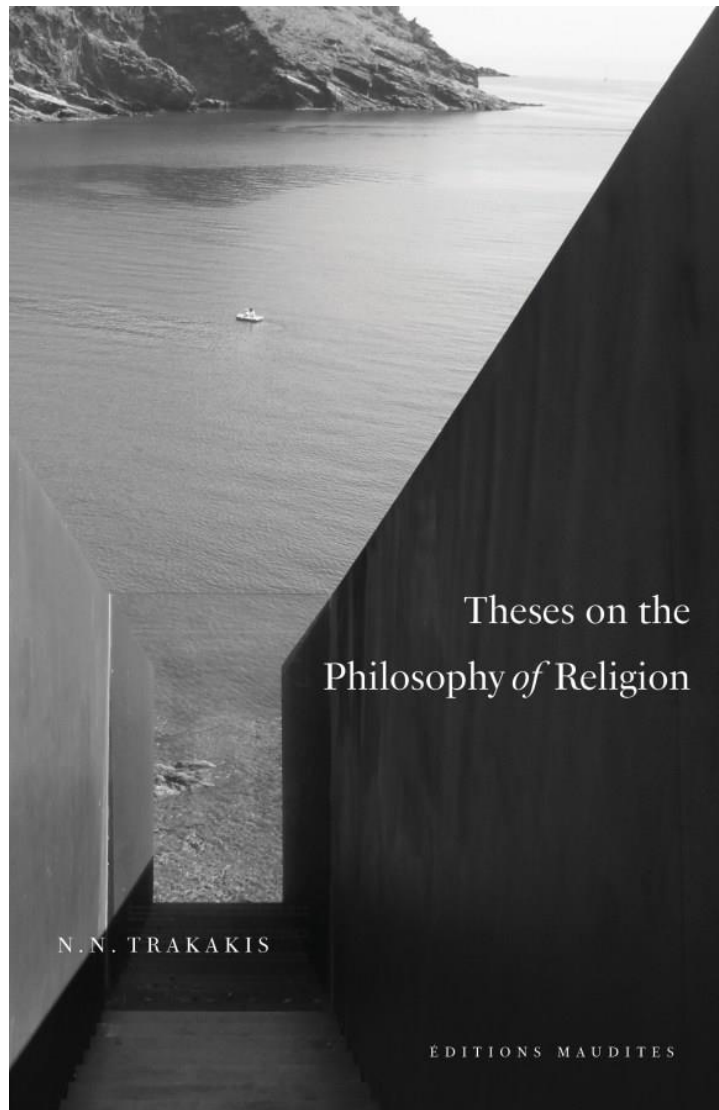


Theses on the Philosophy of Religion¹

Nick Trakakis



(Image credit: Walter Benjamin Memorial, Portbou, Spain © Sigrid Ehrmann)

XIV

If one of the central questions in the philosophy of religion is Why did an all-powerful, all-knowing and perfectly loving God create a world replete with suffering and evil?, and if by extension one of the perennial problems of philosophy is What is the meaning of it

¹ This essay is a series of excerpts from N.N. Trakakis's *Theses on the Philosophy of Religion* (Melbourne AU: Éditions Maudites, 2023).

all?, and if the answer to both is the same, that all attempts to vindicate God, or to find meaning and purpose in the world, have been abject failures, merely ways of mystifying and silencing (if not further victimising) sufferers, of rationalising and sustaining unjust structures, of surrendering to illusions of solace and consolation, reward and punishment, then as D.Z. Phillips urged, “what we need to do is not to revise theodicy, but to reject it.”² And if we embrace *anti-theodicy*, if we “return the ticket”, like Ivan Karamazov, questioning the underlying principles and presuppositions theodacists usually take for granted, or even the very conceptual and moral frameworks within which they operate, then new or at least neglected paths of pursuing philosophy open up, forcing us to rethink the nature, methods and goals of philosophy (and not only of the philosophy of religion), for as Strawson once remarked, there is no shallow end in philosophy,³ so that overturning a dominant and heavily ingrained approach to the problem of evil might well entail nothing less than a reconsideration of fundamental meta-philosophical questions, to the point perhaps where we are compelled to advocate for something that looks, to eyes narrowed by tradition, the very opposite of philosophy as pursued in the academy: *anti-philosophy*. This is not the conceit popularised and endlessly mourned late last century as the ‘death of philosophy’, which rightly raised Alain Badiou’s ire. Yet if an end is signalled it is not for nostalgic or reactionary reasons, but for revolutionary ones, for the sake of the birth or invention of a philosophy worthy of its name. As Badiou himself acknowledges, “Once philosophy’s stakes have been delimited, the pathos of its ‘end’ gives way to quite another question, which is the one of its conditions.”⁴ These conditions, for Badiou, consist of four domains of human endeavour or experience—poetry, mathematics, politics, and love—each with their own “truth-procedure,” and jointly providing philosophy with its material and methods, indeed with its reason for being. But conditions can also be conceived in less transcendental and more concrete terms, as the historical, economic and broadly socio-cultural contexts within which philosophy is practiced and institutionalised: if the university under the auspices of the neoliberal order is undergoing a grave and momentous crisis, this cannot but affect, if not imperil, the disciplines pursued therein, particularly humanities disciplines like philosophy, whose value is often reduced to their utility in the marketplace (“enrol now in Philosophy 101,” the marketing slogan runs, “and boost your career as a business executive!”), to the extent that the option of relocating philosophy outside outmoded institutional boundaries is once again becoming a live and urgent one, a unique opportunity to make a tiger’s leap into the past to rescue

² D.Z. Phillips, “Theism without Theodicy”, in Stephen T. Davis (ed.), *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p.152.

³ P.F. Strawson, *Analysis and Metaphysics: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.vii.

⁴ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), p.31. See also Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2008).

and rejuvenate a less professionalised and specialised, a more experiential and experimental, form of philosophy, of the kind championed by many of the historical greats who never held a university post, from Spinoza and Leibniz to Sartre and Beauvoir. From anti-theodicy, then, we arrive at *anti-university*.

XVI

Philosophy offers an antidote to melancholy.
And many still believe in the *depth* of philosophy!

– E.M. Cioran, *All Gall Is Divided*

Wearing an oatmeal-coloured Prince of Wales check suit, bought on a recent trip to London when passing through Jermyn Street, sporting a brushed-back ponytail and well-groomed beard, he focused on the camera in front of him, smiled broadly and, upon the announcement of “Action!”, began to profess the philosophy he would be advocating as the university’s newly appointed Professor of Human Flourishing in its world-renowned Apeiron Institute:

Mistrust is much more demanding than trust, because it is exhausting to always be on the lookout, to constantly be supervising your actions and those of others, hunting for signs that their intentions are on a collision course with your desires. And so on the epistemological view I defend, faith and knowledge are our starting-point for thinking about rational belief and rational inquiry. What we know, the things we have faith in, constitute our evidence. We should believe other things, we should be confident about other things, to the extent that they are supported by what we know and trust, to the extent that what we know and trust makes them probable. But what do I know? What are my starting-points for inquiry? Here I defend the infallibilist view: I know those propositions which are certain for me. And which are these? Here is a sample:

Eyes peered out of the branches and were gone.

Your love is stored in buckets which you pour over my head.

Belief is a kind of weather.

Azure hoplia cockchafer, the caddisworm,
the bee-louse, blister beetle, assassin bug
The recriminations swarm around sunset.

Something could come in through my ear and come out through my eyes...

As I watch him rattling off one infallible datum after another for the remaining three minutes of the promotional video, taken down almost immediately after it was posted on the Institute's website and accessible ever since only on the deep web, I can see some of that bomb-ticking loneliness which sparked those calamitous events. For beneath the optimism he was advertising, an optimism seemingly as boundless as the fame and ambition of the Institute which had recruited him from his alma mater, Harvard, I could now see how the transition from the moist and misty autumn evenings and soft and restful verdure fields of his northern homeland to the noisy southern sun, the sun that *barren shines* through dry air and over stony landscapes, could have made his pasty body glow like gold, burning it so fiercely as to leave nothing inside, killing every question, for the dazzling glare is not conducive to gazing luxuriously into the distance, towards the infinite, but bullies one into staring fixedly at things close at hand.

That's why all his certainties were full of passionate intensity, which in turn was why they were not worth a single strand of a woman's hair. He, no doubt, soon realised this. In the days and weeks after the video was recorded, he was nowhere to be seen, despite his many commitments to chair meetings and panels, to give classes and seminars. Rumours of all sorts spread through the hallowed corridors of the Institute: he listens all day to Japanese and Chinese podcasts, even though he has no knowledge of these languages; his distraught wife hasn't seen him for weeks, and encountering nothing but feigned concern from the police and his friends, now drives around the city streets at night, their newborn son strapped into the back seat, reassuring him that tonight will be the night when daddy comes home.

Late one night, having stayed back to finish grading a mass of student papers, the writing dismal, the thoughts stale and stupid when not plagiarised, I entered the lift and there he was: slouched in the corner, platinum-bleached hair, shirt and trousers torn and dirty, I only recognised him when he looked up at me with dead-fish eyes. He seemed to have some thought stuck in his mind, like gum in one's hair, and he couldn't get it out. And so I made the first move and asked the obvious questions: "What's happened to you? Where have you been?" He said nothing. A long silence. It was as if he was silently counting to ten. Backwards. Not to instil calm. But to unleash rage. Instead, in a dog-tired voice he said: "I see you are superstitious still. You believe in words. But words are like women: they are made to lie with." The lift doors opened and he made his way out. Shocked, I remained inside, as he turned around: "What do you think? Thought so."

Later I understood when I discovered that he was having all his knowledge drained out of him by whores in a high-class bordello.

In the end he made his way back home, not to his wife and child but to Los Angeles, where he was born. From there, without saying anything to anyone, he retreated to a trailer-park in the middle of the California desert. For four years, in a burned-down trailer with no electricity and no water, his only companions some stray dogs, he did nothing but write an autobiography consisting entirely of excerpts from other books. Yesterday he was found hanging from a tree outside his trailer.

This morning, his former colleagues had one last message from him sitting in their inbox. In parts it read:

I'm not sure about anything. I was never sure about anything.

We question, but the answer exists only as long as we don't know it.

"Curtains," he said, "are interpreters of the language of the wind."

I like exploring discomfort, 'mistakes', what happens when they are left in, incorporated. Silence is presumed to be a mistake, musicians think they have to cut out the negative space on an album, or we in a conversation. I've spent much of my life feeling like I was a mistake, that I needed to change in order to fit in.

J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage.

I know I ruined my life, but I have a body of work, and for that body of work it was worth ruining my life.

Would any man come down from his noose for this?

XVII

In her first book, *Woman's Estate*, published in 1971, Juliet Mitchell spoke of the highly charged revolutionary temper of those tumultuous times:

Women, Hippies, youth groups, students and school children all question the institutions that have formed them, and try to erect their obverse: a collective commune to replace the bourgeois family; 'free communications' and counter-media; anti-universities – all attack major ideological institutions of this society. The assaults are specified, localized and relevant. They bring the contradictions out into the open.⁵

⁵ Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.32.

As the reference to “anti-universities” indicates, one of the main targets of the counter-cultural movement of the sixties was the university—a centuries-old elitist and conservative stronghold with seemingly unchanging structures. An early attempt at demolishing the medieval monolith were the “free universities” of the 1960s, such as the Free University of New York launched in 1965, which paved the way for the Anti-University of London in 1968. The American psychotherapist Joseph Berke was closely involved in the establishment of both, and in April 1968 he explained the motivation behind these ventures as follows:

The schools and universities are dead. They must be destroyed and rebuilt in our own terms. These sentiments reflect the growing belief of students and teachers all over Europe and the United States as they strip aside the academic pretensions from their ‘institutions of higher learning’ and see them for what they are – rigid training schools for the operation and expansion of reactionary government, business, and military bureaucracies.⁶

The London Anti-University opened in February 1968, its campus located on Rivington Street, Shoreditch, East London, run from a building leased, appropriately, from the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. As Roberta Elzey has written, “the aim was to create an explosive, totally new, scene. This meant not being dependent on existing institutions or cliques for money, names or prestige. The relative insecurity of this paid rich dividends in freedom, new faces and a fresh perspective.”⁷ Self-organised along collective, democratic lines, and financially self-supporting (principally through modest course fees), the Anti-University also sought to transform teacher-student relations, which “were fluid, with students becoming teachers, and teachers attending one another’s classes.”⁸ In practice the “teacher” and “student” labels could not be so easily dispensed with, but this did not stop course offerings from being varied and topical (there were courses on art, poetry, black power, revolution, psychology and religion, and the underground media) as well as experimental and participatory. The teaching staff was also quite varied, and included distinguished radical thinkers of the likes of psychiatrist R.D. Laing, cultural theorist Stuart Hall, Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, and psychoanalyst and feminist Juliet Mitchell. Elzey states that “classes attempted to dissolve academic conventions and sacred cows,”⁹ one such sacred cow being the traditional system of grading and accreditation: there were no entry requirements, and no degrees awarded. The Anti-University, Elzey notes, sought to “provide an alternative to the contemporary

⁶ Quoted in Jakob Jakobsen, “The Antiuniversity of London: An Introduction to Deinstitutionalisation”:

<https://antihistory.org/deinsti>.

⁷ Roberta Elzey, “Founding an Anti-University,” in Joseph Berke (ed.), *Counter Culture* (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1969), p.233. (Roberta Elzey was Joseph Berke’s wife at the time.)

⁸ Elzey, “Founding an Anti-University,” p.244.

⁹ Elzey, “Founding an Anti-University,” p.245.

university, with its “battery student” gobbling information fed him to produce eggs for the system.”¹⁰

Initially the Anti-University flourished and attracted much attention, but its success was short-lived. As Emily Reynolds has written,

The dream, unfortunately, didn’t last long. By August, the project was evicted from its Rivington Street headquarters; in suitably chaotic fashion, the organising committee had not paid its bills. For a time, the group continued to hold classes. But the flats and pubs where meetings were held were too disparate, lacked focus; without the energy and stability of the campus, the Antiuniversity floundered and eventually disbanded in 1971.¹¹

Reynolds proceeds to report on the reincarnation of the Anti-University in 2015, under the moniker of “Antiuniversity Now,”¹² at a time when “the situation in Britain is even more dire: higher education is as exclusionary as it has ever been, an institutionalised system for upholding both academic and class hierarchy.” But it’s not just the university that is dead; the anti-university is dead too: many of its pioneering pedagogical techniques (e.g., flexible and student-centred learning) and course offerings have been appropriated by mainstream universities or adopted by the burgeoning adult education sector. Free and anti-universities no longer pose a threat to the educational establishment, and they arguably never did: they were simply too small, disorganised, poorly funded and ephemeral to even come close. This doesn’t automatically reduce these attempts at building a new kind of university to the dustbin of history, for as Jakob Jakobsen rightly notes, “The Antiuniversity raised an enormous amount of questions. In many ways that could be viewed as sufficient in itself.”¹³

Nonetheless the experiment, in a practical sense, did not succeed. And one of the reasons for the failure of the anti-university, both the London version and the other varieties tried elsewhere at the time, concerns its close alliance with radical politics. The year that London’s Anti-University was founded, 1968, was a time of great civil unrest, with students often at the forefront, as witnessed in the demonstrations and riots in Paris in May of that year. Revolutionary politics was not only an object of study at the anti-university, but was an integral part of its self-conception: the goal of the anti-university

¹⁰ Elzey, “Founding an Anti-University,” p.232.

¹¹ Emily Reynolds, “Inside the fight to make education radical again,” *Huck Magazine*, posted 25 November 2019: <https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/activism-2/antiuniversity-now-emily-reynolds-london-rivington-street/>.

¹² See <https://www.antiuniversity.org/about/>.

¹³ Jakobsen, “The Antiuniversity of London.”

was to bring about revolution. The way in which politics dominated the campus is illustrated well by Joseph Berke in relation to the Free University of New York (FUNY):

...the atmosphere was heavy with sights and sounds of world revolution. To the uninitiated, a first visit to FUNY was to be raped by a hundred Che posters, banners and slogans hanging from every conceivable corner. For those who didn't read the daily papers, scenes of mass slaughter in Vietnam, the Dominican Republic or elsewhere filled the air. The stench of gunpowder was almost overwhelming.¹⁴

How this contributed to the collapse of the very structures that the anti-university was in the process of constructing is indicated by Raimond Gaita in "To Civilise the City?", one of the most perceptive essays written recently on the fate of the university sector. Gaita writes:

Much of the student protest movement of the sixties, which many of my generation now romanticise as expressing an ideal period of university life, wanted the universities to serve the interests of the revolution or at least those of social justice. A concern with the intrinsic value of academic study was often scorned as intellectual masturbation. Even subjects in disciplines and sometimes whole disciplines were hijacked to serve the radical cause.¹⁵

As a consequence of this politicisation of the university, a longstanding, unworldly conception of the scholarly life, one that sees it as worth pursuing for its own sake, was dismissed and displaced by an instrumentalist view of education as serving the interests of revolutionary politics. This, however, only softened the ground for an even cruder form of instrumentalisation to take hold over the last few decades, placing universities, and indeed the entire education sector, under the sway of neoliberal economics, so that education is valued to the degree that it benefits the (largely market-driven) economy and contributes to the competitiveness of that economy. In both cases, the radical 60s and the neoliberal present, what has been missing is a shared vocabulary with which to articulate what it means to say that education has "intrinsic worth," that it is valuable "for its own sake," for the delights and insights as well as the responsibilities and obligations it affords, for the ways in which it enriches and challenges our lives irrespective of its exchange value, such as the wealth it might create for the community or the vocational advantages it might provide an individual. Gaita puts the matter well:

In the sixties the universities were vulnerable to the call that they serve the requirements of political idealism. They are now vulnerable to the pressures to serve the economic

¹⁴ Berke, "The Free University of New York," in Berke (ed.), *Counter Culture*, p.223.

¹⁵ Raimond Gaita, "To Civilise the City?" *Meanjin* vol. 71, 2012, p.74.

imperatives of the nation. In both cases their vulnerability has been partly a function of the fact that those who defended them, sometimes passionately, could rarely articulate a vision of the life of the mind that would move people to see something serious and deep where they had not seen it before. It went together with the loss of the concept of a university as something more than a high-flying institution, three stages past kindergarten, that excels at research.¹⁶

If the idea of the “university” has been lost, if as Gaita says “No institutions that are called universities – from the most to the least academically distinguished – think seriously of what they do under that concept,”¹⁷ then what should take its place? Perhaps this problem can be approached by analogy with religion, which of course has been undergoing a much more protracted crisis in the West. “I only hear,” Matthew Arnold lamented during the rise of religious skepticism in the Victorian era, the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of “the sea of faith.” By now that sea has completely receded, rendering the concepts of religion largely useless for the interpretation of the world and our lives, despite fundamentalist outbursts (which in fact only confirm the loss by overcompensation). For many religious people this is a deplorable sign of our decadent times, but for others it is a hidden blessing, even a messianic cessation, and a major Christian thinker belonging to the latter category is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In a now famous letter written from prison on April 30, 1944, Bonhoeffer introduced his enigmatic idea of “religionless Christianity”:

We are moving toward a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly describe themselves as ‘religious’ aren’t really practicing that at all, and so they presumably mean something quite different by “religious”.... [I]f our final judgment must be that the Western form of Christianity, too, was only a preliminary stage to a complete absence of religion, what kind of situation emerges for us, for the church? How can Christ become Lord of the religionless as well? Are there religionless Christians? If religion is only the garb in which Christianity is clothed – and this garb has looked very different in different ages—then what is a religionless Christianity?

Religion, like all concepts, is not a timeless, platonic form, but a contingent construct, its meaning and relevance subject to sociohistorical forces. In the midst of the violence and brutality of World War II—which ended up claiming the life of Bonhoeffer himself, at only 39 years of age—it was legitimate to wonder what place religious faith could have in a society in which all traces, all connections, with the life of Christ seemed to have been buried in the rubble of a war-torn Europe. But out of this wasteland, argued

¹⁶ Gaita, “To Civilise the City?” p.75.

¹⁷ Gaita, “To Civilise the City?” p.68.

Bonhoeffer, a new and more genuine form of Christianity can arise, one divested of its “religious” supports, such as its institutional framework (church) and metaphysical truth-claims (theology). This is a Christianity without religion, and some have radicalised this even further by advocating for a Christianity without God, a Christian atheism.

An argument along these lines can be made about the university and philosophy’s role in it. If the forms and conventions of the university are becoming as obsolete as religion, so that the notion of a “university” looks increasingly like an anachronism or merely a marker of prestige wielded for marketing purposes, this nonetheless provides an opportunity for developing other, more meaningful and imaginative, ways of practicing the life of the mind, just as the death of religion opened up for Bonhoeffer a more authentically Christian way of being in the world. One can only wonder what would happen to philosophy if it were loosened from its institutional shackles: just as religion makes no sense in Bonhoeffer’s secular world, so too the disciplinary boundaries that have all too often promoted territorialism and hyper-specialisation may come undone, allowing for a more holistic and dialogic conception of scholarship. When we no longer fetishise philosophy or its subbranches, the various “philosophies of...,” when we no longer circumscribe what we are doing as “philosophy,” as opposed to “science” or “art,” then we stand a chance, a small chance, of finally *philosophising*.

XVIII

History is made of missed encounters,
of lost opportunities
that leave the bitter taste of melancholia.

– Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*

A

Memories of Paris dissolved in the warm light bathing the canal and the facades in yellow and orange tones, as he made his way to the outskirts of town, eventually locating the redbrick house. He was shown in and went up the creaking stairs, carefully clambering at the same time over the unruly little bodies spread on the steps and poking fun at his oversized wig. He barged through the half-open door on the first floor and halted a few feet inside. Surveying the spacious room, softly lit and stuffy, he could make out an unkempt four poster bed with red curtains, two small oak tables, a chessboard on one and a bowl of gruel on the other, a bookcase bursting with manuscripts, a portrait on the wall. As he moved further in he caught sight of a thin, slovenly dressed figure crouched by the window at the far end, surrounded by all manner of strange-looking tools and

machines, which he assumed were for his famed lens-grinding work, forever helping others see. He was alarmed, however, to see that, rather than busily grinding and polishing, he was engrossed in two massive spiders battling one another in the glass dust. As one of these monstrosities sunk its fangs into the other, he broke out into guffaws, which he smothered upon sensing the gaze of the visitor. He rose slowly in a coughing fit, and after regaining his composure, he sized up the still-startled guest and, raising his long moustache and eyebrows but lowering his voice, as if spreading a secret, whispered: "*Conatus!*"

"Everything endeavours to persist in its being. We call that 'desire'," he continued, leading the visitor to a seat at a nearby table. The small, plump frame of the visitor dropped onto the chair, and after introducing himself, listing at length his inventions and achievements, his connections with dukes and archbishops, his cheeks and chins having reclaimed by then their ruddy glow, he removed his wig and began explaining the purpose of his visit. But he paused mid-sentence as soon as he noticed the aghast expression on the other's face, an expression unfailingly occasioned whenever he revealed his bald head, deformed as it was by a large protrusion, the size of an egg hatched by a Minorca hen. Infuriated, the visitor took out from his jacket a number of pages, every inch of which was covered in tiny script, and he started reading, almost in full volume, his nose almost touching the paper, as his host quietly took up a tobacco pipe.

"*Quod Ens Perfectissimum Existit,*" he began, in the hope that on this at least both men would be in perfect agreement. "*Calculamus!* If it is possible that God exists, then God exists." As he progressed from this self-evident starting-point into the more arcane and contentious reaches of his proof, he grew increasingly animated and would pace up and down the room, throwing his ungainly limbs about, vigorously announcing and expounding upon each new premise, only to go off-script to express some new opinion, then contradicting this with another, then offering a third that attempted to subsume the previous two but, failing miserably, he'd leap to an altogether different line of thought. At certain points he'd abruptly stop and turn to cast a scrutinising glance at the listless eyes of his host, who sat silent and still, encircled by a cloud of smoke, through which the guest suspected he glimpsed a sardonic grin. He continued, now circling his auditor like a vulture: "I will demonstrate that for any two perfections, *A* and *B*, the statement '*A* and *B* are incompatible' is not a necessary truth."

As the monologue proceeded, it would be punctured by short sharp coughs from the puffing auditor, and these only grew longer and louder as the proof neared its conclusion. And just as he was about to make the very last step in the proof, anticipating the crushing defeat of this "atheist Jew" (as the public labelled him) "whose defecated

erudition and studious abominations have been forged in hell" (to quote a scandalised theologian), and the longed-for applause and adulation of the scientific community, he was cut short by a counter-argument or counter-gaze, he could never remember afterwards what exactly it was, but he knew at that moment that he finally met his match, that he stood on the precipice of necessity, peering into his host's clear cold eyes, shot through with splinters reflecting and magnifying *himself*.

B

I was leafing through the battered diary, the one thing I have retained through all the upheavals and displacements, preserving within it the gestures and thoughts, the food and clothes, the friendships and loves, the streets and buildings, an entire way of living irretrievably lost. I made my way to July, and there it was, the sole entry for Monday the 16th:

I have met him, I have met philosophy itself!

The day before, I recall, was his birthday, as I discovered when the conversation turned to our age difference: eleven years, as it happens. It was one of those languid Frankfurt evenings, the air sun-stained still, but now cool and invigorating after a hotter than usual day. We chose a table outside, in a café near the Opernplatz, and waited for him—that is, myself and Friedel, my "father-confessor," as I jokingly referred to him, whom I had known since my gymnasium days, when we would meet at his home every Saturday afternoon to read the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Even that year, as I was finishing my doctoral dissertation, we continued to meet regularly, making our way through Hegel and Kierkegaard. And it was then that he told me about a new contributor to his newspaper, and how important it would be for us to meet, and so he had been trying for months to bring us together but could not get him to agree.

I don't remember much from our conversation that night, which lasted well into the early hours. Friedel, excited and as a result stuttering, excused himself and left early. I went on gazing at that medieval face with a thick moustache concealing voluptuous lips and unpindownable cares, the heavy, black round-rimmed glasses removed at frequent intervals to pose a battery of questions (assuming for some reason that the person he was asking, or interrogating, was far more knowledgeable than was indeed the case), only to reveal a pair of brooding blue eyes which all by themselves seemed to be singing, in a gently melodious dirge, all night long, silences.

Gretel unexpectedly joined us for a moment: our courtship had only just begun, and I don't know how she knew where I was that night. Perhaps she was coming from

the opera, for she was wearing an elegant velvet burgundy dress. I also recall a curious confrontation between them (I think they had already met once or twice): "Ah, a woman of Paris!" he exclaimed as she approached. She smiled, sat down, and without even acknowledging me, replied: "I like it when you look tired. You become very ethereal." For it was past midnight and we had been talking uninterruptedly. "You look like your ghost," she added, taking his long, firm, slender hands into hers. He drew back in horror, but she quickly sought to reassure him: "Ah! But a ghost isn't a corpse. It's a living thing, only it gets its body from its soul. It hasn't any unnecessary flesh; it doesn't get hungry, thirsty, or sleepy. And besides, what I find most poetic is that a ghost is not earth-bound. Wherever it may be, it is also somewhere else at the same time." They exchanged a furtive glance and she made off.

I remember his eyes softening, exuding a very French sense of sadness, as they traced her retreating steps. I also remember him saying afterwards that "every single second is the Strait Gate through which the Messiah might enter," yet we should not sit idly by but must "hasten the end". At the time I suspected he was seeking to recruit me to the crazed *dohakei haketz*, but now, two decades later, and a world away in a peaceful, prefabricated duplex at 316 South Kenter Avenue, I finally understand what he was saying.

C

Morituri vos salutant.

27 September 2023