

**Gérard Bensussan**  
**The Fear of Spinoza:**  
**Derrida as Reader of the *Theological-Political Treatise***

*Los laberintos  
que crea el tiempo  
se desvanecen.  
Sólo queda  
el desierto. (Lorca)*

I would like to start by situating my paper almost topologically: first, with respect to the precise occurrence (in Spinoza as well as in Derrida) of the *fear* which my title evokes; then, I will turn to the typescript, with which I was able to become familiar through the care of Willi Goetschel,<sup>1</sup> and, finally, I will address the spectrality that inhabits and permeates this text, the remarkable “ghost of Spinoza” of which Derrida speaks on page 17 of the third lecture on the “Théologico-Politique” that was at my disposal. In particular, I would like to suggest that this specter or ghost is even more present in Derrida’s commentary by virtue of remaining nameless and it is precisely towards the naming of this spectrality that I myself will proceed.

This preliminary remark will allow me to engage with the material of my “investigation” and to accurately circumscribe it as follows:

1. I will limit myself to the reading, commentary and interpretation of Derrida’s notes, which are essentially contained in the lecture on Nationality and Philosophical Nationalism (referred to as Théologico-Politique 1) and the two lectures on the Theological Political (referred to as Théologico-Politique 2-3) which were sent to me – and more specifically lectures 1, 2, and 3 up to page 17, and nearly the whole of the fascicle containing these lectures on the Theologico-Political.

2. If I allow myself such a selective reading, it is because even together these notes do not form in any way a coherent or organized reading of Spinoza. It is remarkable that the only texts with which Derrida engages – and again, we will see in what manner – are the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*, and that the *Ethics* is scarcely even mentioned, in an almost anecdotal mode. We have all three of us, Willi Goetschel, Warren Montag and me, more or less entitled our papers: “Derrida, Reader of Spinoza.” However, in my estimation, there is nothing of the sort between the two, no actual or

rigorous deconstructive reading of Spinoza, like there is, and with what force, of Hegel (one would only have to open *Glas* to make the observation). We could explain at length and with much ease that between these two philosophers, Spinoza and Derrida, there is little common ground, affinity or dialogue, in the same way that the history of philosophy, to a great extent, is itself constituted, inventing itself, in a way, from these dialogues of thought, which can attest to profound discord or even relative agreement. Nothing of the sort, in my view, between Spinoza and Derrida – a point which merits more discussion, but which shall not be developed here.

3. In addition, the method of my reading is to elaborate on the one Derrida himself undertakes of Spinoza, the fragmentary character of which I have just outlined. In his own words: “my intention is not to engage in a systematic and internal reading of the *Treatise*” (Théologico-Politique 2, 1); “[my] very oblique and selective reading of the *Theological-Political Treatise*” (ibid., 17); “I could have called on other texts of the tradition, Kant” (Théologico-Politique 3, 17), he also says; “the reading [of Spinoza’s text] will have had the significance of an inscription, an inscription within an inscription, resembling even something like opening credits, while titles, names and references appear, we already see the first scene in the background” (3, 1). This “first scene” is described by Derrida as “Judeo-German,” where the hyphen is as “paradoxical” and as “difficult” as the one in “theological-political.” This is of particular interest for my argument. In fact, the ghost of Spinoza’s ghost that I clearly discern throughout Derrida’s commentary is precisely, and may it be said right away, “Judeo-German.” Derrida explains (1, 6) that he will not depart from “a modern Judeo-German text, but from one of the great texts of the philosophical tradition itself wholly devoted to the theological-political dimension in which the example of the Jewish people as a chosen people is of crucial importance,” namely the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Not a starting point then, since he evokes Spinoza as a digression and as a simple but exemplary passage; in fact, Derrida goes to him or returns to him incessantly, and I myself will have to revisit this revisitation. In any case, the reading of Spinoza by Derrida is truly, in his own words, selective, oblique, contingent, whose function is simply that of a prelude, or even a pretext, or conversely, that of a postscript. Furthermore, he is often the sort to argue the incompleteness of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, and of his *ci falt*, that is to say of his last “word”, *reliqua desiderantur* (La langue et le discours de la méthode 13, 3-4).

These preliminary considerations indicate already the methodological limit and paradox of any position which implies that the "Derrida Reader of Spinoza" is perfectly evident, or is a sort of pseudo-evidence which needed to be isolated from the scope of a discussion on the reading of Derrida's reading.

In all of these course notes where we find this proposed "reading" of Spinoza, not deconstructive but spectral and outlying, where is the pivot-point, or more exactly, the diagonal of this change in perspective, so to speak?<sup>2</sup> This is found, according to me, around Spinoza's precise exclamation, undoubtedly recurrent in Derrida's commentary: *Nec satis mirari possum*.<sup>3</sup> Derrida reflects on multiple occasions on Misrahi-Francès' translation with his characteristic care in dealing with these matters: "*je suis frappé d'une véritable stupeur*" ("I am seized by a veritable stupor"). He adjusts and inflects the form of this statement through many significant variations: "stupefied, horrified" (*Nationalité et nationalisme philosophiques* 1, 24); "inextinguishable surprise, almost infinite" (*Théologico-Politique* 2, 2); "fascination" (*ibid.*, 3); "all of Spinoza's discourse connotes a horrified admiration" (*ibid.*, 10). Stupor, dread, admiration and fear all contribute to the meaning of *nec satis mirari possum*. Derrida puts these words into Spinoza's mouth: "I cannot be astounded enough, be fascinated enough, I cannot tire of looking; but I look while turning away, full of fear" (*ibid.*). In fact, a preliminary question or clarification is necessary: what is it that causes, in Spinoza's own text, in chapter 17 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, this remarkable dread, this fascinated interruption which so captivates Derrida? It is the wrath of God, his violence, his ruse, his destructive fury, his vengeance:

The more I ponder, the more I must exclaim, in Tacitus' words, that at that time "God did not wish to save them but to punish them."<sup>4</sup> Nor can I sufficiently express my amazement<sup>5</sup> that there was so much anger in the divine mind, that He should actually make laws (which are normally designed to protect the honor, safety and security of all the people) to avenge himself and punish them, and thus the laws seemed to be not laws (i.e., a protection for the people) but penalties and punishments.<sup>6</sup>

I can recall the context of this passage as it relates to the *nec satis mirari possum*. It concerns the explanation of the degeneration or the "corruption," terms that Derrida extracts from the vocabulary of the *Treatise*,<sup>7</sup> of the State of the Hebrews. How and why has the State of the Hebrews veered from its egalitarian form of strict theocracy towards the "monarchical mosaic

Law”? Their State was originally founded on the equality of all through the abandonment and the transfer of their power of agency to a sole being, God, immaterial and, in a way, apolitical. It is therefore presented, in its “initial pact”, as a quasi-democracy.<sup>8</sup> But, as it happens, this initial pact gives way to a personal allegiance under the authority of Moses. The reason for this substitution, the replacement of a pact of equality for all in God by a pact of submission to one man, is, of course, the *fear* of the Hebrews, “struck with fear” because they were having to “address God, to receive and interpret his laws,” plunged “in such a state of anguish that they believed their final hour had come” and that they preferred, “trembling, to turn to Moses” so that he might take care of the political and hermeneutical task in their place.<sup>9</sup> If fear is truly the cause and source of the transition from a theocratic pact to another, from quasi-democracy to monarchy, where does the fear itself come from? We would have to retrace the whole story starting from the Exodus from Egypt, such as it is recounted by Spinoza in his *Treatise*, and not without a certain amount of empathy, even though he is particularly severe with the Jews in his analysis as a whole. In their relationship to God, from the Exodus to the granting of the Law and the episode of the golden calf, the Hebrews, having accepted the pact of the transfer of power and law, were in a way tricked by God, who acted as a father to them; a father who was not only very strict, but also unjust, and profoundly so. But what does this ruse entail, this infamy of God, in Spinoza’s reading of the State of the Hebrews after their historic leaving of Egypt? Spinoza insists on the liberty with which the Hebrews’ consented to the Law:

Once liberated from the intolerable oppression of the Egyptians, they were not bound by compact to anyone; rather they regained the natural right to all that they could get, and everyone was once again free to decide whether they wanted to retain this right or give it up [...] they resolved [...] to transfer their right to no mortal man but rather to God alone. Without hesitation, all equally with one shout promised to obey God absolutely in all his commands, and to recognize no other law but that which He himself conferred as law by prophetic revelation. [...] [C]rying with one voice [the Hebrews said]: “We will do whatever God shall say” (making no mention of an intermediary).<sup>10</sup>

What is at issue here is the very famous *naase v’nishma*, from Exodus 24: 7, the *All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and obey*,<sup>11</sup> a declaration that preoccupies so many rabbinic commentaries which, in general, stress that only the Hebrews had accepted obedience without any conditions

from their side, while the other peoples had responded with demanding reasonable conditions for their eventual obedience. But what happens at the end of the story? The Hebrews, Spinoza explains, are the victims of what they accepted without reluctance. Only they accepted the unacceptable, to obey without even knowing why, as this was the order from God and no one else. This was their political demise. They were cruelly tricked by God and destined to be destroyed. Derrida comments at length the quote from Ezekiel 20: 25 inserted by Spinoza in his text (it is the same quote by L. Segon that the edition La Pléiade uses, to which Derrida adds the exceedingly cruel quote of Chouraqui): "So I gave them rules of government which were not good and laws under which they could not live – while also letting them ruin themselves through their offerings ... I had to destroy them, so that they would know I am Jehovah."<sup>12</sup>

God gave the Hebrews impractical rules of government and treacherously left them to fend for themselves with these commandments. He pushed them therefore to "corrupt themselves" in their efforts to practice his word; he corrupted them himself "with their offerings," in Chouraqui's translation. Even without having to explain the particular circumstance of this corruption, or the delegating of power to the Levites, we can see that God, according to the Spinozian retelling that Derrida examines, made the Hebrews unworthy to his own eyes, "to the eyes of his name," as we should say, the name being an important question in the seminar, and more precisely the divine name, *shem*, which is related to its homophone "*schème*" (schema): "this word '*schème*' amuses me," Derrida writes because "if Spinoza refuses or contests the existence of a schema in the Greco-Kantian sense, it's perhaps because he conserves the Hebrew sense of the word" (Théologico-Politique 2, 1). God decides then, in the name of his name, so as to make it known and to impose it, to "destroy" the Hebrews as a political community according to his avowed "plan"<sup>13</sup>: "*je vais leur apprendre comment je m'appelle*" ("I will make them learn my name"), as Derrida puts it, playing with the French expression (2, 13).

The construction of the narrative is terribly violent. The Hebrews accept unconditionally the Law. Even their pseudo indocility (a "childish" argument according to Spinoza<sup>14</sup>), or their recriminations under the yoke of a cast, the Levites, is yet another side of their unconditional obedience to God. They accept therefore to "be obedient even before hearing his word." And so: they are struck by the terrible vengeance, this "vengeful, demanding violence, or revenge" (ibid.) of God in order to impose his

name. It is here, at this point, where Spinoza admits his fear. But why this fear, which, in his words, seems especially mysterious? It is surely not the effect of some sort of empathy that he feels towards the Hebrews. On the contrary, the circumstance will eventually be considered their own fault. He describes rather a sort of horrified stupor towards this vengeful and cunning God, this wicked God. If the circumstance is deemed the fault of the Hebrews, it is not God who should be held in contempt, but the Hebrews. This God, in order to impose his name to those who have forgotten it (we are still dealing with Spinoza's reading), deceives his sons and punishes them. It is unnecessary to explain how and why this vengeful God is on all counts incompatible with the *Deus sive Natura*. The question that we must ask is elsewhere: does this God avenge himself or does he avenge *injustice*? Let us remember first some preliminary elements. Everything that man does for the conservation of his being depends strictly on the laws of nature, that is to say the government of God in its universal decrees and its "internal assistance," according to the proposed distinction in the third chapter of the *Treatise* between this "internal assistance" and the "external assistance," or in other words "whatever proves useful to man from the power of external causes,"<sup>15</sup> the "fortune" as Spinoza says also, the government of God as it acts on human affairs by means of exterior and unexpected causes. Therefore, "whether therefore we say that all things happen according to the laws of nature, or are ordained by the edict and direction of God, we are saying the same thing."<sup>16</sup> Without difficulty, we understand that the vengeful, violent, and even spiteful God, – and, again, I will leave aside the question if this very literal reading, *sola scriptura*, is compatible or not with particular rabbinic commentaries – that this furiously anthropomorphic God is absolutely heterogeneous to the *Deus sive Natura*. With this being said, the actual question can now be specified and duplicated according to the perspective of Derrida's reading. 1. Why is it the fear of Spinoza rather than his mockery?<sup>17</sup> 2. What is the nature of Derrida's reworking of this fear?

To the first question (why the fear?), Derrida's response is very simple: that which is afraid and steps back in horror in this passage, is Reason, "Spinoza's rationalist and universalist system" (Théologico-Politique 2, 16) with "all his oppositions," his binary structural apparatus (internal/external, spiritual/literal, rational/temporal, universal/corporal), with his "system of dissociations" (temporal and sensory election/natural law) and especially with his universalizing and Christianizing method (2, 11). Even

Derrida explains that it is "rationalism as a whole," and not only Spinoza's, that would turn away, fascinated, from this violent vengeance of God. This fascinated Reason is haunted by the terrible fear of petrification as if faced with the Gorgon. Spinoza, Derrida explains, turns away but he still wants to look. *Nec satis mirari possum*: literally, "I cannot look enough." What fascinates Spinozian Reason, what it would want to look at in the face, is "*inextricability*", or "the contamination, the contact between different meanings which Spinoza tries to keep separate" (2, 3). When it comes to Gorgon and Medusa, we say that they were inseparably of a splendid beauty and/or of a repugnant ugliness, as if the peril for whoever yielded to the desire of looking at them was found in this fearful indeterminacy. This leads to the second question. What exactly is the meaning of Derrida's reading of these pages, which I said was symptomatic and not properly deconstructive? It is fairly clear: rationalism in its whole constitutes "a system of protection" against the threat of petrification which terrifies Reason. And what gives merit to this protection, what threatens to petrify in compact inseparability all of its dissociative and analytical operations? "The name" of God, Derrida insists: "is it not the case that all of Spinozian discourse acts as a protection against the name of God, of this God that becomes a nameless God in the *Ethics*?" (2, 17). *Reason against the Name* – but if Reason is a rampart against the Name, it is only secondary, a sort of product derived from the Name, invented to oppose its threat, archaic and fearfully cold. Derrida's fundamental contribution in the lectures on the Theologico-Political is to displace the anthropological representation of divine violence – which, for Spinoza or even Maimonides and the rationalist philosophers of the Middle-Ages, would have come across as an ignorant gesture – towards an absolutely and irreducibly originary status. It is precisely this radically non-anthropological originary that could not see, or rather, as we know now, would not want, or could not see the system of rationality.

This situation [...] would be that of every institution, of every foundation of law which, by definition, is anterior to law, and would therefore be an act of originary violence, an act of war, but an act of originary war which can only be justified before the law by attacking another pre-originary violence, to which it responds, originarily, by taking the form of vengeance [...] But this vengeance can no longer be confined peacefully inside the limits of an anthropology or a psychology of the passions. But perhaps it founds the possibility of a human society (2, 5).

A “logic of vengeance” (ibid.) would therefore command and radically precede Law, Society and Reason. In truth, it is not a logic that we are dealing with, unless this term is simply used out of convenience, but a real *destructive force*. But Derrida, when he talks here of “logic,” expresses very strongly that “vengeance” is not a pre-logical, anthropomorphic, anthropopathic, or anthropological figure. It is in fact the rational presupposition (which is a particularly apt oxymoron) that guides, for example, Maimonides’ allegorical reading of the text of the Torah. It is also this presupposition whereby hermeneutic reason imposes itself on the biblical text in order to allow for a “rational” reading. To strengthen and to reinforce his position, Derrida calls upon two figures, two paradigms: the idea of a vengeance of history in Heidegger and the idea of a vengeance of language in Scholem. This double invocation has a precise function in Derrida’s process: to show that in all cases (vengeance of God, of history and of language)

the power or the instance of vengeance is too large for the human subject, for the individual, the conscience, or even the unconscious of the individual subject: language and history, then, are laws to which the individual subject is subjugated, for which he is perhaps responsible, but which surpass him and which he cannot master. These are not finite or empirical instances, even if they are not infinite in the positive sense of major rational theologies or traditional metaphysics. How are we to conceive of a vengeance which is not an extension of an anthropological subjectivity? (ibid., 2-3).

The two passages from the seminar that I have just cited delve into the “Judeo-German” indicated by Derrida as the actual horizon and genealogical framework of his reading of Spinoza. The Judeo-German figure, however, that would lend itself the most manifestly to a real, explicit invocation by the needs of this reading, such as it is organized by Derrida, is not named. In my view, it is Walter Benjamin and, more precisely, some pertinent elements found in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt (Critique of Violence)*, which literally haunt Derrida’s approach to the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Benjamin is the monumental ghost who walks through the entirety of the lectures on the Theologico-Political, and the ghost of Spinoza who attributes to him the place of an “inscription.”

The whole thought process of the *Critique of Violence* is animated by the category of “divine violence,” opaque in many regards but transparent in the essay from 1920-1921. It is very much this violence, which is at issue for Spinoza and Derrida. Benjamin opposes this “divine violence” to “mythic violence.” If mythic violence is inspired by a directing and orienting



principle, *power*, divine violence is entirely driven by another principle, absolutely "contrary", says Benjamin, that of *justice*.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, "God" replaces destiny, and the justice of ends replaces the violence of means. The first salient feature of this divine violence, for Benjamin, is that it gives definitive leave to law and that it commands a "politics" which is divorced from any relation to the judicial and is subject to the sole justice of ends. On the one hand, mythic violence combats violence by violence, a classic situation brought on by any form of power relations, its conflicts and political transformations. On the other hand, divine violence combats violence by justice. But it may only do so by radically destructive means, "limitlessly destructive," Benjamin writes. Through destruction, divine violence opposes the foundation and conservation of law held by mythic violence (something to which Derrida seems at times to reduce divine violence even though he does not make reference here to Benjamin). In order to express and illustrate the destructive justice brought on by divine violence, Benjamin refers in particular to the biblical episode of the rebellion of Korah which he opposes to the myth of Niobe, punished for having considered herself superior to the goddess Leto. Korah and his two hundred and fifty companions who accompany him in his revolt are exterminated one by one, "the earth closed upon them, and they perished from among the assembly" (*Numbers*, 16, 33). Even Spinoza uses the example of Korah: "So they instigated a commotion and went to see [Moses], claiming they were all equally sacred and that it was not right that he should be elevated above all the rest. Nor was there anyway that he could pacify them; however, via a miracle which he invoked as a token of his high standing with God, they were all annihilated."<sup>19</sup> Both Spinoza and Benjamin refer to the same biblical passage, but they infuse it with symmetrically opposite significations. For Benjamin, God smites "the privileged ones" of Korah's group, the priests and the notables (and this is exactly what is said in the biblical text of the *Numbers* 16,2: "princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown"). For him, Korah's group unites all who incarnate, represent and assure institutionally "the domination of law on the living" and on justice. For Spinoza, however, the group is the representative of the people's protests against Moses' arbitrariness, fantasy and ambitions of a perpetual law, a pontificate, or in a word, his ruse. The violent destruction of Korah and his companions is in the name of "justice," albeit against law, according to Benjamin. According to Spinoza, it is, on the contrary, an abominable

“denial of justice.” Both are in agreement that a terrible act of violence is committed (Benjamin goes as far as to consider it an act of divine hyperviolence, whose complex status will not be discussed here), but it is *justice* which separates them.

The vengeful God who inspires Reason’s fear is unjust. Stupefaction is borne out of God’s injustice – which, not being able to stand this performative contradiction, calls on allegory for its anthropological contents in the figure of a God who is always equal to the self, or in other words, Nature, an equivalence which Reason perpetually creates. This God, whose injustice has been erased, is, Derrida insists, a *nameless God*. The question of the name is strategic in Derrida’s reading. The *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* analyzes very precisely what follows the confusion between name and thing. According to Spinoza, this confusion is at the origin of our belief in fictions as well as most of philosophy’s errors. And yet the nameless God of the *Ethics* represents a reversed reflection of a veritable fiction denounced by the *Theological-Political Treatise*, which is the Name without God as pure *flatus vocis*, destined for rumination and empty and superstitious invocation. This fiction indicates and attests to a powerlessness or a lesser intellectual power. Philosophy must then constitute a critique of language, since it is in language, in the words governed by the body, such as memory and imagination, that fictions are formed. In regards to this coherent and rigorous relationship between philosophical reason as a critique of language and, inextricably, as an operation of perpetuating an equivalence between God and Nature, I will refer back to Derrida and the very start of the lecture on Language and the Discourse on Method.

Divine violence as it is distinguished by Benjamin from mythic violence, its foundation and conservation of law (an evidently decisive distinction), can only be expressed through Justice. It is Justice who smites Korah and his friends, the representatives of institutionalized law. It is Justice which destroys all in its path, that is to say all foundational or conserving violence, or all mythic law. For Benjamin, Justice is very much *the name of God*, to such an extent that we could even say that the God in the *Critique of Violence* is a *Deus sive Justitia*. He delivers “law” by smiting those who play with law and enforce it against Justice. It is without question that Benjamin leaves many aspects of the destructive or even exterminative violence of God in the dark, or in the darkness of God, as Nietzsche would have us say. But, in any case, what we are able to retain from this

is that the violence of the vengeful God, or the God of Justice, is looked at by Benjamin straight into the eyes, without any avowed sense of fear, which does not help to comfort the reader, but does so with a rectitude that is authorized by the equivalence of divine violence with Justice and its extra-subjective power, something much more vast than any notion of subjectivity, consciousness or of individuality – a power which is neither finite nor empirical (Théologico-Politique 2, 3).

The symptomal reading of Spinoza's fear refers Reason back to its non-deductive genealogy, to an originarity that precedes it. God's vengeance is the operator of this genealogical operation undertaken by Derrida. It is true, however, that the seminar does not turn to this ghostly and very "Judeo-German" *Deus sive Justitia*. But it seems possible to me to decipher in Derrida's symptomalization of the *Theological-Political Treatise* a sort of secretive, marranic defense – as if he were a marrano of marranismo – of the biblical-Hebraic literality, with regard to the vengeful God. This is shown in a series of inversions and displacements of fear. The text of these lectures on the Theologico-Political attest to an extraordinary mimetic force of the fear of Reason, towards and away from Spinoza. On page 10 of Théologico-Politique 2, Derrida puts forth the following hypothesis: "If I use the word fear or fright, it is in order to suggest now what I will get to in a moment and to risk a *rapprochement*, a troubling analogy between the stepping back attitude of Spinoza before the vengeful God and the fear of the first Hebrews [...] at the immediate provocation and the fire of the divine speech." This remark pertains to the passage of the *Treatise* that I already cited in which Spinoza tries to determine the cause of the substitution of the pact of relinquishment for the pact of equality: "[O]n the first occasion, they all equally approached God to hear what he wished to decree. But in this first encounter they were so exceedingly terrified and astonished when they heard God speaking that they thought their final day had come. Gripped by terror, they approached Moses."<sup>20</sup> Being very reasonable, we could say, or even, to a certain extent, "rationalist," the Hebrews know very well that direct contact with God would be fatal for them. They are thus seized by a movement of stepping back that anticipates the stepping back of Spinoza, who, in a way, simply repeats the same gesture. But in turning to Moses and delegating all power to him, this movement would turn out to be fatal to the rigorous equality that united them, forever lost, replaced by a stately organization, structured by mediations, mediators and rules. The Hebrews sacrificed

their liberty and their equality *because of their fear*, of their panicked fright towards the violence of God, unbearable and fatal to men (this is the meaning of *Exodus* 33:23, where Moses himself cannot see God, by virtue of an ontological impossibility, and not because of some hierarchical restriction). Filled with dread, the Hebrews prefer to enter into a rational transaction of the delegation of power as a system of protection against the terrible power of the Name. But they remain nevertheless assured, rightly or wrongly, of the Justice of the Name. It is truly the question of Justice which is at stake. The undeniable merit of Benjamin is his understanding of this very point, something which Spinoza's reading glosses over. What we are dealing with is a sort of chiasm in which, one against the other, Justice and Reason are playing – and for Benjamin, this speaks precisely to the conflict between justice and law. Rationalism's exaggerated premise entails a belief in which reason is always and necessarily on the same side as justice, or justice on the side of reason. And what if this wasn't the case? This is the dreadful suspicion that Benjamin's text on violence secretly and remarkably carries; it is undoubtedly here where his obscure enigma resides. It is as if we were to be confronted with, in twisting Spinoza's doctrine,<sup>21</sup> a *fiction of reason!* Spinoza's fear would therefore emanate from a certain recognition, evanescent, fugitive, unavowed, of this terrible and immediate incompatibility between reason and justice, just as the fear of the Hebrews (1, 25ff.) is at the core of the transition from a direct quasi-democracy to the delegation of power and to representation. Representation then, either in the philosophical and metaphysical sense or in the political sense of a transfer of power, sutures the impossibility of a full presence of God, within God. There would be therefore a manifest relationship between the "rationalist and universalist system of Spinoza" and "the transition whereby the Hebrews organize their State" (2, 16). If the God of the Jews is a God "who carries death [...] in the name of his name" (ibid.), there are ultimately two choices. On the one hand, with Spinoza, as well as with the rationalist stream of medieval and Jewish philosophy before him, we change paths, by going towards this *nameless God* who is the *Deus sive Natura* – and it's all of modern philosophy which participates in this movement. On the other, we will have understood that this Name means Justice, *Deus sive Justitia*, and we do not let go of the enigma, as it is scarcely possible – this is Benjamin's stance, despite many considerable difficulties that the *Critique of Violence* does not alleviate. This position is not Derrida's within the sixty odd pages

of the lectures on the Theological-Political, which do not engage with any alternative but take the blade of undecidability right to the heart of Spinoza's argument. However, Derrida's position cannot be understood, in my estimation, without this Benjaminian foundation (messianic) of justice and its aporias, of which reason is terrified.

There is another side to the mimetic power of fear – a sort of secondary power, albeit very instructive. Derrida writes (2, 2) that, considering "the continuation of vengeance," the vengeance of history (Heidegger), the vengeance of language (Scholem) and of course the vengeance of God (Spinoza), he feels himself constant stupefaction, fear, astonishment and fascination; he could himself cry out *nec satis mirari possum*. What does this mimesis of fear signify, its repetition, by Spinoza, who gives fear its motive, by the Hebrews, who are subject to the fatal consequence, and by Derrida, whose revisiting, more or less feigned, is an operative gesture? What all this means, I said it from the very beginning, is an opening or a philosophical emotion, or affect, that can be likened to a procedure or a method whereby "objects" are assigned to thought outside any sovereign understanding, without any grounding, if it were, which would exclude fear in order to attain mastery, by of course a necessary and inevitable inversion of it. Fear is a virtue of Reason which Reason holds as a vice – the moment when Reason considers itself and, at the same time, questions itself in front of the abyss of its possible *deposition*, of its "ecstasy" and of its "stupor," to use Schelling's famous words. Derrida's text offers us a subtle, layered exposition that can take the form of a stratified cross-section of this spectrality.

Firstly, *the fear of the Hebrews*, as understood and explained by Spinoza. This constitutes the moment in which fear shows its two sides. In consenting, out of fear of death, to the relinquishment, the Hebrews fall into a new type of slavery, while at the same time constituting a multitude that "would surely be more fit to rule than to be ruled" according to the words of § 27 of the *Political Treatise*.<sup>22</sup> What would be needed here is a sort of simulation, an auto-commentary on behalf of Spinoza which would be, in fact, a counter-commentary of the passage in question from the *Theological-Political Treatise* by § 27 of the *Political Treatise*. I will of course not attempt this here but I would like to suggest the possibility that, in the very least, Spinoza's fear is spectrally linked to his own reflections on the multitude. Certainly, Spinoza's anti-Judaic passion in the *Theological-Political Treatise* hinders the possibility of such a dialogue. Spinoza is torn between a fear of the plebes, always ready to support the

worst tyrants and to massacre the wise, and the radical affirmation that there is no sovereignty outside the *multitudo*. This significant inconsistency between a multitude which is ideally free and reasonable and an ignorant crowd, “terrible when it is without fear” effectively clarifies the situation of the Hebrews, the relationship to Moses and the theological-political question itself. It is through this problematic that we can understand that the transition from quasi-democracy to monarchy, from liberty in the equality of all to the relinquishment of all to the command of one person, is an expression of Spinoza’s aporia of the multitude.

As for *Spinoza’s Fear*, it is the fear of Reason and, at the same time, the reverse realization that this fear constitutes a “system of protection” (2, 16). In this fascinated expression of Reason, the symptomatic reading reveals and circumscribes a greater frame for Spinoza’s rationalism, a rationalism within a rationalism—une *mise en abîme*—of which Martial Guérout has identified certain traits: an absolute, ontological and univocal rationalism, where being holds an absolute unity in terms of modes, causes and attributes. This ontological structure is determinant and automatically hinders the possibility of any separation between Reason and Justice. The metaphysical reappropriation or naturalization of God leads, therefore, to the nameless God of *The Ethics*: a God who has been emptied of any possibility of injustice, but who is, conversely, a God without Justice. Moreover, if God is to be but a naturalized (or naturalizing) God, and his kingdom equivalent to the law of nature, what happens to his Justice? This is the dilemma.

*Our fear*, finally, the one which Derrida takes on as his own, sharing it with us, can perhaps be seen as a reappraisal of philosophy itself. The stepping back of the Hebrews from God, Spinoza’s from God’s violence, as well as Derrida’s, reminds us of an increasing significance for whoever encounters a text of the tradition. This movement is doubtless the same as what animates philosophy. The *thaumazein*, or ‘wonder’, is a contemplative stepping back of the same type; indignation, as well, or all of the other names that have tried to determine “the beginning of philosophy.” Fear designates a pre-philosophical emotion, or affect, which can legitimately appear in the list. This question is fully undertaken from the very start of the lectures on Language and Descartes’ Discourse on Method according to what Derrida describes as a “fatal topic [. . .] which constrains all philosophical discourse” (Language and the Discourse on Method, 13, 2), in taking the example of the *Treatise on the Emendation*

of the *Intellect* as well as *Sein und Zeit*, of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and the *Manuscripts of 1844*. The stepping back, in so far as it is repeated, engages thought in the fateful topic of the beginning. That where fear fears, thought steps back to think: this is precisely what should be looked in the eyes.

(translated by Richard Spavin)

### Notes

- 1 Thanks to the kindness of Warren Montag and Willi Goetschel, I was able to work on the lecture notes of J. Derrida – also, I have to thank here the *Department of Special Collections, UCI Libraries, University of California, Irvine* where they come from. The typescript comes from two courses, lectures 10-13 of *The Language and the Discourse of Method (La langue et le discours de la méthode)* and lectures 1-3 comprising the lecture on nationality and philosophical nationalism (*Nationalité et nationalisme philosophiques*) and two lectures on the Theological-Political (*Théologico-Politique*). The latter are referred to throughout as *Théologico-Politique*, 1-3. It is on the basis of this distribution, uncertain and temporary, that I will cite here Derrida's notes.
- 2 One can say that Derrida and Spinoza are like two opposed angles of the philosophic field, as far away from each other in the space of a square as possible. And nevertheless, a diagonal can be drawn between them the way Derrida's lectures trace it. This diagonal is the diagonal of "fear." With this line of fear the field is traversed, without that, the opposition between the two "angles" occupied by the two philosophers could be abolished or tempered without reducing the space that opposes them.
- 3 Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 226: "Nor can I sufficiently express my amazement [...];" *Traité des Autorités théologique et politique*, trans. Misrahi-Francès in Spinoza, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. and trans. Roland Caillois, Madeleine Francès et Robert Misrahi Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Gallimard, 1954, rpt. 1988), 867.
- 4 Tacitus, *Histories*, 1.3.
- 5 The Pléiade has: "une véritable stupeur."
- 6 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 226.
- 7 All of lectures on the Theologico-Political originate from the trinomial proposed by Derrida at the beginning of his analysis (*Nationalité et nationalisme philosophiques* 1, 8): corruption/vengeance/spectrality.
- 8 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 214: "The Hebrews did not transfer their right to another person but rather all gave up their right, equally, as in a democracy [. . .]."
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 213f.; *Ibid.*, p. 848 et p. 849. The mediator is

Moses, particularly in this story since he is the one who recommends that the Hebrews “relinquish” their State of equality before finding themselves within a monarchy. Moses is the only beneficiary of this transfer of the natural rights of the people.

- 11 Translations from *Exodus* and *Numbers* are from *The Jewish Bible* by the Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 1917.
- 12 Spinoza quotes Ezekiel 20: 25, Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 226.
- 13 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 227.
- 14 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 225.
- 15 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 45.
- 16 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 45.
- 17 This is what the editors of the Pléiade believe – incapable of taking Derrida’s interpretation of Spinoza’s fear seriously. Derrida harshly criticized them for this.
- 18 Walter Benjamin, *Critique of Violence* in Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), 277-300, 296f. I will refer back to this same passage on page 296f. in the continuation of my argument.
- 19 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 227.
- 20 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 214.
- 21 This is what Derrida does at the beginning of the lecture on Language and Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*, when he deconstructs the founding proposition of Spinoza’s principle of reason in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, according to which we cannot, once we have understood through intellect the nature of the body, form a fiction about an infinite fly. “Is it more difficult to form a fiction of a philosopher in a finite and mortal mode [...] What difference is there between Spinoza and an infinite spider” (Language and the Discourse on Method, 11, 6)?
- 22 Spinoza, *Political Treatise* in Spinoza, *Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Michael Morgan (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2002) cap. 7, § 27, 720.