

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.¹ 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!"²

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 very³ 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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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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ He writes to rabbi Henoah, 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.⁸

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 phrase⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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,¹¹ 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 century¹² 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.¹³ 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*).¹⁴ 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?¹⁵ Well, without doubt to bring the rabbis,¹⁶ 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,¹⁷ emancipate and liberate a certain intelligibility of the meaning which will¹⁸ demonstrate that it is accessible to all, i.e., universalizable, having no irreducible adherence to Hebrew,¹⁹ 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.²⁰ You see,²¹ one understands it better as such, one understands it better as meaning of meaning, this here is *Aufklärung*. One understands better this²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ (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.)²⁵

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 Mendelssohn²⁶ 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 believe²⁷ 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;²⁸ 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?²⁹ 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 sort³⁰ of a European or a citizen of the world, a cosmopolitan philosopher, and to publicize one's solidarity with Spinoza at this moment³¹, 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.³² 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.³³

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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶

Imagine Mendelssohn, on the one side he faces the Leibnizian rock and on the other the Cartesian one, and then there between them, where Spinoza fell, he casts flowers. He was a sacrifice for man, a sacrifice that deserved to be decorated with flowers.³⁷

Without him, philosophy would never have been able to extend its borders so far.³⁸

Thus, Mendelssohn continues this heritage after having cast some flowers in front of the abyss.³⁹ Elsewhere he adds:

[O]ne could say of the Spinozistic system [...] that the most erroneous propositions of it are not so much false as they are incomplete.⁴⁰

(Always: progressivism)

In any case, you see what the importance of a tradition of the Hebrew in German can mean for the rabbis: a manner to liberate them from the subjection to the letter, to reach the universality of meaning, to cosmopolitize them by going out into the world of German culture and language.

[10] The contrast thus is very clear between the two translations of the Hebrew Bible into German, the one by Mendelssohn on the one hand and two centuries later the one by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. For the latter, in a perspective that is no longer, on the contrary, one could say that of the *Aufklärung*, it was – whether a *Gastgeschenk* [a gift of hospitality]⁴¹ or not – a matter of marking the German language, a little bit like Luther had done, and accounting for the two literalities, on the one hand attention to the respiratory units of the Hebrew word in the sacred text, and on the other a quasi-materiality of the German signifier in its particular idiom. In neither case is it a question to put one or the other of the literalities to the service of a signified meaning that would be transcendent, universal, etc. Basically, Buber and Rosenzweig were no longer following a logic of the sign (Signifier/Signified), that logic of the sign that is, itself, rather on the side of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, Mendelssohn, he translated, all the while respecting the two languages, for the Jews, especially the rabbis, to access a universal meaning signified by one or the other language. This logic of the sign is legible even in the politics and the philosophy of right and power outlined in *Jerusalem*, in particular in the first part which I won't comment – and which is a sort of a recap that at the same time critiques, continues, and further develops [*fait progresser*] the doctrines

of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke which are, at the very moment they are criticized, sometimes directly at the same time resituated in a context that justifies them to a certain degree. I will focus only on what is said in the second part about the relation between Judaism and reason. Judaism, according to Mendelssohn, does not make pretension of any revelation that would be incompatible with, or exclusive of, eternal truths, those that are indispensable to happiness (Spinoza). This is therefore not a revealed religion in the usual sense. A universal and humane religion without which humans are neither virtuous nor happy is not one that is revealed. In contrast (and here one is very close to Spinoza), the legislation of a people is historical and can, itself, be revealed. The revelation concerns the legislation (political) and not the eternal truths. It is in this regard historical. The commandments and precepts are formulated in these enouncements of God: "I am the Eternal your God who has made a covenant with your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and have promised them to make out of their seed a nation that belongs to me. The moment has [11] finally come when this promise must be realized. For this reason, I have saved you from slavery in Egypt, saved you by miracles and unprecedented signs. I am your savior, your Lord and King, I make a covenant with you and give you laws according to which you shall live and be a fortunate nation in the land I will give you," etc.⁴² These precepts, these commandments, this covenant, this promise, they are historical truths and not eternal truths. They rest on historical evidence that has to be confirmed by authorities, reinforced by miracles. This domain of the covenant, promise, etc., this historical domain of signs is a stranger to the domain of the eternal truths of reason. These are neither confirmed nor weakened by history, they belong to another order.⁴³

Having said that, if I understand a difficult passage in Mendelssohn correctly (p. 135), "although the divine book [...] received through Moses" is historical, although it is "a book of laws containing ordinances, rules of life and prescriptions, it also includes" – at least virtually – a "treasure of rational truths and religious doctrines [...] intimately connected with the laws that they form but one entity. [These] refer to, or are based upon, eternal truths of reason."⁴⁴ Between the historical and the non-historical, between these prescriptive laws and philosophical reason there is a link that the rabbis are right, Mendelssohn says, to compare it to the relationship between soul and body. And here, Mendelssohn adds what interests us particularly: he says that⁴⁵ of this fact (the union of historical truths

and truths of reason, or if you wish, of the order of the sign to the order of meaning), of this everybody has to be convinced, is convinced since one reads the laws of Moses “in whatever translation.”

In other words, since one reads the laws of Moses in whatever translation, with regard to their content, they can migrate from one language to another and thus liberate themselves from the signifying of the letter and the body, in that moment one understands what the unity of the soul and the body is, or what is the unity of meaning, eternal truths and laws as historical truths. The translation is really the test and the experience of this union, in the Jewish people and the Jewish history, of this reason of history.⁴⁶

This means that the historical comprises a non-historical meaning, transcending the language, alien to the order of the sign or embodying in the signs like the soul in the body. The image of the body which thus is the image of the image is exchanged in the same passage for that of a garment or veil. Mendelssohn explains that the secular experience teaches us that this divine code revealed historically could have become for all humans, or at least for a great part among them until now, a source of rational knowledge. This truth, its knowledge sleeps hidden in the code. “The truth,” he says, “gives itself in the most simple cloth.” The closer one gets, the more pure, innocent, and full of love the regard you have for the truth, the more it reveals itself, the more it uncovers the “light veil” behind which it hides to not be profaned.

[12] This means that for Mendelssohn original Judaism did not bind itself to a particular language and writing [*écriture*]. The doctrines and the laws, the convictions and the actions were not tied to written words and signs whose letters must impose themselves on all the humans for all time, under all the “revolutions of languages, customs, forms of life and circumstances,” [A 102] giving rise to rigid formula (against the orthodoxy of the rabbis) in which we could encase the concepts without truncating them.

What does this mean? It means that from the beginning the message received by the Jewish people was not bound in an inseparable way to a language or script or wording of a sort that it would have to be imposed to the people in the rigid form of an orthodoxy. The meaning of this message is free of a linguistic corset [*corset littéral*] and this is the reason why it needs to be able to evolve and why one has to be able to transmit and adapt through the historical progress. This is then counter to the rigidity of [the model of] the orthodox reproduction of the rabbis.⁴⁷

All this does not stop at the dead letters but shows itself to be entrusted to a living, spiritual teaching that remains the same across history. It is this “paternal” teaching that has to be respected and this is what the code orders us. But this living teaching was not only not written but it was prohibited to write it: “‘What has been transmitted orally,’ say the rabbis, ‘you are not permitted to put in writing.’”⁴⁸ When necessity forced the heads of the synagogue to permit writing about the laws, they interpreted this authorization as a destruction of the law. This says the Psalmist who they thus cite: “There is a time when for the sake of the Eternal the law must be destroyed.”⁴⁹ However, Mendelssohn adds, “according to the original constitution [...] it was not supposed to be like that.”⁵⁰ Writing, the recourse to writing was not supposed to happen, it was an accident. What necessarily happened was not supposed to happen. This evil that is writing should not have happened, but it was inevitable that it would happen. This is rather Rousseauist despite there being some disagreement with the second discourse.⁵¹

And according to a well-known template, Mendelssohn only talks about this writing as an unfortunate accident – writing of a death [*écriture de mort*] – to compare it to another writing, a good writing, a living writing which is not enclosed or deposed in the letters. This living writing, this “kind of living writing,” is the ceremonial law. It is not literal because it is (always the same opposition) associated with [*à côté de*] the spirit and heart, and its meaning⁵²: “The ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning, never ceasing to inspire contemplation and to provide the occasion and opportunity for oral instruction.”⁵³

Since then, the invention of printing, the dissemination of books “has entirely transformed man.”⁵⁴ Mendelssohn is not against this invention and against what printing can favor in the progress of knowledge (*Aufklärung*) but [13] in being entirely grateful to this providence he notes that just like anything it carries negative consequences and leads to abuse:

We teach and instruct one another only through writings; we learn to know nature and man only from writings. We work and relax, edify and amuse ourselves through scribbling [*gribouillage*] (*le scribouillage: Schreiberey*). The preacher does not converse with his congregation; he reads or declaims to it a written treatise. The professor reads his written lectures from the lectern. Everything is dead letter; the spirit of living conversation has vanished. We express our love and anger in letters, quarrel and become reconciled in letters; all our personal relations are by correspondence; and when we get together, we know of no other entertainment than playing or reading to each other.⁵⁵

And Mendelssohn denounces the substitution of a concept by a word as an effect of this writing mania. In the same way that wisdom is found hence more likely in books of a sage man rather than in the sage man himself, we encourage the sage to publish. There is a madness in publishing, a compulsion in writing and a substitution of thought by language that follows the substitution of speech by the written. As a result, the language replaces the thought, the word the concept, writing language, books experience: “[W]e are *literati, men of letters*. Our whole being depends on letters; and we can scarcely comprehend how a mortal man can educate and perfect himself without a *book*” (p. 142)⁵⁶: (comment: the link between the Enlightenment and the condemnation of writing but the contradiction with progressivism, etc.).

In order to explain devaluation and not to simply condemn writing or the sign in general, Mendelssohn must produce a theory of the origin of the sign, speech, and writing, all the more so that the history of the sign has had essential effects on religion. Man can not content itself to external first sensations, he forms from them concepts (thus general ones) and experiences the necessity to connect these concepts to perceptible signs: not only to communicate them to others but to store them and to preserve them for himself. But the moment of formation of the concept strictly speaking occurs without sign, the sign comes after, according to Mendelssohn.⁵⁷

This means, thanks to the attention, man extracts a general character of this first impression or his first impressions but then this attention wears off, and this wearing-off of this attention or of interest leads to attach this abstract character to a sensible sign that is put at our disposal by providence. In other words, to describe this summarily, I have a sensation and the first sensations, silent, sensible, and then by the attention I extract general characters from the sensible thing, and from them I form the concept, the concept of a table, for instance, all that without a word, without a sign. It is thanks to this attention and my interest for the thing that I thus can form a first silent concept. But this attention and interest wears off and it is the moment of this wearing-off that I find it necessary to confide this concept to a sign, i.e., to a thing that is permanent to represent it all by itself.⁵⁸

[14] This is how the languages are born, “which are composed of natural and arbitrary signs and without which man would be but little distinguished from the irrational animals, for without the aid of signs, man can scarcely remove himself one step from the sensual.” (144)⁵⁹

So what does this section mean, which naturally might appear a little bit

crude and ridiculous? One must understand the logic and the principles. That is that the concept does not arise from the sign. There is a thought and there is also a natural sensation, but a thought owing to the generality [*une pensée dû de la generalité*]⁶⁰ that comes before the sign. The sign comes second. But this necessity of the sign coming second is to be explained by the human finitude, i.e., it is to be explained by the fact that man tires and his attention is finite. This does not mean that there are signs and there is semiotics because there is fatigue and finitude, but it means that the concept of the sign is rooted in its foundation in finitude. Only a finite being requires signs but only a rational finitude is able to produce arbitrary signs. The animal, too, is finite and has natural signs but it does not have arbitrary signs. Hence, the power to create arbitrary signs through one's finitude and one's fatigue, this is the human finitude, which is properly human and not animal. Therefore, the semiotics as such is rooted in the fatigue and the animal is not fatigued in this sense. Now if one says that semiotics is tied to the fatigue and semiotics is made the defining feature of man, and one will well say that the animal makes a lot of things, but one will not say about it that it is tired. Fatigue is not simply a physical limit, we need to tie the experience of the sign to this fatigue. So, since the invention of the sign one has come to see that the invention of a sign is a manifestation of the finitude of a rational being that can indicate, despite the risks it brings with it, a progress in knowledge. And Mendelssohn does not stop admiring the invention of the word 'nature' and the one who has invented this word.⁶¹

Now, regarding the difference between audible and visible sign Mendelssohn offers a very interesting explanation. He talks about this fact that a sign has two functions: on the one hand the communication with another, on the other the storing, the preservation "as a vessel, so to speak, in which to preserve them, and keep them near at hand for use."⁶² Now, the language articulated and audible is useful for the communication to another. Why? Because the concepts, being present in themselves to the mind and having no need of a sign to form when I want to talk to another, and completely [*bien?*] spontaneously, I can summon an articulated sign and speak to the other to tell them the concept present in the mind. Now, this is an operation of my free will and spontaneity and my voice is obviously the closest to this spontaneity: I decide to speak. However, the visible language, i.e., the storing under the form of a spatial figure, is a completely different experience. The reason is that we suffer from am-

nesia which makes signs necessary that can remind us, without our free will, and contrary to it in some way: like notes or memory aids. And it is necessary that the visible signs are securely permanent since the audible signs don't last. The visible sign, when I write it in my notebook, for example.⁶³ "Visible signs," says Mendelssohn, "provide this advantage because they are permanent and need not always be reproduced in order to make an impression."⁶⁴ An audible sign, however, has to be produced each time to make an impression.⁶⁵

Now, the first signs of abstract concepts, in the history of language and writing, have been taken at the beginning from the things themselves, i.e., for example, the lion has the characteristics [*signe*] of courage, the visible sign of courage, the dog that of fidelity, the peacock of proud beauty, etc. and "the first physicians," says Mendelssohn, "carried live snakes with them as a sign that they knew how to render the harmful harmless."⁶⁶ Later then, always according to a law of economy, i.e., abbreviation tied to the fatigue and to the fact that one has to make the most with the least possible effort, one has had to abbreviate and utilize the synecdoches or metonymies (one part for the whole) and all that gives birth to the hieroglyph. Now up to here, we have in this process that I have very schematically invoked, the case of a linear and continuous development that leads up to the hieroglyph. But from the hieroglyph to the alphabet, i.e., to phonetic writing, there is a "leap," Mendelssohn says, that "seems to have required more than ordinary human powers."⁶⁷

With regard to this leap and the general restructuring it induces, Mendelssohn is quite precise and complicated. Staying with the most general outline, his argument is the following: one is wrong to simply believe that alphabetic writing consists in signs corresponding to sounds and cannot be related to things and concepts except through sounds or spoken words.⁶⁸ Certainly, this is how it is in fact for us who are called normal or of good hearing. This is the way it apparently works. But this appearance conceals the structure of language. This structure is better revealed by the deaf-mutes because for them writing directly signifies the thing. According to Mendelssohn, a deaf-mute when he reads "bread," he does not proceed by the pronunciation of the word "bread" and the link between the phoneme and the signified bread. When he reads "bread" he thinks bread, but he does not pronounce it because he is deaf-mute. The deaf-mute thus better delivers the structural possibility of the phonetic writing, which is to tie the writing to the concept or the thing without having to pass through sound.

[15] I let you read (p. 148-9) the descriptions of the consequences that Mendelssohn draws from this possible restructuring by the superhuman leap, as it were the leap from the hieroglyph to phonetic writing.⁶⁹ I will only insist on the evaluation that this phenomenon gives rise to for Mendelssohn. On the positive side there is a possibility to store, capitalize (*Aufklärung*) knowledge and to institute heritage and tradition. The image of the animal is here, one more time, that of the hive (work and pleasure). This means that in the hive the bees make what we make in writing, i.e., work and pleasure.⁷⁰ Mendelssohn says:

The observations, experiments, and reflections in astronomical, economic, moral, and religious matters were multiplied, propagated, facilitated, and preserved for posterity. These are the cells/libraries⁷¹ in which the bees collect their honey and save it for their own enjoyment and that of others.⁷²

Why this work turns finally into pleasure I don't know.⁷³ On the negative side there is a loss of what in the speech is a matter of accents or tone which the graphic transcription impoverishes (standardization and stereotypification of speech, etc.). [As Mendelssohn notes:]

For this reason, the nations which are unacquainted with writing have a far greater diversity in their spoken language, and many of the sounds in these languages are so indeterminate that we are able to indicate them by our written characters only very imperfectly.⁷⁴

Certainly, one has later tried to diversify the written notation to adjust [the signs] to the finer differences. I also note in passing the monogenetic hypothesis that all writing which first derives from a hieroglyphic source has itself its source in a Hebrew hieroglyphic alphabet; in a way one suspects, if I have read the text correctly, Mendelssohn to say that the supernatural force [which] the leap from hieroglyphs to phonetic writing [made possible] has in the end been done by Hebrew writing, which ultimately is the origin of all writing. You see what he says is that the Hebrew letters for ox, house, camel, door, hook, etc., each letter having the shape of the thing it represents⁷⁵:

That our alphabet was borrowed from some kind of hieroglyphic writing can still be discerned today in most of the shapes and names of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, from which, as history clearly shows, all other known ways of writing originated. It was a Phoenician who instructed the Greeks in the art of writing.⁷⁶

Still on the negative side, and this negative side is integrated in a general theory of the depravation, decomposition, aggravation (these are Mendelssohn's words) that always accompany the progress, there is also this constitutive contempt for the [16] sign that forces to take the sign for the thing. Or to misrecognize the fact that the things-signs have also their own reality (money-merchandise, etc.).

Among the errors induced by the usage of writing and by a certain ethnocentrism which Mendelssohn denounces there is this particular confusion that consists in interpreting as idolatries the practices of other nations, other religions which one accuses to idolize images which are only a writing but a writing unknown to us:

Our own travelers may very often make similar mistakes when they report to us on the religion of distant peoples. They must acquaint themselves very intimately with the thoughts and opinions of a nation before they can say with certainty whether its images still have the character of script, or whether they have already degenerated into idolatry. In plundering the Temple, the conquerors of Jerusalem found the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant and took them for idols of the Jews. They saw everything with the eyes of barbarians, and from their point of view. In accordance with their own customs, they took an image of divine providence and prevailing grace for an image of the Deity, for the Deity itself, and delighted in their discovery.⁷⁷

This said, writing can lead us to idolatrous perversions (for example numerology which consists in attributing to a number a secret force or a miraculous force: and there one does not know, because he does not say so, whether he has in mind Pythagoreanism or the Kabbala).⁷⁸

In sum, then, we have two types of perversions: on the one hand image writing and idolatry and on the other writing as alphabetic scribbling [*gribouillage*] that gives way to speculative excess. Hence the necessity in Judaism of a law that is made for avoiding these two perversions: the perversions of idolatry and the perversions of speculation. A law that commands actions and that is only orally transmitted. The action avoids idolatry because it is always ephemeral, the action is in the moment it is realized. One does not store it, hence it does not give way to images and hence this cannot be idolatrous like image writing. At the same time,⁷⁹ the temptation for Mendelssohn to call these unwritten precepts and the ceremonial laws to which they give rise "a kind of writing," a writing *avant la lettre*, if you wish.

These laws were *revealed*, that is, they were made known by God, through *words* and *script*. Yet only the most essential part of them was entrusted to letters; and without the unwritten explanations, delimitations, and more precise determinations, transmitted orally and propagated through oral, living instruction, even these written laws are mostly incomprehensible, or inevitably became so in the course of time. For no words or written signs preserve their meaning unchanged throughout a generation.

The written as well as the unwritten laws have directly, as *prescriptions for actions* and rules of life, public and private felicity as their ultimate aim. But they are also, in large part, to be regarded as a kind of script, and they have significance and meaning as ceremonial laws. They guide the inquiring intelligence to divine truths upon which the religion of this people was founded. The ceremonial law was the bond which was to connect action with contemplation, life with theory. The ceremonial law was to induce personal converse and social contact between school and teacher, inquirer and instructor, and to stimulate and encourage rivalry and emulation; and it actually fulfilled this mission in the early period, before the constitution degenerated and human folly again interfered to change, through misunderstanding and misdirection, the good into evil and the useful into the harmful.⁸⁰

All history is the history of this deviation. And a little earlier he has written the following⁸¹:

Religious doctrines and propositions or *eternal truths* about God and his government and providence, without which man cannot be enlightened and happy. These are not forced upon the faith of the nation under the threat of eternal or temporal punishments, but, in accordance with the nature and evidence of eternal truths, recommended to rational acknowledgment. They did not have to be given by direct revelation, or made known through *word* and *script*, which are intelligible only *here* and *now*. The Supreme Being has revealed them to all rational creatures through *things* and *concepts* – *hence not by word or writing but by things and concepts*⁸² – and inscribed them in the soul with a script that is legible and comprehensible at all times and in all places.⁸³

Hence the laws are not revealed through writing [*écriture*], language, and word but through concepts and things immediately constructed in the mind and hence universal because they don't depend on a system of writing or of language in particular.⁸⁴

For this reason, our much-quoted poet sings:

The heavens declare the majesty of God,
 And the firmament announceth the work of His hands;
 From one day this doctrine floweth into another;
 And night giveth instruction to night.
No teaching, no words,
Without their voice being heard.

*Their choral resoundeth over all the earth,
 Their message goeth forth to the ends of the world,
 To the place where He hath set a tent for the sun, etc.* [Ps. 19: 1-5]

Their effect is as natural as the beneficent influence of the sun, which, as it hurries through its orbit, sheds light and warmth over the whole globe. As the same poet explains still more clearly in another place:

From sunrise to sundown
 The name of the Lord is praised. [Ps 103: 2-4]

Or as the prophet says in the name of the Lord: *From the rising of the sun to its setting, My name is great among the heathens, and in every place frankincense is presented unto My name, even pure oblations for My name is great among the heathens.* [Mal 1:11]⁸⁵

I would like to conclude with the name, on this question of the name because it has followed us since the beginning of the seminar and we will find it again starting next week with Benjamin in particular. Hence the theory, or rather the philosophy of language is, like Scholem's, a philosophy of the name.⁸⁶

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Notes

- 1 Derrida refers here to the introduction by Dominique Bourel to the French translation of *Jérusalem ou pouvoir religieux et judaïsme*, trans. Dominique Bourel (Paris: Les Press d'aujourd'hui, 1982), 80-83.
- 2 Translation of Mendelssohn's letter to Ernst Ferdinand Klein from August 29, 1782 in Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. in association with Fritz Bamberger, Haim Borodianski, Simon Rawidowicz, Bruno Strauß, Leo Strauß, started by Ismar Elbogen, Julius Guttman, Eugen Mittwoch, and continued by Alexander Altmann with Haim Bar-Dayana, Eva J. Engel, Leo Strauß, Werner Weinberg (Berlin 1929-32, Breslau 1938. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann-Günther Holzboog, 1974-2022), vol. 13, 80. References to this edition will be Jub A followed by volume and page number.
- 3 Derrida changes from assez [p. 5] to très [I: 38:00].
- 4 "de la loi" added [I: 39 :24].
- 5 "par des juifs" added [41:26].
- 6 In the lecture Derrida corrects his notes saying he means the rabbi of Berlin rather than Jerusalem as the typoscript has it [41:58].

- 7 The last two sentences are added in the recording [42:56-43:03].
- 8 Derrida cites the letter from Bourel's introduction, 40. Cf. Jub A: 19, 295-96. For an English translation of the complete letter, presumably addressed to Hanokh Rocknitz of Vienna, see Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 488-89. I follow Mendelssohn's original wording written in German with Hebrew letters and with Hebrew interspersed.
- 9 Derrida uses "cette phrase" here in the recording [45:30].
- 10 The first sentence is modified according to the recording and the second added [47:24-45].
- 11 "Nationalism" added in the recording [45:35].
- 12 "du dix-huitièmes siècle" added [49:10].
- 13 "et qui se ne laisse pas se prendre [à] cette opposition-là sens/lettre, esprit/lettre" [49:16-24].
- 14 The rest of this paragraph gives the expansion on the parenthesis that Derrida offered during his lecture [49:50-51:00].
- 15 Derrida added the part about Baudelaire [52:35-55].
- 16 "les" replaced by "rabbins" [53:01].
- 17 Inserted "en vue de Mendelssohn" [53:20].
- 18 "et" inserted [53:28].
- 19 Inserted: "n'ayant pas adhérence irréductible à l'hébreu" [53:38].
- 20 The last three sentences added [53:47-54:08]. Additions in brackets by the Translator.
- 21 "Tenez" [54:12].
- 22 "c'est ça là l'Aufklärung. On comprend mieux ce" [54:15].
- 23 "Cette émancipation es ten comprise une opposition sens/lettre qui est du type massivement Platonicien." [55:07].
- 24 "Et tous les deux sont possible aujourd'hui." [55:41-55:43].
- 25 After "one does not lack any example" follows the rest inserted in this parenthesis [55:43-56:36].
- 26 "Mendelssohn" inserted [56:51].
- 27 "Je crois qu'une" inserted [57:19].
- 28 Slightly reworded [57:36-59].
- 29 "Le progrès qu'il a fait faire à la philosophie, tout étant évalué à cette époque-là, tout au moins alors parmi les acteurs, en termes du progrès. Qu'est-ce que va progresser, qu'est-ce que ne va pas progresser?" [58:00-58:18]
- 30 "une sorte de" added [59:06].
- 31 "avec Spinoza en ce moment là" inserted [59:14].
- 32 Derrida expands here: "qui comme vous le savez, faisait courir un risque à certain" [59:30].
- 33 Moses Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, in Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 96-129, 106.
- 34 For his discussion of Scholem's letter to Rosenzweig see Derrida's "The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano" in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 191-227.
- 35 Derrida expands here on the passage he reads from Mendelssohn [1:00:20-1:01:15].
- 36 Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 106.
- 37 Derrida adds here another comment on the passage [1:01:30-1:01:55].

- 38 Moses Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 106.
- 39 Derrida adds here another comment on the passage [1:01:59-1:02:05].
- 40 Moses Mendelssohn, *Dialogues*, 103.
- 41 In the introductory part of this lecture, here omitted, Derrida quotes Scholem's remark that the Buber-Rosenzweig translation was a sort of a "Gastgeschenk" that arrived when the host considered the party to be over.
- 42 Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (University of New England Press: Hanover and London, 1983), 98. References to this edition will be A followed by page number; Jub A 8:165.
- 43 At this point [from here onwards all references are to part 2 of the recording, II: 7:02-8:00] Derrida recapitulates what he just explained in the preceding passage, i.e., that the order of the historical is not to be confused with the order of eternal truth, a point that aligns with Spinoza.
- 44 A 99; Jub A 8: 165f.
- 45 Derrida inserts "il dit que" [9:54].
- 46 These two sentences are comments Derrida inserts here [10:30-11:20].
- 47 This paragraph is inserted [14:00-14:49].
- 48 A 102; Jub A 8: 169.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 "Ce mal, qui est l'écriture, aurait du ne pas arriver, mais il etait fatal que cela arriva. Ceci est assez Rousseauiste malgré qu'il y est quelque point de désaccord avec le second discours." [17:00 to 17:25].
- 52 Derrida inserts here: "et celui du sense" [18:14].
- 53 A 102-103; Jub A 169.
- 54 A 103; Jub A 8: 169.
- 55 A 103; Jub A 8: 169-70. The French translation has "faire un cours" but Mendelssohn simply refers to the period's popular custom to read to each other.
- 56 A 104; Jub A 8: 170.
- 57 Derrida inserts "selon Mendelssohn" [23:59].
- 58 In this paragraph Derrida expands on the lecture notes [24:00-25:33].
- 59 A 105; Jub A 8: 171-72.
- 60 [26:04-26:08]
- 61 This paragraph follows the recording [25:39-28:37].
- 62 A 107; Jub A 173.
- 63 Here some comments on the example of the notebook in the recording are omitted.
- 64 A 107; Jub A 8: 173.
- 65 This paragraph follows the recording [28:47-31:43].
- 66 A 108; Jub A 8: 174.
- 67 A 108; Jub A 8: 174. This paragraph follows the recording [31:44-34:02].
- 68 The rest of the paragraph follows the recording which expands on the lecture notes [34:54 to 36:20].
- 69 Derrida expands "par le saut quasiment surhumain qui est le saut du hiéroglyphe a l'écriture phonétique" [36:15].
- 70 This sentence and the comment following the quotation Derrida added [37:00-37:20].

- 71 Derrida's insertion, typescript page 15.
- 72 A 110; Jub A 8: 176.
- 73 The French translation has 'work' (travail) and 'pleasure' (plaisir) while the German speaks of work and use (*Genuss*). While *Genuss* can mean enjoyment, Mendelssohn has in mind the pleasure of its use. See Jub A 176.
- 74 A 110; Jub A 8: 175-76.
- 75 This paragraph follows the recording [39:26-40:49]: Et je note aussi au passage l'hypothèse monogénétique de toute les écritures qui toute dérive d'abord d'une source hiéroglyphique, qui elle-même tire sa source d'une hiéroglyphie alphabétique hébraïque. D'une sorte qu'on soupçonne, si j'ai bien lu le texte, Mendelssohn de dire que la force surnaturelle que le saut du hiéroglyphe a l'écriture phonétique a été, finalement, donnée par l'écriture hébraïque, qui est au fond l'origine de toutes les écritures. Vous voyez ce qu'il dit [...]"
- 76 A 166; Jub A 8: 176.
- 77 A 114; Jub A 8: 180.
- 78 The comment in parentheses is Derrida's insertion [44:35-44:46].
- 79 This paragraph up to here follows Derrida's spoken comments [44:50-46:03].
- 80 A 128; Jub A 8: 193.
- 81 Between reading the two passages from Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* from the French translation on pages 173 and then pages 171f., Derrida inserts this and the previous sentence [48:36-48:48].
- 82 The addition between the dashes is Derrida's [49:41].
- 83 A 126; Jub A 8: 191.
- 84 Derrida interrupts the reading of the passage in Mendelssohn with this comment [50:15].
- 85 A 126-27; Jub A 8: 191-92.
- 86 Derrida's concluding words [51:39-52:02].