

## AFTERWORD

### *To Pray After Praying/To Dance With No Feet*

*Raise a tent of shelter now  
though every thread is torn  
Dance me to the end of love*

*Leonard Cohen*

Jacques Derrida once wrote, “So, when this break, this interruption happens in the everyday life, on the exceptional moment of prayer, we are going back to the name, to the name of the name, a nameless name, or a placeless place... We don’t simply address someone, we pray to someone—God if you want, some unique one, to allow us to pray... It’s praying after the prayer—*prier après la prière*—which is the prayer before the prayer, the prayer for the prayer.”<sup>1</sup>

It strikes me that these words serve well as a summation of the philosophical-theological reflections proffered in Aubrey L. Glazer’s *Mystical Vertigo: Contemporary Hebrew Poetry; Dancing Over the Divide*. Apart from the immensely important significance of studying several contemporary Hebrew poets in light of the kabbalistic tradition, an effort that has the potential to transform both disciplines, this is a book that seeks in its deepest crevices to pray for the possibility of praying, to pray after all the statutory prayers have been uttered, a retrieval of the prayer before prayer, the poem within the poem that is the silence preceding and succeeding all speech. To elucidate this promise of prayer, which disseminates through the book like the light refracted and fragmented

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<sup>1</sup> David Shapiro, Michal Govrin, and Jacques Derrida, *Body of Prayer* (New York: Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, 2001), 61-63.

through a crystal prism, let me begin with the expression “mystical vertigo.” Glazer has been especially influenced in this regard by the statement of Alain Badiou, “dance is governed by the perpetual renewal of the relation between vertigo and exactitude.”<sup>2</sup> More specifically, Glazer appropriates Badiou’s locution to depict the nature of the mystical experience of nondual consciousness, the state of conjunction (*devekut*) with the infinite, which he links phenomenologically to touching.

We will return to the matter of touching later, and particularly the implication of the author’s penchant to cross out the word each time it is written, but first we must ponder the relation between vertigo and exactitude. How are we to think about this juxtaposition? On the most basic level, vertigo is a condition of dizziness brought about by a feeling of motion while one is in fact stationary. There is, however, a profounder meaning to be elicited from this movement at a standstill, the motion of immobility, the touching that is no-touching. Let us attend to the precise title of Badiou’s essay, “Dance as a Metaphor for Thought.” Badiou, of course, is in conversation with Nietzsche, who famously said that the noble education should consist not only of learning how to dance with one’s feet, but with ideas, words, and the pen. Elsewhere he wrote that dance instantiates the speculative ideal, and hence the determination of the philosopher is measured by the desire to be a good dancer. It should come as no surprise, accordingly, that the prophet of the new dawn of humanity, Zarathustra, described himself as possessing “dancing mad feet.” Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, in another aphorism, he confessed—perhaps with tongue and cheek—that he could only believe in a God who dances. I would humbly submit that we should only trust thinkers whose thought is a form of dancing, the brightening glance, to paraphrase Yeats, wherein we cannot know the dancer from the dance.

Simply put, to embark upon the path of thought set forth in *Mystical Vertigo*, one must take hold of the movement of dance. But how does one take hold of movement? Is it not the case, as Michel Henry put it, that *the thought of movement is not movement*.<sup>3</sup> Surely this should be the case with

<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, translated by Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 70.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, translated by Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 61.

a phenomenon like dancing, which is quintessentially movement. Perhaps the singularity of dance makes it impossible to speak about it, leading one invariably to the tautological judgment, *to dance one must simply dance*.

And yet, in the course of time, dance has served as an apt metaphor to depict the life of the mind and the creative endeavor of the human spirit. Let us listen more carefully to Badiou. Nietzsche's metaphor of dance for thought is related to several other critical images: the flight of the bird, the overflowing of the fountain, the innocence of the child, and the intangibility of the air.<sup>4</sup> To think of thought as a form of dance, one must combine all of these characteristics to invoke an intensification of movement that is like the wheel that turns itself, a circle revolving in space free of all gravity and constraint, the "mobility that is firmly fastened to itself, a mobility that is not inscribed within an external determination, but instead moves without detaching itself from its own center."<sup>5</sup> Exteriority and interiority are no longer a viable distinction, for within the circle there is nothing peripheral that is not central and nothing central that is not peripheral. Thinking that is worthy to be thought is a vertical movement stretching—indeed leaping—toward its proper height rooted in the ground whence it originates. The leap requires spontaneity and discipline, a liberating of the body that is concurrently a control of the body. In Badiou's formulation: "Dance offers a metaphor for a light and subtle thought precisely because it shows the restraint immanent to movement and thereby opposes itself to the spontaneous vulgarity of the body."<sup>6</sup>

Translating Nietzsche into his own philosophical idiom, Badiou notes that dance provides the metaphor "for the fact that every genuine thought depends upon an event. An event is precisely what remains undecided between the taking place and the non-place—in the guise of an emergence that is indiscernible from its own disappearance... The event 'itself' is never anything besides its own disappearance." To be sure, we have no choice but to affix names to events, but these names are naught but inscriptions placed "as if at the gilded edge of loss." The dance itself, by contrast, points

4. Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 57-58.

5. *Ibid.*, 59.

6. *Ibid.*, 60.

toward thought as event before it has received a name, “at the extreme edge of its veritable disappearance, without the shelter of the name.”<sup>7</sup>

Glazer cites these words of Badiou to depict his own notion of the immersion in the divine nothingness, the place and non-place of mystical apperception. The language of the mystic and poet alike is engendered from the unification or incorporation in the indifferent oneness of the infinite, the nihilating nonground where nothing and something are conjoined, the space of utter annihilation in relation to which everything is affirmed in its negation and negated in its affirmation. Mystical discourse and poetic utterance may be marked in Badiou’s terminology as the event that appears in its disappearance, oscillating between the presence of absence and the absence of presence, the emanation of light through its withdrawal, the occlusion of nonbeing that is the manifestation of being. From this language is woven the garment that is the name of the unnameable and unknowable essence that permeates and yet escapes all beings, the groundlessness above time and space that is the elemental ground of the temporal-spatial world, the pleromatic vacuum that is neither something nor nothing, but the not-being that continually comes to be in the ephemeral shadow-play of being, the void wherein everything possible is actual because what is actual is nothing but the possible, the sheltering-concealing wherein the real is what appears to be real, the clearing in relation to which being is no longer distinguishable from nothing, the matrix within which all beings are revealed and concealed in the nihilation of their being.

As I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> according to Yitzhak Maier Morgenstern, a key figure who has informed Glazer’s orientation, the goal of mystical piety is to ascend to this nothingness where emanator and emanated are conjoined. From this point, which is no point at all, the nonlocality of the pointless, one is absorbed in the infinite. Epistemically, being attached to this spot propagates the awareness that unification is discriminated through division, that identity is envisaged against the foreground of heterogeneity. This is identified, moreover, as the true

7. Ibid., 61.

8. Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 229-235. I have taken the liberty to repeat some of that analysis here.

intent of prayer, which is illumined by being compared to a dream that guides one contemplatively on the path that peaks with being bound to the light of *Keter*, the dark luminescence, where opposites converge in their opposition. Analogous to the dream, prayer draws one upward to the summit of the *scala contemplativa*, the place of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, where limitlessness and limitedness intersect and collude in the identity of their (in)difference, where nothing becomes something and something nothing.

The lowest rung of prayer involves the worshipper imagining a reciprocal relation to a transcendent other. However, as one mystically enlightened comes to understand, both the self of the former and the icon of the latter are products of an egocentric consciousness programmed instinctually to perceive reality from the standpoint of individual needs (at its best coalescing in the altruistic obligation to maximize the good for the greatest number). The psychological inclination translates theologically into the inexorable need to confabulate the divine in human terms. When conjured theistically, prayer ensnares one inescapably in a trap of metaphoricity, and hence, the face of the other, presumed to be incapable of representation, is shrouded anthropomorphically and anthropopathically. Even if the image of the face is meant to intimate an alterity that cannot be known or named, the “trace of *illeity*,” in Levinas’s telling terminology, the mind is still coerced to construct an image of the imageless. The acme of the ascent is an atheological showing, the apophatic venturing beyond the theopoetic need to configure the transcendent. But the route to this disfiguration, the facing of the face that necessarily cannot be faced, the contemplation of the meta/figure, the inessential essence that is (non)human, is through the veil of the divine anthropos/human imagination.

The ultimate purpose of worship, on this score, is to return language to the nothingness of infinity. Liturgical words lose their referential meaning, for in the infinite unity there is no other to be addressed dialogically, and, consequently, the mystical vertigo gives way to an apophasis in which the temptation to portray God in human terms and the human in divine terms is overcome. Let us recall here the following words of Meister Eckhart describing the ideal of detachment (*abegescheidenheit*) that brings about the kenotic state of releasement (*gelâzenheit*), which eliminates the dialogical distance between human and divine that makes prayer itself possible: “I say

that purity in detachment does not know how to pray, because if someone prays he asks God to get something for him, or he asks God to take something away from him. But a heart in detachment asks for nothing, nor has it anything of which it would gladly be free. So it is free of all prayer, and its prayer is nothing else than for uniformity with God... And as the soul attains this, it loses its name and it draws God into itself, so that in itself it becomes nothing, as the sun draws up the red dawn into itself so that it becomes nothing. Nothing else will bring man to this except pure detachment.”<sup>9</sup>

Eckhart has poignantly articulated the experience that Glazer refers to by the paradoxical phrase “touching and not-touching.” Of the different senses, the phenomenality of touch is distinctive, insofar as the interior and the exterior are not only contiguous but inseparable. In the touching that is no-touching, we advance even beyond this coincidence of subject and object, for there is nothing more to touch, not even nothing, and hence we are restored to the language before language, the name before the name, the event that is before any nominal fixation,<sup>10</sup> where being is crossed out, in Heideggerian terms, or placed under erasure in Derrida’s translation.

“In dance,” writes Badiou, “there is therefore something that is prior to time, something that is pre-temporal. It is this pre-temporal element that will be *played out* in space. Dance is what suspends time within space.”<sup>11</sup> Cast in Jewish eschatological terms, the pre-temporal may also be demarcated as the post-temporal, the messianic time that is the timeless moment, which cannot transpire temporally and therefore must always be capable of occurring (in)temporally. The messianic task imparted to the Jew—at once the source of elation and tragedy, the hope against hope, desiring the impossible possibility, that is, the possibility that escapes the very domain of the possible—portends the need to wait temporally for what cannot take place in time but which is nevertheless constitutive of the very nature of time, the advent of the (non)event, the occurrence of what cannot occur save in the nonoccurrence of its occurrence. Messianic

<sup>9</sup>. *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, translation and introduction by Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and Bernard McGinn, preface by Houston Smith (New York: Paulist, 1981), 292.

<sup>10</sup>. Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 61.

<sup>11</sup>. *Ibid.*, 61-62 (emphasis in original).

anticipation hinges on the paradox of preparing for the future that is already present as the present that is always future, the *tomorrow that is now precisely because it is now tomorrow*.<sup>12</sup> To live in that space where time is suspended, it may be necessary to journey beyond the poetic, leaping backward to see ahead, envisioning the visibility of the invisible rendered invisible in its visibility, expecting the past and recollecting the future. To occasion this leap, we will need to learn to dance again, albeit without feet, as the seventh beggar in the famous tale of Nahman of Bratslav. Just as that beggar was compelled to come by not-coming, so we are bound to pray by not-praying, praying the prayer before and after there is any prayer, praying for the possibility to pray. In this precarious moment of spiritual impoverishment, that alone should suffice.

*Elliot R. Wolfson*  
*New York University*

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<sup>12</sup> For fuller discussion, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 265-300.