

## Jacques Derrida

### A Kind of Writing *Avant la Lettre*: A Lecture on Mendelssohn\*

[5] I now come to the point about which I would like to talk about, [Mendelssohn's] translation of the Bible into German. In his last years, besides the translation of the Psalms and his *Jerusalem*, it is the *Sefer Netivot ha-Shalom*, the *Paths of Peace* which he translated the five books of the Torah into German but [printed] in Hebrew letters and with a commentary.<sup>1</sup> He intends at least two things: to return to the Bible in the purest form and teach German to the Jews to leave the Ghetto (comment). This is a rather complicated point. He wants to serve two languages at the same time but without mixing them. With regard to the controversial question of the sermon *more judaico*, he explains in a letter to Klein: "I would be rather hesitant to see [...] the Jewish-German dialect and the confusion of Hebrew and German be authorized by laws. I fear that this jargon has contributed a great deal to the immorality [Unsittlichkeit] of the common man. [...] pure German or pure Hebrew [...] But no confusion of the languages!"<sup>2</sup>

This translation of the Hebrew Bible into German, which had among other purposes that of spurring the Jews to open themselves to German language and culture, met with a very<sup>3</sup> lively opposition. First in the rabbinate of Prague as well as Hamburg. In some cases the reading of the translation was simply prohibited, reminding us for instance of the prohibition that the French Catholic church, I believe, or the Sorbonne (the former seminary, I don't remember anymore) put on the translation of the Bible into French that by the way represented Calvinism. Here if one prohibits the Hebrew Bible in German, it is at the same time a kind

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\* The translation is based on the typescript of the lecture number 9 in the seminar "Le Théologico-Politique: Nationalité et nationalisme philosophique" (1986-1987), given January 28, 1987. The typescript can be found in the archive of Jacques Derrida's papers at the University of California Irvine, MS C01 Box 19, folder 4 and the audio recording of the lecture MS-C001-A014 part 1 and 2. The translation begins at the top of page 5 of the typescript and page numbers are indicated in square brackets. All additions taken from the audio recording are referenced in the notes by the Roman number I or II indicating part 1, resp. 2 of the recording file followed by the hour, minutes and seconds.

of dehebraization one fears, a kind of reform movement that actually has a double dimension, a religious and a social one. A religious dimension because the text of the law ends up by translation to be dissociated from its letter. Now, we have already talked a lot about the stakes of this literality of this law.<sup>4</sup> We have done so, to begin with, in our reading of Spinoza and you will see in a moment that the phantom of Spinoza is quite present in these passages. A religious dimension, then, deprived of literality which has another meaning in the case of the translation of the Latin Bible into French. (Comment: God did not speak Latin; literality is not that of the law but of the acts of the Church.)

[6] But social dimension, too, because by way of education and rigorous religious reading one forced Jewish youth to learn German and familiarize themselves with the non-Jewish culture etc. The resistance was even more serious – and understandable – as the socio-political landscape of the period was marked by an offensive in terms of conversions of Jews (and around 1782, Joseph II issued what is called the Edict of Tolerance which, in a liberal style, invited the Jews to convert). All these questions, the one of tolerance in general, are abundantly treated in *Jerusalem*. Mendelssohn thus knows that his translation of the Bible is criticized by the Jews.<sup>5</sup> And as a brilliant strategist, he concludes that the resistance is so significant that it confirms the necessity and importance of what it resists, all the more so as the Jewish community, and even the Rabbinic community is divided and that this resistance is not homogenous. The rabbi of Berlin had given his authorization.<sup>6</sup> Mendelssohn is not surprised about this resistance that he interprets undoubtedly as a resistance against reason, progress, the Enlightenment. And I will return to the Enlightenment in a moment. Mendelssohn is not surprised, he even takes joy in a resistance that confirms the necessity and the meaning of his project, a project that consists in prying open a door, to cross a border by force. And when one crosses a frontier by force one encounters violence. To translate the Bible into German is to cross such a frontier in a violent manner.<sup>7</sup> He writes to rabbi Henoch, without doubt in 1784:

If my translation had to be accepted without dispute by all Jews, it would be superfluous. The more today's so-called sages oppose it the more it is necessary. At the beginning, I composed [this translation] for the man of the street [dalat ha'am, literally: the impoverished]. But I find it is even more necessary for the rabbis.<sup>8</sup>

This last precision sums up the essential, the most pointed essence of the enterprise. Why would the rabbis, and especially they more than others, need a translation from Hebrew into German? The rabbis don't need a translation at all, they would have to be the only ones or the first not needing a translation. The man of the street even if he does not know German well might also not know Hebrew well. He therefore might need this translation and this kind of commentary which is also a translation. But the rabbi? In principle, he knows the text well [7] in its so-called original language, in its original letter. So why and how can Mendelssohn say that his translation is "even more important for the rabbis"?

I believe one needs to contextualize this phrase<sup>9</sup> in the general debate of the Enlightenment, and the relation between what is called Enlightenment (reason, universalism, critique, belief in progress, teleology) on the one hand, and the meaning and the letter on the other, or the spirit and writing. While I don't insist heavily or even, without doubt, don't stress this enough, thinking that it goes without saying, you have well understood that my insistence since the introduction on Spinoza and the sessions on the translation of the Bible, my insistence on these questions of the spirit and the letter or the meaning, literal or non-literal circumcision etc., all this concerns – indirectly but certainly – the question of the Enlightenment, the *Aufklärung* (that of the eighteenth century or that called the new one of today) in relation to, or rather as it relates to the question of the letter. The letter in its opposition to, and difference with the meaning or the spirit. Remember what was said about Spinoza on this subject, Spinoza the philosopher of the Enlightenment in his own way.<sup>10</sup> Can one not say, without excessive simplification, that the philosophy of the Enlightenment, in its most critical regard, i.e., its most liberating, its most emancipatory as well, presents a particular stance against the letter in the name of meaning, the meaning being more thinkable, more universalizable, more rational whereas the letter risking being locked in singularity, i.e., empiricity, dogmatism, nationality, nationalism,<sup>11</sup> the body, etc. But you see well, and I believe this to still be the case for those who in the name of some new *Aufklärung* praise the transparent communication and believe so to be able to attack what they identify – falsely, obviously – as a thinking of the letter or writing [*écriture*], a return to the letter, i.e., a mysticism of writing [*écriture*]. These proponents of the new Enlightenment are like their ancestors of the eighteenth century<sup>12</sup> blind to what the letter can be, the structure of the letter and which does not let itself be grasped as this

opposition of meaning/letter, spirit/letter.<sup>13</sup> It goes without saying, I think, that what I was able to propose under the name of the trace, writing, etc. appears no longer in the register of literality the way it was possible to be determined during the period of the Enlightenment and does not fall under the rule of the opposition between letter and meaning or letter and spirit, sensual or corporeal exteriority of the literality and the interiority intelligible of meaning (Plato and Mendelssohn, the Platonism of the *Aufklärung*).<sup>14</sup> This opposition is thus fundamentally Platonist and it is no accident that Mendelssohn is in his own way a Platonist and that the Enlightenment [*Aufklärung*] is Platonist concerning this point; massively so. However, we need to differentiate. He is a Platonist of the Enlightenment [*Aufklärung*] only insofar as he insists on distinguishing between the intelligible meaning and the sensible letter – the former needing to be emancipated from the latter in order to free its universal, international, cosmopolitical content. The nation, and more specifically the language, being on the side of the sensible. It is undoubtedly a large and rough picture that I am sketching here, but I think it will resist the criticisms that can be made against it.

[8] This way it will turn out that the *Aufklärer* and Jew Mendelssohn belongs not only to a certain Platonist tradition, from this point of view, but more precisely to a Spinozist one; I think here of the Spinoza we have read, the one who, precisely in the *Theological-Political Treatise* when he opposes meaning to the letter, and sometimes in a very Pauline manner the spiritual inner and universal meaning to the law, to the literal sign, to the exteriority of the carnal circumcision, etc.

We will see in a moment what could have been the lineage Spinoza/Mendelssohn. For the moment, let us return to his remark: “At the beginning, I composed [the translation] for the man of the street but I find it is even more important for the rabbis.” My question was: why is it even more important for those who are supposed to know the text and the original language in which it was written rather than for others? To understand my question, it is more or less the same thing that we would ask someone who told a French person that it is important for them that we translate Baudelaire’s work into English. Why? Under which conditions can one tell a French person: “It is important that you read the English translation of Baudelaire”? What does that imply with regard to the experience of literature when we consider the texts of Baudelaire?<sup>15</sup> Well, without doubt to bring the rabbis,<sup>16</sup> like the man of the street, closer to the German language

and culture, but especially and more specifically because the passage into another linguistic medium, into another literality will, in the view of Mendelssohn,<sup>17</sup> emancipate and liberate a certain intelligibility of the meaning which will<sup>18</sup> demonstrate that it is accessible to all, i.e., universalizable, having no irreducible adherence to Hebrew,<sup>19</sup> therefore independent from the letter. One will finally understand what is in the Bible when one will have translated it. As long as one does not translate it one has too much [of] the letter by way of meaning, [and so the letter is] too much identified with meaning [rather than allowing for meaning to arise through signification]. Therefore, one understands the meaning better as such based on the task of the translation.<sup>20</sup> You see,<sup>21</sup> one understands it better as such, one understands it better as meaning of meaning, this here is *Aufklärung*. One understands better this<sup>22</sup> semantic content which can travel from one language to another, from one nation to another which is already like a citizen of the world. And I think one can say without forcing the issue that the subject of emancipation (in particular the one of the emancipation of the Jews) that belongs so clearly to the Enlightenment indicates [*signifie*] also and first of all, and is inseparable from, the subject of emancipation concerning meaning with regard to the letter. This emancipation is one that comprises the opposition meaning/letter that is obviously massively Platonist.<sup>23</sup> What I force myself not to multiply, if you allow me this type of remark, is what I interpret under the name of trace or *écriture* and what, I repeat it, does not belong any more to this oppositional logic, what can at the same time, simultaneously and without the least pertinence neither in one sense or another, appear to be either found in the camp of the Enlightenment or the camp opposed to the Enlightenment. And both are possible today.<sup>24</sup> (One does not lack any example. The debates with certain German philosophers, with Habermas in particular, are just about this. Sometimes one rightly says this still is obscurantist, this is still the discourse of the letter, of writing etc., then again one truthfully observes that it is not as simple as that. There is a critical merit on the side of the Enlightenment but what one does not see is that the so-called Enlightenment philosophy still is, from this point of view, for better or worse, Platonist. It lives in this opposition between meaning and letter.)<sup>25</sup>

As far as the affinities go, i.e., the lineage between Spinoza and Mendelssohn, one has numerous signs, especially in *Jerusalem* as we will see. In any case, his friend Lessing who has immortalized Mendelssohn<sup>26</sup> in the features of Nathan the Wise [9] admitted to Jacobi his Spinozism which

one translated in the best case as pantheism, in the worst as atheism, and Mendelssohn finds himself so at the center of the *Pantheismusstreit* which then made such a rage. And I believe<sup>27</sup> a comparative reading distilled from the *Theological-Political Treatise* and *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism* would be interesting and necessary, though I cannot engage in this here.

Of course, one should not make of Mendelssohn a simple Spinozist. He constantly denounced the errors of Spinoza, but these errors were in his eyes the price Spinoza had to pay for progress;<sup>28</sup> the progress he got philosophy to make, all being evaluated during that period, at the very least, among the actors in terms of regarding progress. What will lead to progress, what will not lead to progress?<sup>29</sup> This was the price to pay, and this price was that of the personal fate of Spinoza, its costs truly sacrificial, Spinoza offered as sacrifice in the battle for the progress of philosophy, the Enlightenment, and reason. The fact that the one sacrificed in this sacrifice was neither German, nor Christian, nor simply Jewish, that he most often had written in Latin, made him a sort<sup>30</sup> of a European or a citizen of the world, a cosmopolitan philosopher, and to publicize one's solidarity with Spinoza at this moment<sup>31</sup>, even if it was mixed with critique, to write an homage to Spinoza, now that was a gesture that involved a lot that, as you know, posed a risk to some.<sup>32</sup> This was the gesture of Mendelssohn. He wrote the following:

Let us always acknowledge that even some other than a German, I add further, someone other than a Christian, namely, Spinoza, has participated immensely in the work of bettering philosophy. Before the transition from the Cartesian to the Leibnizian philosophy could occur, it was necessary for someone to take the plunge into the monstrous abyss lying between them.<sup>33</sup>

Now, if we had the time I would very much like to compare this abyss to all the abysses of which Scholem speaks in his letter to Rosenzweig.<sup>34</sup> What has Spinoza done? He dived into the abyss because to go from Descartes to Leibniz there was no bridge, and the representation of Mendelssohn goes like this:

Here is a man who has sacrificed himself by throwing himself into the void, and the one who threw himself into this void was neither a German nor a Christian.<sup>35</sup> This unhappy lot fell to Spinoza. How his fate is to be pitied! He was a sacrifice for the human intellect, but one that deserves to be decorated with flowers.<sup>36</sup>