

30 Landauer, *Revolution*, 98.

31 See the passage cited above at n. 16 and compare *Meister Eckharts mystische Schriften*, 149, cited by Schwartz, “Gustav Landauer,” 175 n. 11.



Jesus's teachings—as support for his contention that divinization of self implies that the individual is one with the world.<sup>32</sup> Combining Eckhart's mystical pietism with Tolstoy's social pacifism, Landauer defined nonviolent anarchy as the rebirth of the individual in relation to the community so that the soul would feel like a “ray of the world” (*Strahl der Welt*) and no longer as a stranger (*nicht als Fremden*).<sup>33</sup>

Also pertinent is Fritz Mauthner's atheistic or godless mysticism, which in part was based on the earlier expressions of the apophatic limitation of language to depict the divine nature. Eckhart, together with Goethe, is upheld by Mauthner as the exemplar of one who affirms a mystical experience of the ineffable unity beyond the multiplicity of the world of individuation.<sup>34</sup> As Landauer summarized Mauthner's argument, language and the intellect cannot serve to bring the world closer to us or to transform the world in us; rather, as a “speechless part of nature” (*sprachloses Stück Natur*), the human transforms himself or herself into everything. Mysticism begins at this point of contiguity between the subject and the world.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Buber alludes to this very point in the few citations from Eckhart in his *Ekstatische Konfessionen*. The first is used as the book's epigraph, “Wordless is the one thing which I have in mind. One in one united, bare in bare doth shine (*Daz einez daz ich da meine daz ist wortelos. Ein und ein vereinet da liuhet bloz in bloz*).” Eckhart is here referring to the essentially speechless nature of the union of the soul and the One, both stripped of all form. The import of the text is made more explicit in a second passage from Eckhart cited by Buber in the introduction:

Now speaks the bride in the Song of Songs: “I climbed over all the mountains and all my faculties, till I reached the dark power of the Father. There I heard without sound, there I saw without light, there I smelt without movement, there I tasted that which was not, there I felt what did

32 Landauer, *Revolution*, 100: “Perhaps the deepest meaning of Jesus' teachings is reached when Meister Eckhart lets God, who is also the Son of Man, say: ‘I was human to you, so if you are not Gods to me, then you do me injustice.’ So let us see how we can become Gods! Let us see how we can find the world in ourselves!”

33 Compare the passage from Landauer's “Anarchische Gedanken über den Anarchismus” translated in Lunn, *Prophet of Community*, 137.

34 Gershom Weiler, *Mauthner's Critique of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 293; Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Editor's Introduction,” in Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*, xv.

35 Landauer, *Skepsis und Mystik*, 6. The passage is translated into English by Mendes-Flohr in Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*, xv. Compare the analysis of Mauthner's view on language in Lunn, *Prophet of Community*, 155–157.



not exist. Then my heart became bottomless, my soul loveless, my mind formless and my nature without essence." . . . When she says that she has climbed over all the mountains, she means a transcendence of all speech which she can in any way devise by her own faculties—until she reaches the dark power of the Father, where all speech ends.

Buber glosses the passage, "Being lifted so completely above the multiplicity of the I, above the play of the senses and of thought, the ecstatic is also separated from language, which cannot follow him."<sup>36</sup> He goes on to describe the function of language as the making of signs, or image-words, that relate to the world of multiplicity or what he calls the "sign-begetting plurality of the I (*der zeichengenernden Vielheit des Ich*)."<sup>37</sup> By contrast, language has no access to the "realm of ecstasy," which is the "realm of unity." In the ecstatic experience, the unity is not relative or limited by the other; it is a state of absolute and limitless solitude, the unsayable abyss that cannot be fathomed, the unity of the I and the world.<sup>37</sup>

The same theme is enunciated in *Sister Katrei*, an alleged dialogue between Catherine, referred to as Eckhart's spiritual daughter, and her confessor, who is modeled after Eckhart. Buber included sections from this text in the "Supplement" to his compilation and delineated it as being "ascribed to Meister Eckhart" (*Meister Eckhart zugeschrieben*).<sup>38</sup> The text was published in 1857 by Franz Pfeiffer as part of Eckhart's literary corpus, but doubts had been expressed by other scholars regarding the authenticity of this attribution. The recent scholarly consensus is that the treatise belongs to the Pseudo-Eckhartiana, that is, texts that transmit and elaborate on authentic Eckhartian teachings but were not composed by him or even committed to writing by a disciple directly transcribing an oral sermon.<sup>39</sup> Although uncertain of its

36 Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*, 5; *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, 54.

37 Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*, 5–6; *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, 54–55.

38 Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*, 153; *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, 208.

39 Dagmar Gottschall, "Eckhart and the Vernacular Tradition: Pseudo-Eckhart and Eckhart Legends," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, ed. Jeremiah M. Hackett (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 549–550. See also Franz-Josef Schweitzer, *Die Freiheitsbegriff der deutschen Mystik: Seine Beziehung zur Ketzerei der "Brüder und Schwestern vom Freien Geist", mit besonderer Rücksicht auf den pseudoeckhartischen Traktat "Schwester Katrei"* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter D. Lang, 1981); Raoul Vaneigem, *The Movement of the Free Spirit*, trans. Randall Cherry and Ian Peterson (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 149–152; Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 172–181; E. D. Sylla, "Swester Katrei and Gregory of Rimini: Angels, God, and Mathematics in the Fourteenth Century," in *Mathematics and*

authorship, Buber may have been inspired to include this text because of its citation in Landauer's "Durch Absonderung zur Gemeinschaft."<sup>40</sup> But perhaps even more pertinent is the reference to this treatise in Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, which is cited to substantiate the following observation: "Theism . . . places the primary source of existence outside us, as an object. All mysticism . . . draw[s] this source gradually back into ourselves as the subject, and the adept at last recognizes with wonder and delight that he himself is it."<sup>41</sup> The "pantheistic consciousness," whereby we revel in the awareness that "we ourselves are the kernel of the world and the source of all existence," is deemed to be "essential to all mysticism."<sup>42</sup> The selection chosen by Buber hits a similar note, emphasizing that by stripping itself of all images, concepts, and words, the soul becomes one with the Godhead beyond our capacity to imagine, know, or describe. As the female persona instructs her master, in a reversal of the expected gender hierarchy,

You should know that all that is put into words and presented to people with images is nothing but a stimulus to God. Know that in God there is nothing but God (*dass in Gott nichts ist als Gott*). Know that no soul can enter into God unless it first becomes God just as it was before it was created. . . . The soul is naked and bare of all things that bear names. So it stands, . . . as one, in the One (*So steht sie die Eine in dem Einen*), so that it has a progression in naked divinity (*nackten Gottheit*), like the oil on a cloth, which spreads and keeps on spreading until it has flowed over the whole cloth.<sup>43</sup>

Buber, like the thinkers I have mentioned and many others who could have been cited, undoubtedly read Eckhart as a subversive, who sought to lift Christianity above its parochial moorings, but in so doing planted the seeds of disruption and the potential for an atheistic transformation of the faith. In the third part of *Ich und Du*, Buber explicitly contrasts the dialogical reading

---

*the Divine: A Historical Study*, ed. Teun Koetsier and Luc Bergmans (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005), 249–272.

40 Landauer, *Revolution*, 98. Landauer considered Eckhart to have been the author of *Schwester Katrei*.

41 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2:612. This source is noted by Phil Huston, *Martin Buber's Journey to Presence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 65–66.

42 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2:612–613.

43 Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*, 156; *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, 210–211.

of the verse “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) with Eckhart’s mystical interpretation that extends the one-time historical event of the Word becoming flesh to God begetting the Word eternally in the human soul.<sup>44</sup> In the essay “Was ist der Mensch?” (1938), based on his inaugural lecture as professor of social philosophy at Hebrew University, Buber traced his idea of the realization (*Verwirklichung*) of God in the soul to the mystical transvaluation of Christianity whose fountainhead was Eckhart:

Since 1900 I had first been under the influence of German mysticism from Meister Eckhart to Angelus Silesius, according to which the primal ground (*Urgrund*) of being, the nameless, impersonal godhead, comes to “birth” in the human soul; then I had been under the influence of the later Kabbala and of Hasidism, according to which man has the power to unite the God who is over the world with his *shekinah* dwelling in the world. In this way there arose in me the thought of a realization of God through man; man appeared to me as the being through whose existence the Absolute, resting in its truth, can gain the character of reality.<sup>45</sup>

The position to which Buber alluded on that occasion was worked out most fully in *Daniel, Die Gespräche von der Verwirklichung*, wherein the authentic life is said to consist of the realization of the unconditioned unity in the conditioned world of human experience.<sup>46</sup> It is significant that the epigraph in the first two editions of *Daniel* (1913 and 1919), but removed from all subsequent editions, is from *De Divisione Naturae* by John Scotus Eriugena: *Deus in creatura mirabili et ineffabili modu creatur* (God is created in his creatures in a wondrous and ineffable way).<sup>47</sup> The original intent of the dictum conveys Eriugena’s signature idea that creation is a theophany of the outpouring of the hidden and transcendent God. Buber, however, reads the passage through the prism of Eckhart’s notion of the birth of God in the soul to confirm his idea of the realization of God through the self that is one with the world.<sup>48</sup> Consider the words from the final dialogue:

44 Buber, *I and Thou*, 133; *Ich und Du*, 102–103.

45 Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor-Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 219.

46 See Martin Buber, *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 15–40.

47 Martin Buber, *Werkausgabe 1: Frühe kulturkritische und philosophische Schriften 1891–1924*, ed. Martin Tremml (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2001), 183.

48 Huston, *Martin Buber’s Journey*, 107–108.

This I is the I of the world (*Dieses Ich is das Ich der Welt*). In it unity (*Einheit*) fulfills itself. This I is the unconditioned (*das Unbedingte*). And this I is set (*eingestellt*) in a human life. Human life cannot dispense with conditionality (*Bedingtheit*). But the unconditioned is written indelibly in the heart of the world. The sum of a life is the sum of its unconditionality (*Unbedingtheit*). The power of a life is the power of its unity. He who dies in the completed unity of his life, speaks from the I (*spricht das Ich aus*), which is not inserted: which is the naked eternity (*nackte Ewigkeit*).<sup>49</sup>

The heretical implications of Eckhart are drawn more explicitly in Buber's essay "God and the Soul," composed sometime between 1940 and 1943, and first published in 1945 in the Hebrew collection *Be-Fardes ha-Hasidut*. Buber begins that study by demarcating the distinguishing feature of mysticism as an "overpowering experience of unity" in which the duality of the "self-enclosed I" over and against the "self-enclosed world" is dissolved.<sup>50</sup> As he is quick to point out, however, in the mysticism that springs from the soil of theistic religions, there is the additional factor that

the mystic knows of a close personal intercourse with God. The intercourse has as its goal, certainly, a union with God, a union that not seldom is felt and presented in images of earthly eros. But in erotic intercourse between being and being as in the intercourse between man and God it is still just the duality of these beings which is the elementary presupposition of what passes between them. . . . It is the duality of I and Thou, both entering the reciprocity of the relation. . . . In other words, in this close intercourse that the mystic experiences, God, no matter how infinite he is comprehended as being, is still Person and remains Person.<sup>51</sup>

The original Hebrew better preserves the kabbalistic resonance of Buber's language: במגע קרוב זה שבו מתנסה המיסטיקן אלהים הוא אישיות—אף כי ישותו סוף ישות אין סוף.<sup>52</sup> In *Ich und Du*, Buber similarly argued, "What the ecstatic calls

49 Buber, *Werkausgabe* 1, 245. I have utilized, albeit with slight modifications, the translation in Huston, *Martin Buber's Journey*, 175–176. For an alternative rendering, see Buber, *Daniel*, 143–144.

50 Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, ed. and trans. Maurice Freidman (New York: Horizon Press, 1960), 185–186.

51 *Ibid.*, 186.

52 Martin Buber, *Be-Fardes ha-Hasidut: Iyyunim be-Maḥashavtah u-ve-Hawayatah* (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 1945), 98.

unification is the rapturous dynamics of the relationship; not a unity that has come into being at this moment in world time, fusing I and You, but the dynamics of the relationship itself which can stand before the two carriers of this relationship.”<sup>53</sup> In the aforementioned essay, Buber was willing to salvage the term “mysticism” by rendering it in accord with the basic premise of his philosophy of dialogue, viz., the individual may desire to merge with God, but the Thou of the divine confronts the I of the soul in such a way that it is not possible for the autonomous presence of the Thou to be effaced. Buber goes so far as to say that the difference is so unbridgeable that the mystic always remains a theist. The intercourse with God, no matter how intense and even erotically charged, does not entail the annihilation of the personhood of the divine.<sup>54</sup>

It goes without saying that the matter is more complex both historically and philosophically. I cannot endorse Buber’s assessment that no mystic ever thought of calling into question the personal character of the divine being, although I concede that in traditional theistic communities no mystic calls the personal character of the divine being into question without at the same time affirming its existence. From the specific case of kabbalistic praxis, we can deduce that the goal of the meditational path is to cleave to the nameless, but the only ladder to ascend thereto is the name. The state of conjunction achieved at the pinnacle of the contemplative ascent is predicated on the collapse of the discursive space of difference and the eradication of the dialogical distance between human and divine. Mysticism, as Buber eventually came to accept, does “not permit God to assume the servant’s form of the speaking and acting person, of a creator, of a revealer, and to tread the way of the Passion through time as the partner of history . . . so it forbids man . . . from really praying and serving and loving such as is possible only by an *I* to a *Thou*.”<sup>55</sup> Eckhart can serve as an illustration of Buber’s point: the apophatic rejection of theistic language engenders a mystical atheism that Eckhart marks as the “divine death” (*götlich tot*) wherein the soul finds its own uncreatedness (*ungeschaffenheit*) through assimilation into God’s uncreated image (*ungeschaffen bild*).<sup>56</sup> However, Buber’s criticism could be tempered by acknowledging that the atheistic component in the Eckhartian worldview emerges from and remains dialectically intertwined with the theistic underpinning

53 Buber, *I and Thou*, 135; *Ich und Du*, 104–105.

54 Buber, *I and Thou*, 182; *Ich und Du*, 159–160.

55 Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 50 (emphasis in original).

56 Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 145.

such that the unraveling of the latter necessarily brings about the nullification of the former. To free God from God, in other words, would require that the God beyond God be liberated as well from this very taxonomy of godliness, indeed from any delineation that is not subject to an uncompromising and seemingly never-ending denegation. To overcome is not to deny or to destroy but to surpass, which entails constant delineation of the limit that one perpetually exceeds; the surpassing invariably solidifies the threshold that has been surpassed. As Derrida argued with respect to Eckhart, inasmuch as the nothingness beyond God is “enclosed in ontic transcendence,” the negative theology “is still a theology and, *in its literality at least*, it is concerned with liberating and acknowledging the ineffable transcendence of an infinite existent.”<sup>57</sup> Or, as he put it elsewhere, the preface *hyper-* in the Neoplatonically inflected term *hyperousios*—in Eckhart’s own locution, the superessential being (*vberwesende wesen*)<sup>58</sup>—“has the double and ambiguous value of what is above in a hierarchy, thus both beyond and more. God (is) beyond Being but as such is more (being) than being: *no more being and being more than being: being more.*”<sup>59</sup>

Needless to say, Buber was not oblivious to the repercussion of the mystical ideal epitomized by Eckhart. Thus, subsequent to making his categorical statement that the theistic mystic never abandons the experience of God as person, he writes:

It is otherwise when mysticism, stepping beyond the realm of experienced intercourse, dares to deal with God as He is in Himself, that is, outside His relation to man, indeed outside His relationship to the created world. Certainly, it knows well that, as Meister Eckhart put it, no one can say of God what He is. But its conception of the absolute unity . . . is so strong that even the highest conception of the person must yield before it. The unity that is related to something other than itself is not the perfect unity; the perfect unity can no longer be personal.<sup>60</sup>

57 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 146; *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 217.

58 Meister Eckhart: *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke herausgegeben im Auftrage der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft*, vol. 3, ed. Josef Quint (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1976), 438 (Pr. 83); *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O’C. Walshe, rev. Bernard McGinn (New York: Herder & Herder, 2009), 462–463.

59 Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, 2 vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 2:158 (emphasis in original).

60 Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, 187.

After acknowledging that Eckhart's notion of God's hyperbeing involves an absolute unity to which the image of personhood does not pertain, Buber tries to salvage his orthodoxy by noting that

the mysticism that has sprung from the soil of a theistic religion by no means wishes to deny the personal character of God; but it strives to raise that perfect unity, that nothing any longer stands over against, above even the God of revelation and to distinguish between the Godhead abiding in pure being and the active God. . . . There, to that primal being before creation, to that unity above all duality, the mystic ultimately strives to return; he wants to become as he was before creation.<sup>61</sup>

The positing of absolute unity, which ostensibly dispels all difference, yields a duality in the very being of God—in Eckhart's terminology, the distinction between God and the Godhead. The former is the aspect of the divine that exists in relation to the world. At its most extreme theologically, this view generates the potentially heretical syllogism: if there is no world, there is no God, only the Godhead removed from all relationality and dialogic mutuality.<sup>62</sup> Unlike Landauer, who elucidated the notion of apophysis in Judaism by citing Eckhart's remarks concerning the "supernatural knowledge" (*übernatürlichen Wissen*) of God that comes by way of unknowing (*Unwissen*) and ignorance (*Nichtwissen*),<sup>63</sup> and the early Buber, who argued for a common mystical tradition underlying Ḥasidic religiosity, Meister Eckhart, and the Upanishads,<sup>64</sup> the later Buber accords a privileged status to Judaism. To be more precise, Buber argues that Eckhart and Sankara, respectively from the Christian and Indian perspectives, demonstrate that the mystical path leads to the enigma at the borderline of human consciousness: how does the impersonal Godhead, unnameable and unknowable, the being beyond being, become a person and assume a name? Incredulously, Buber asserts at this point of the argument, "Hasidism (and, so far as I can see, it alone) has undertaken to answer this question. . . . Here is one of the few points in which Hasidic theology goes beyond the later Kabbala in whose footsteps here too it walks, even if only gropingly."<sup>65</sup> In an even more stunningly ethnocentric tone, Buber opines, "In

61 Ibid., 187–188.

62 Ibid., 188–189.

63 Landauer, "Sind das Ketzergedanken?," 252.

64 See the letter from Buber to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, written in 1906, cited and discussed by Schwartz, "The Politicization," 213.

65 Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, 190.



Hasidism—and it alone as I can see, in the history of human spirit—mysticism has become *ethos*. Here the primary mystical unity in which the soul wants to be merged is no other form of God than the demander of the demand. Here the mystical soul cannot become real if it is not one with the moral.”<sup>66</sup>

Leaving aside the obvious absurdity of this claim in the history of religions,<sup>67</sup> and bracketing the more difficult question of whether the terms “ethos” and “moral” can be applied properly to Ḥasidism,<sup>68</sup> I want to keep the focus on the philosophical reasoning buttressing Buber’s parochialism. Basing himself on Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch, Buber argues that the Godhead, or the pure Being, the *Ein Sof* in kabbalistic nomenclature, is not impersonal, as in the case of Eckhart, but rather it embodies “the person in the paradoxical sense, the limitless, the absolute Person. Not the *tzimtzum*, the self-limitation, but the limitless original Godhead itself, the Being, speaks the ‘I’ of revelation.”<sup>69</sup> Although I do not think Buber’s explication is completely defensible, it is a fascinating inversion of what is usually assumed to be the explanation of the kabbalistic symbolism: the quality of personhood is applied to *Ein Sof* and not to its configuration in the imaginal body of the macroanthropos that emerges as a consequence of the self-limitation of the limitless. We do find in some Ḥasidic sources that the second-person pronoun *attah* is applied to the radiance of the infinite.<sup>70</sup> For the purposes of this analysis I will refer to a passage from Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Ḥabad-Lubavitch dynasty: “This is [the meaning of the liturgical formula] ‘Blessed are You, O Lord’ (*barukh attah y/hwh*); that is, we request that there will be the engendering (*hithawwut*) and emanation (*hamshakhat*) of the name YHWH from the aspect of You (*attah*), which is the light of *Ein Sof* that is exceedingly above the name YHWH, for the name YHWH instructs about the concatenation of the gradations.”<sup>71</sup> That the pronoun *attah* is assigned to the light of the infinite—in some other sources, it is related more specifically to the manifestation of that light in *Ḥokhmah*,

66 Ibid., 198–199.

67 Various scholars have discussed the question of mysticism and ethics. See, for example, Richard H. Jones, *Mysticism and Morality: A New Look at Old Questions* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004).

68 I took up this question of taxonomy with respect to kabbalistic literature more generally in *Venturing Beyond*. The questions I posed there are equally relevant to Ḥasidic sources.

69 Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, 196.

70 For instance, see Nahman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei MoHaRaN* (Benei-Beraq, 1972), 1:4, 5a; Meir Horowitz of Dzików, *Imrei No’am* (Jaroslaw, 1907), 81b.

71 Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Torah* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1996), Balaq, 70d.

the divine wisdom<sup>72</sup>—is meant to underscore the concurrent concealment of the infinite and its omnipresence, a concomitance that yields the cosmological paradox: God is present in the world from which God is absent. Expressed somewhat more technically, the finite is consubstantial with the insubstantiality of the infinite and hence the divine is transcendent as the immanence of the transcendence that is immanent in its transcendence.<sup>73</sup> On occasion, Shneur Zalman went so far as to say that the second-person pronoun demarcates the substance (*mahut*) and essence (*ašmut*) of the infinite.<sup>74</sup> The essence is a presence that cannot be personified—indeed, in Ḥabad thought the essence is a linguistic signpost that points to that which has no essence—but it is referred to as “you,” an honorific address to the disclosure of the light beyond disclosure, the nameless that is beyond the most sacred of divine names.<sup>75</sup> As was his wont, Menaḥem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh rebbe, distilled the dense idea cogently:

72 Ibid., Emor, 38c. See also Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Seder Tefillot mi-kol ha-Shanah* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1986), 39c. In that context, the word *attah* is said to have three referents: *Malkhut*, *Ḥesed*, and *Ḥokhmah*. Concerning the last of these symbolic meanings, he writes: “Since *Ḥokhmah* is the aspect of the beginning of the disclosure, it is called ‘you,’ facing one, but the aspect of *Keter* is called ‘nothing’ (*ayin*) . . . since it is the aspect of concealment and hiddenness.”

73 Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menaḥem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 78, 84, 88–89, 97–98, 105–106, 168, 213. My perspective is encapsulated in the assertion that “apophatic panentheism” presumes “a reciprocal transcendence whereby God and world abide in the difference of their belonging-together, indeed they belong together precisely in virtue of their difference” (91).

74 Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Torah Or* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2001), 27d. On Shneur Zalman’s teaching that the pronoun *attah* signifies the essence of the infinite (*ašmut ein sof*), see the following note.

75 Menaḥem Mendel Schneerson, *Torat Menaḥem: Sefer Ma’amarim Meluqaṭ*, vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Vaad Hanochos BLahak, 2002), 205, and see especially the interpretation of *attah har’eta lada’at* (Deut 4:35) attributed to Shneur Zalman, and the other references to this teaching in the works of Yosef Yišḥaq Schneersohn cited there in n. 34. According to the Alter Rebbe’s interpretation, *attah* refers to the essence when it is in a state of disclosure (*ha-ašmut hu be-hitgallut*). From that perspective the second-person pronoun can be considered higher than the third-person pronoun. See also Menaḥem Mendel Schneerson, *Torat Menaḥem: Hitwwa’aduyot 5746*, vol. 3 (Brooklyn: Lahak Hanochos, 1990), 477.

*Attah*—this applies to his essence and his substance, blessed be he, concerning which alone it can be said “you,” a term [that denotes] to be in the presence (*nokhah*), since he is found in every place . . . for even though “one does not know and he is not known,” even so, just as he is in his essence in the manner of “one does not know and he is not known,” so too he is found in every place. Therefore, it is possible to say concerning him “you,” the language of presence.<sup>76</sup>

Encapsulated in the assumption that the second-person pronoun is indicative of the essence and substance of the infinite is the fundamental dialecticism—the belief in the logic of contradiction in defiance of the law of noncontradiction<sup>77</sup>—of Ḥabad thinking: the hidden is most hidden when manifest and the manifest most manifest when hidden. *Ein Sof* is represented in personal terms precisely because it is beyond theopoetic confabulation—its substance is not an identifiable substance and its essence is not a discernible essence.<sup>78</sup> As I have portrayed the Ḥabad perspective elsewhere,

The ascent culminates in an atheological showing, the disclosure of the concealment that is beyond figurative symbolization, the essence of the Infinite, the utter transcendence that is so entirely removed that it is removed from the very notion of removal, insofar as removal itself implies something from which to be removed, but the way to this anthropomorphic and theomorphic disfiguration—the human that is not-human and therefore the God that is not-God—is through the configuration of the divine anthropos that is limited to Israel.<sup>79</sup>

76 Menahem Mendel Schneerson, *Torat Menahem: Hitwva'aduyyot 5712*, vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Lahak Hanochos, 1995), 78. See *ibid.*, 304–305. This theme is repeated on many occasions in Schneerson's teachings, of which I offer here a modest representation: Menahem Mendel Schneerson, *Torat Menahem: Hitwva'aduyyot 5712*, vol. 2 (Brooklyn: Lahak Hanochos, 1996), 27, 59; *Torat Menahem: Hitwva'aduyyot 5713*, vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Lahak Hanochos, 1997), 135; *Torat Menahem: Hitwva'aduyyot 5714*, vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Lahak Hanochos, 1998), 85; *Torat Menahem: Hitwva'aduyyot 5715*, vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Vaad Hanochos BLahak, 1999), 51; *Torat Menahem: Hitwva'aduyyot 5723*, vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Lahak Hanochos, 2007), 136.

77 Regarding this phenomenon, see the collection *The Law of Non-Contradiction: New Philosophical Essays*, ed. Graham Priest, J. C. Beall, and Bradley Armour-Garb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

78 See the section “Messianic Anthropos: Beyond Theopoetic Metaphoricization,” in Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 240–248.

79 Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 244.

In Buber's interpretation, *Ein Sof* emphatically is not impersonal; indeed, it is the absolute person, which must be marked by the pronoun *du*, the equivalent of *attah*. To be sure, absolute personhood also cannot be reified, but it is a person nonetheless, whereas the point of the Ḥabad texts is that the light of the infinite in its highest instantiation cannot be personalized, and even more so *Ein Sof*, the *deus absconditus*, which is more typically signified by *hu*, the impersonal pronoun. To cite from Shneur Zalman again:

The difference between “you” (*attah*) and “it” (*hu*) is known, for “you” instructs about the aspect of disclosure (*gilluy*), for the saying of “you” instructs about that which stands facing one openly (*le-omed le-nokhaḥ be-gilluy*), and the saying of “it” instructs about the one that is hidden and concealed (*mi she-hu nistar we-ne'lam*), and its substance is not known openly (*we-eino yadu'a mahuto be-gilluy*).<sup>80</sup>

Another anomaly in Buber's approach is that it is generally thought that the term *elohut*, which signifies divinity, is applied distinctively to the sphere of the ten emanations and not to the *Ein Sof*, the infinity beyond verbal, conceptual, and imagistic representation. Even those kabbalists and Ḥasidic masters who speak of the Tetragrammaton as the name that reveals the light of the infinite do so by embracing the paradox that the name discloses the nameless by concealing it. I will cite the example of the Lithuanian kabbalist, Solomon Ḥayyim Eliashiv, in order to shed light on what I find unconventional in Buber's approach. According to Eliashiv, the Tetragrammaton is designated the essential name (*shem ha-ešem*) because “the infinite shows itself (*ein sof ašmo mitra'eh*) through this name by means of its being garbed and unified (*hitlabbesho we-yiḥudo*) in the emanation.”<sup>81</sup> Or, as he puts it in a second context:

Thus his names are himself, blessed be he, for the light of the infinite itself (*or ein sof ašmo*) is revealed by means of the emanation (*ha-ašilut*) through the Tetragrammaton, blessed be he, and in the names and epithets that branch out from him, and he and his name are one. However, all of his disclosures in them are only for the sake of the generation and the existence of the worlds of creation (*ber'ah*), formation (*yeširah*), and

80 Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Seder Tefillot mi-kol ha-Shanah*, 39c.

81 Solomon ben Ḥayyim Eliashiv, *Leshem Shevo we-Aḥlamah: Ḥaqdamot u-She'arim* (Jerusalem: Aaron Barzanai, 2006), 42c.

doing (*asiyyah*), for if not for this he would not have been revealed at all, and he would have remained in the aspect of infinity as it was before.<sup>82</sup>

Eliashiv, following a passage in Ḥayyim Viṭal's *Eṣ Ḥayyim*,<sup>83</sup> repeatedly emphasizes that the world of emanation is to be distinguished from the worlds of creation, formation, and doing—the four worlds according to the traditional kabbalistic taxonomy—insofar as the first world alone can be considered a manifestation of the essence of the infinite, which is represented symbolically by the Tetragrammaton. This reflects a distinction traceable to the thirteenth-century kabbalists between the world of unity (*olam ha-yihud*) and the world of separation (*olam ha-perud*). The force of the mythologic, however, dictates that, even in the former, the realm of divine emanations, the nameless can be declaimed through the name only by remaining inexpressible.

For Buber, the mystery of *šimšum*, the delimitation of the limitless, implies that the Tetragrammaton, the primal name of the Godhead, dons the garment of Elohim, the name that denotes finite nature, an idea anchored in the numerological equivalence of that name and the word *ha-ṭeva* (both have the sum of 86). As enigmatic as this interpretation might seem, it is not irrational, according to Buber's utilization of the Maggid's teaching whence he generalizes about Ḥasidism. That is, the rationale is that the infinite Godhead contracts itself to make space for the other because it wants to bestow goodness on humankind, a quality that is plausible only if we presume that the Godhead is endowed with personal characteristics. Indeed, Buber goes so far as to identify YHWH as the absolute person, whereas Elohim is the impersonal. In his own words:

We stand here before a paradoxical activity that does not impair the absoluteness of the original divine. The distinction is not here, as in the mysticism of Sankara and Eckhart, between a "Godhead" resting within itself and an active personal God, but almost the reverse, between the original Godhead designated by the Tetragrammaton, that wants to impart Himself directly, and in order to do this accomplishes the limitation to Elohim, to creation. . . . Of the two Elohim is the impersonal figure of God . . . but here there stands, before and above this, the original

82 Solomon ben Ḥayyim Eliashiv, *Leshem Shevo we-Aḥlamah: Heleq ha-Be'urim* (Jerusalem: Aaron Barzanai, 2011), 5a. Compare Solomon ben Ḥayyim Eliashiv, *Leshem Shevo we-Aḥlamah: Sefer ha-De'ah* (Jerusalem: Aaron Barzanai, 2005), pt. 1, 160–161.

83 Ḥayyim Viṭal, *Eṣ Ḥayyim* (Jerusalem: Sitrei Ḥayyim, 2013), 3:3, 17a.

Godhead, the “Being,” and it is both at once, the perfect unity and the limitless Person.<sup>84</sup>

There is much with which to quibble—most importantly, the will that is attributed by kabbalists to the infinite is a will that is devoid of willfulness and to which ordinary causal agency cannot be assigned inasmuch as it is beyond the dyad of cause and effect—but for the sake of discussion, we will accept Buber’s presentation. What he imagines to be unique to Ḥasidism is the personification of the Godhead, the paradox of the limitless Person whose deeds and demands can be calculated by a moral standard. Again, to quote Buber verbatim:

The Godhead as the perfect unity, the God before and above creation, is at the same time the commanding God. For just as He is the kind One who creates the worlds to actualize His kindness; He is the great lover who has set man in the world in order to be able to love him—but there is no perfect love without reciprocity, and He, the original God, accordingly longs that man should love Him. . . . Everything follows from this; for man cannot love God in truth without loving the world.<sup>85</sup>

The triangulation of God, human, and world in this bond of love is the foundation for Buber’s ludicrous claim that only in Ḥasidism does mysticism become ethos.

In the afterword to *Ich und Du* added in 1957, Buber reworked this analysis, and for good reason, since it touches on one of the most vexing issues in the phenomenology of religion, the very issue that marks his transition from the mystical to the dialogical. Acknowledging that the “actuality of faith” (*Glaubenwirklichkeit*) requires that we apply to transcendence characteristics that derive from the realm of immanence, Buber writes:

The designation of God as a person is indispensable for all who, like myself, do not mean a principle when they say “God,” although mystics like Eckhart occasionally equate “Being” (*»das Sein«*) with him, and who, like myself, do not mean an idea when they say “God,” although philosophers like Plato could at times take him for one—all who, like myself, mean by “God” him that, whatever else he may be in addition, enters into a direct relationship (*unmittelbare Beziehung*) to us human beings through creative, revelatory, and redemptive acts, and thus makes it

84 Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, 195.

85 *Ibid.*, 198.

possible for us to enter into a direct relationship to him. . . . The concept of personhood (*Personhaftigkeit*) is, of course, utterly incapable of describing the nature of God; but it is permitted and necessary to say that God is *also* a person (*Gott sei auch eine Person*).<sup>86</sup>

What do these words really mean philosophically? How can Buber assert, on the one hand, that the concept of personhood is incapable of describing the nature of God, and, on the other hand, that it is not only permitted but necessary to say that God is a person? To respond to this, we must step back and mention an important point made by Hermann Cohen, which I suggest is in the background of Buber's thinking. Cohen maintained that the application of personhood to the divine actuality not only does not result in ascribing an image to God, but, quite the contrary, it is the very gesture that precludes representation and hence safeguards the faith against the incursion of idolatry. Moreover, since the human is created in God's likeness, the lack of representation that issues from the attribution of personhood to the divine is the criterion that must be applied to human subjectivity, that is, the dignity of the human self consists of resistance to objectification or reification.<sup>87</sup> Notwithstanding the validity of these assertions, Cohen's position needs to be interrogated on the theological and the anthropological planes. How is a conception of personhood meaningful if it is rid of all positive description and intentionality? To avoid objectifying the other is worthy of commendation, but the impersonal nature of personality that emerges from Cohen's conception seems hardly suitable psychologically or sociologically. Certainly, the theistic elements of the Jewish tradition do not support such a constraint on the imagination, as several critics of Cohen emphasized, including Altmann, Strauss, Guttman, and Buber.<sup>88</sup> Cohen himself remarked that the scriptural description of Adam having been created in God's image "very naively intends to give to myth a monotheistic coloring." Of course, as he goes on to say, there is no image of God and therefore the biblical account of Adam having been created in the image and likeness of God cannot be interpreted imagistically. What is intended by

86 Buber, *I and Thou*, 180–181; *Ich und Du*, 158.

87 Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 57; *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kaufmann, 1929), 66.

88 See Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 21–29.



this notion is that in virtue of knowledge the human is the focal point of all becoming, which is the logical consequence of God's unique being.<sup>89</sup>

Cohen's philosophical exegesis notwithstanding, the notion of divine person problematizes the distinction he wished to uphold between image (*Bild*) and archetype (*Urbild*). To generate the personification of transcendence required by Cohen's own notion of divine compassion and goodness, which highlights a major discrepancy between religion and ethics, the archetype, the originary image whence all images originate, would have to be conceived imagistically. The classifications "archetypal thought" and "archetypal being" are not sufficient to accommodate the portrayal of God as person. That Cohen wished to burn the candle at both ends, so to speak, is evident from the fact that he assents to the psalmist's idea of the human being's longing to draw near to God, a longing impelled by and consummated in forgiveness, but he also proclaims that monotheism severs forgiveness from the "wholly mythological, original form of atonement."<sup>90</sup> I would counter that without the mythological—or perhaps mythopoeic—would be the more desirable term—the discourse about divine mercy and human longing is depleted of any spiritual gravitas.

Buber offered a similar critique of Cohen in the essay "The Love of God and the Idea of the Deity" (1943). Buber chronicles Cohen's attempt to get past the Kantian sublimation of God into an idea, the principle of truth instrumental in establishing the unity of nature and morality, by giving an adequate place to the love of God in the gamut of religious faith. Nevertheless, in Buber's estimation, Cohen could not get out from under the weight of thinking that experiencing God as a living personality is to place the divine within the confines of myth. Thus even in his last work, to preserve the Being (*esse*; *Sein*) of God, Cohen deprives the deity of existence (*existentia*; *Dasein*). God is designated by Buber as "absolute personality"—in a manner that is consonant with Cohen in spite of Buber's criticism—but this does not mean that God is a person, only that he loves as a personality and wishes to be loved like a personality.<sup>91</sup> Such a distinction, however, is not defensible; one cannot credibly speak of a reciprocal love between God and human if the notion of personhood is used equivocally. Buber is right to insist that not only was Cohen's identification of the God of Abraham and the God of the philosophers doomed to fail, it also demonstrates that the rational purification of monotheism of all images leads

89 Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 86; *Religion der Vernunft*, 100.

90 Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 212–214; *Religion der Vernunft*, 248–250.

91 Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), 53–61.

to the abstraction that is the greatest imaginative fabrication: “For the idea of God, that masterpiece of man’s construction, is only the image of images, the most lofty of all the images by which man imagines the imageless God.” To love God genuinely one must sense an “actuality which rises above the idea.”<sup>92</sup> But how can that actuality be encountered without succumbing to a metaphorical constellation by which it is reified even if that reification is of the subject that cannot be reified? Is this not what Buber meant when he mused that the “sublime melancholy (*erhabene Schwermut*) of our lot” is “that every You must become an It in our world?”<sup>93</sup>

One might counter that the eternal Thou is different insofar as the eternal Thou is the exclusive presence that is not describable, analyzable, or classifiable. In the third part of *Ich und Du*, Buber states clearly that the eternal Thou is an absolute presence that can never by its own nature become an it, an object subject to spatial and temporal conditionality.

Every You in the world is compelled by its nature to become a thing for us or at least to enter again and again into thinghood (*Dinghaftigkeit*)... Only one You never ceases, in accordance with its nature to be You for us. To be sure, whoever knows God also knows God’s remoteness and the agony of drought upon a frightened heart, but not the loss of presence (*Präsenzlosigkeit*)... The eternal You is You by its very nature; only *our* nature forces us to draw it into the It-world and It-speech. The It-world coheres (*Zusammenhang*) in space and time. The You-world does not cohere in either. It coheres in the center in which the extended lines of relationships intersect: in the eternal You.<sup>94</sup>

92 Ibid., 62.

93 Buber, *I and Thou*, 68; *Ich und Du*, 24.

94 Buber, *I and Thou*, 147–148 (emphasis in original); *Ich und Du*, 117–119. Buber’s depiction of God as the absolute presence encountered in the moment was developed, in part due to the influence of Rosenzweig, in the fifth of the eight lectures he delivered at the Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus in Frankfurt between January 15 and March 12, 1922. See Rivka Horwitz, *Buber’s Way to “I and Thou”: An Historical Analysis and the First Publication of Martin Buber’s Lectures “Religion als Gegenwart”* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1978), 36, 107–110. On the presence of God and the relation of time and eternity, see also Buber’s remarks in the seventh lecture (ibid., 131), and the relevant comments on Buber’s idea of the realization of God in the ever-present moment of revelation, which is compared to Nietzsche’s doctrine of “the eternal return of the same,” in Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue*, 118–119.

If we take Buber at his word, what does it mean to speak of God as person or to say that he loves as a personality? Is it not the case that all kataphatic theological discourse draws the eternal Thou into the It-world and into the It-speech? Are we not thrown back to a duality akin to Eckhart's distinction between the Godhead and God? Alternatively, does this not return us to Buber's earlier embrace of the notion of God's realization that presumably compromises the understanding of revelation based on a deity independent of human projection and thus renders him still guilty of atheism, as Rosenzweig tacitly assumed in the 1914 essay "Atheistic Theology"?<sup>95</sup> And here it is apposite to recall as well Buber's quip in his discussion of Scheler and Heidegger: "All theism is a variety of that conception of eternity for which time can signify only the manifestation and effect but not the origin and development of a perfect being."<sup>96</sup> The "irrefragable genuineness of mutuality" mandates that the other is "no longer a phenomenon of my I, but instead is my *Thou*."<sup>97</sup> In its utter irreducibility, however, the perfect being may not be any more attainable in its alterity than the all-encompassing One of the mystic—in Eckhart's phrase, cited by Buber in *Ich und Du*, "one and one made one" (*ein und ein vereinet*)<sup>98</sup>—unless we allow for imaginary configurations of the unimaginable that would involve dragging the Thou into the It-World.

The danger of the role of imagination in religious faith and the psychological need to picture God anthropomorphically appears to underlie the comment from Buber's *Ich und Du* with which I commenced these reflections: just as the egomaniac's infatuation with ego prompts him or her to misconstrue the truth of the process of perception or affection, so the theomaniac is so obsessed with the deity that he or she fails to grasp the nature of either the giver or the gift. In the *Eclipse of God*, Buber offers another way to express the dilemma:

Thus the personal manifestation of the divine is not decisive for the genuineness of religion. What is decisive is that I relate myself to the divine as to Being which is over against me, though *not* over against me *alone*. . . . He who refuses to limit God to the transcendent has a fuller conception

95 See Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue*, 180 n. 247.

96 Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 218.

97 *Ibid.*, 59.

98 Buber, *I and Thou*, 134; *Ich und Du*, 104. See also *idem*, *Between Man and Man*, 59, and the German *Die Frage an den Einzelnen* in Martin Buber, *Das dialogische Prinzip* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1986), 216.

of Him than he who does so limit Him. But he who confines God within the immanent means something other than Him.<sup>99</sup>

Like Cohen and Rosenzweig, Buber's dialogical thinking is rooted in the principle of correlation that preserves the separate identities of God, human, and world.<sup>100</sup> Buber, moreover, establishes a nexus between the present, presence, and relation to the other. To understand Buber's conception of making-present that which comes to presence without the possibility of representation that would coerce theistic belief to lapse into idolatry, one must consider the temporal compartment of the moment of encounter:

The present (*Gegenwart*)—not that which is like a point and merely designates whatever our thoughts may posit as the end of “elapsed” time, the fiction of the fixed lapse, but the actual and fulfilled present—exists only insofar as presentness (*Gegenwärtigkeit*), encounter (*Begegnung*), and relation (*Beziehung*) exist. Only as the You becomes present does presence come into being. . . . Presence is not what is evanescent and passes but what confronts us, waiting and enduring. . . . What is essential is lived in the present, objects in the past.<sup>101</sup>

Buber recognized that if the absence beyond the world were given as presence in the world, the religious imaginaire would acquiesce inevitably to the anthropocentric personification of transcendence. In a section near the conclusion of the afterword added to *Ich und Du*, which I cited above, Buber tackles this very issue, distinguishing himself from Eckhart and affirming that God is not merely an idea of Being but a person that is capable of a direct relationship to human beings through creation, revelation, and redemption. It is noteworthy that Buber invokes in that context Spinoza, commenting that in addition to the two modes that the philosopher identified as expressing God's infinity, nature (extension) and spirit (thought), a third should be added, which he designates by the idiosyncratic coinage “personlikeness” (*Personhaftigkeit*), a postulate that Spinoza, of course, would have found philosophically offensive.<sup>102</sup> Buber does not shy away from the paradox: God both is

99 Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 28. The reality of faith, according to Buber, means “living in relationship” to the “absolute Being” that one believes in unconditionally (31).

100 Buber, *I and Thou*, 143; *Ich und Du*, 113.

101 Buber, *I and Thou*, 63–64; *Ich und Du*, 19–20.

102 Buber offered a sustained critique of Spinoza in the essay “Spinoza, Sabbatai Zevi and the Baal-Shem” (1927), included in *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, 90–112.

and is not a person. The full scope of the discord with a linear logic of noncontradiction is appreciated when we realize that precisely because God is not a person can we speak of God as the “absolute person,” that is, the “one that cannot be relativized. It is as absolute person that God enters into direct relationship to us.”<sup>103</sup> Emulating the divine, every intersubjective relation is marked by the simultaneity of an unconditional inclusivity that includes exclusivity and an unconditional exclusivity that excludes inclusivity.

Let me conclude by turning to a passage in *Two Types of Faith* in which Buber noted a basic contrast between Judaism and Christianity with respect to the anthropomorphic manifestation of the divine. In Christianity, there is one permanent image by which the invisible is seen, the person of Jesus, who represents the human countenance of the Father; in Judaism, God appears in a plethora of visions but, since none of these persist, the divine “remained unseen in all His appearances.”<sup>104</sup> In my judgment, Buber’s assertion that the dialectic of concealment and disclosure is preserved more perspicaciously in Judaism than in Christianity is questionable, but for the purposes of this essay my disagreement will be bracketed. What is more important is the insight concerning the inevitable lapse of monotheism into polytheism and idolatry, a position that accords in part with Freud’s take on Christianity vis-à-vis Judaism in *Moses and Monotheism*,<sup>105</sup> a matter that lies beyond my immediate concern. Buber’s words are worth citing in full:

“Israel,” from the point of view of the history of faith, implies in its very heart immediacy towards the imperceptible Being. God ever gives Himself to be seen in the phenomena of nature and history, and remains invisible. That He reveals Himself and that He “hides Himself” (Is. xlv. 15) belong indivisibly together; but for His concealment His revelation would not be real and temporal. Therefore He is imageless; an image means fixing

103 Buber, *I and Thou*, 181–182; *Ich und Du*, 158–159.

104 Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith: A Study of the Interpretation of Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Norman P. Goldhawk (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 129.

105 Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson, Standard Edition 23 (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 88: “The Christian religion did not maintain the high level in things of the mind to which Judaism had soared. It was no longer strictly monotheist, it took over numerous symbolic rituals from surrounding peoples, it re-established the great mother-goddess and found room to introduce many of the divine figures of polytheism only lightly veiled, though in subordinate positions. . . . And yet in the history of religion—that is, as regards the return of the repressed—Christianity was an advance and from that time on the Jewish religion was to some extent a fossil.”

to one manifestation, its aim is to prevent God from hiding Himself, He may not be allowed any longer to be present as the One Who is there as He is there (Exod. iii. 14), no longer appear as He will; because an image is this and intends this, “thou shalt not make to thyself any image.” And to Him, the ever only personally Present One, the One who never becomes a figure, even to Him the man in Israel has an exclusively immediate relationship . . . not as an object among objects, but as the exclusive Thou of prayer and devotion.<sup>106</sup>

Monotheism, according to Buber, is not essentially a stance about the world, as is customarily believed, but rather the faith and piety that ensue from the “primal reality of a life-relationship.” It is because God remains hidden in the “exclusive immediacy” of this relationship that God is manifest in innumerable forms in space and time. To turn any of these manifestations into a fixed image is to subvert the prophetic truism that God is imageless. The eternal Thou is the “personally present One” that can never become a figure—this is the meaning of the name of God revealed to Moses, *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, that is, God is the supreme subjectivity that cannot be objectified, “the One who cannot be represented,” “the One who cannot be confined to any outward form.”<sup>107</sup> This “reality of faith” is opposed by the Christian belief that “assigns to God a

106 Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, 130.

107 Ibid., 130–131. Compare Martin Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998), 51–53: “As reply to his question about the name Moses is told: *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*. This is usually understood to mean ‘I am that I am’ in the sense that YHWH describes himself as the Being One or even the Everlasting One, the one unalterably persisting in his being. . . . It means: happening, coming into being, being there, being present, being thus and thus; but not being in an abstract sense. . . . YHWH indeed states that he will always be present, but at any given moment as the one as whom he then, in that given moment, will be present. He who promises his steady presence, his steady assistance, refuses to restrict himself to definite forms of manifestation; how could the people even venture to conjure and limit him! . . . That *Ehyeh* is not a name; the God can never be named so; only on this one occasion, in this sole moment of transmitting his work, is Moses allowed and ordered to take the God’s self-comprehension in his mouth as a name.” See *ibid.*, 117–118: “The saga of the Fathers . . . has something to tell of human figures, in which YHWH lets himself be seen. But there is nothing supernatural about them, and they are not present otherwise than any other section of Nature in which the God manifests himself. What is actually meant by this letting-Himself-be-seen on the part of YHWH has been shown in the story of the Burning Bush; in the fiery flame, not as a form to be separated from it, but in it and through it. . . . And it is in precisely such a fashion . . . that the representatives of Israel come to see Him on the heights of Sinai. . . . He allows them to see Him in the glory of His light, becoming manifest yet remaining invisible.”

definite human countenance” through the historical person of Jesus. “The God of the Christian is both imageless and imaged, but imageless rather in the religious idea and imaged in actual experience. The image conceals the imageless One.” From the Jewish vantage point, the paradox is kept intact: the image reveals the imageless One insofar as the immediacy of the latter entails that God hides and appears concomitantly, that is, the God that is revealed is the God that is withheld.<sup>108</sup> As Buber put it elsewhere, the religious reality of the encounter with the formless, which shines through all forms, knows no image or comprehensible object, but only the “presence of the Present One.”<sup>109</sup> It is for this reason that Buber suggests that the “critical atheism” of the philosopher, the “negation of all metaphysical ideas about God,” is “well suited to arouse religious men and to impel them to a new meeting. On their way they destroy the images which manifestly no longer do justice to God.”<sup>110</sup>

Buber avows nonetheless that in order not to succumb to the voice of nihilism we need to have recourse to the “images of the Absolute, partly pallid, partly crude, altogether false and yet true, fleeting as an image in a dream yet verified in eternity.”<sup>111</sup> Commenting on this passage, Strauss wrote:

The experience of God is surely not specifically Jewish. Besides, can one can say that . . . one knows from the experience of God, taken by itself, that He is the creator of heaven and earth, or that men who are not prophets experience God as a thinking, willing and speaking being? Is the absolute experience necessarily the experience of a Thou? Every assertion about the absolute experience which says more than . . . what is experienced is . . . an “image” or an interpretation; that any one interpretation is the simply true interpretation is not known but “merely believed.” One cannot establish that any particular interpretation of the absolute experience is the most adequate interpretation on the ground that it alone agrees with all other experiences, for instance with the experienced mystery of the Jewish fate, for the Jewish fate is a mystery only on the basis of one particular interpretation of the absolute experience. The very emphasis on the absolute experience as experience compels one to

---

See also Martin Buber, *Kingship of God*, 3rd ed., trans. Richard Scheimann (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1990), 105–106.

108 Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, 131–132.

109 Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 45.

110 *Ibid.*, 46.

111 *Ibid.*, 119.



demand . . . that it be carefully distinguished from every interpretation of the experience.<sup>112</sup>

Strauss proposed a hypothetical rejoinder on the part of Buber that the atheistic suspicion about the veracity of the experience of the absolute is as much a belief as the theistic endorsing of such an experience.<sup>113</sup> What is crucial for my analysis is that Strauss offered an incisive critique of Buber's paradoxical assertion that the images of God are, at once, fictitious and true, ephemeral and enduring. In fairness to Buber, Strauss did not pay close enough attention to the point we raised above concerning what Buber imagined to be the distinctive contribution of Judaism in realizing that every image is as much a concealment as it is a disclosure. From this standpoint, Buber would have assuredly consented to Strauss's admonition that no one interpretation of the experience is sufficient to account for all the other interpretations, a view that gestures hermeneutically toward the postmodern sensibility.

It is fitting to end with a comment of Alexander Altmann from his essay "The God of Religion, the God of Metaphysics and Wittgenstein's 'Language-Games,'" published after his death in 1987. From Wittgenstein Altmann finds support for his conviction that faith in God "denotes the factuality of a transcendent conscious Being the surrender to whose care makes all the difference in one's life. . . . The commitment is personal and it flows from faith in a personal God."<sup>114</sup> In a second passage, Altmann reiterates this central tenet of the phenomenology of religious experience within a theistic framework: "Belief in God is never a merely abstract affirmation of a Supreme Being. Invariably, it entails faith in the truth of a coherent series of beliefs, strung together by a concrete image of God. Without the total *Gestalt*, that image fades away."<sup>115</sup> While this image should not be understood in some "crude sense" as literal, it is still "potent and vibrant,"<sup>116</sup> and consequently cannot be viewed merely as metaphorical.

The Wittgensteinian motif of religious language-games as pictures could well serve as a summary of Buber's dialogical thinking: "To be religious is to live by pictures or, as we might say, by an inventory of images in which powerful ideas are concretized. . . . The images that form the texture of religious thought

112 Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 11–12.

113 *Ibid.*, 12.

114 Alexander Altmann, "The God of Religion, the God of Metaphysics and Wittgenstein's 'Language-Games,'" *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 39 (1987): 291.

115 *Ibid.*, 292.

116 *Ibid.*, 294.

are all related to each other and form a consistent whole."<sup>117</sup> Precisely because transcendence, when properly understood, stipulates the complete withdrawal from the phenomenalizable—what is given is the nongiven, the giving that exceeds the demarcation of givenness—we can grasp the function of religious intuition indexically as pointing the way to what is beyond the way—the sign that directs one to what is, logically speaking, insignificant. In the end, the line separating Buber and Eckhart is not so bold, although Buber himself distinguished between the earlier mystical and later dialogical stages of his intellectual development. Each, in his own historical moment, understood that the theopoetic propensity is to imagine the transcendent in images that are no more than a projection of our will to instantiate in form that which is formless. The presence of God is made present through imaging the real, but imaging the real in this case implies that the presence can only be made present through the absence of representation, otherwise the making present elides into reification of the presence as a representable object of the nonrepresentable. In that respect, the goal of the journey is to venture not only beyond God but also beyond the Godhead in light of which all personalistic depictions of the divine person are rendered idolatrous, even the depiction of what Eckhart called the superessential nothingness whose shadow is perceived as the nonbeing at the core of all being.<sup>118</sup> Perhaps this is the most important implication of Eckhart's impact on Buber, an insight that may still have theopolitical implications in a world where too often personifications of the God beyond personification are worshipped at the expense of losing contact with an absolute person that cannot be personified absolutely.

---

117 Ibid.

118 *Expositio sancti evangelii secundum Iohannem*, n. 20, in *Meister Eckhart: Die lateinischen Werke*, vol. 3, ed. Albert Zimmerman and Loris Sturlese (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1994), 17: "Res enim omnis creata sapit umbram nihili," rendered into German as "Denn an allem Geschaffenen spürt man den Schatten des Nichts." English translation in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 128: "Every created being smacks of the shadow of nothingness." I would modify the translation to "For in all that is created one can discern the shadow of nothingness."