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The Promise of the Name
'Jewish Nominalism' as the Critique of Idealist Tradition

The name hidden in its potency possesses a power of manifestation and occultation, of revelation and encrypting. What does it hide? Precisely the abyss that is enclosed within it. To open a name is to find in it not something but rather something like an abyss, the abyss as the thing in itself.

Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, pp. 213-214

Here they stopped, tightly packed, bleating imploringly [...] humped and horned creatures, encased in their various costumes and armors of zoology [...] scared by their own disguises, looking with fearful and astonished eyes through the camouflage of their hairy hides and mooing mournfully, as if gagged under their attires. Did they expect me to name them and solve their riddle? Or did they ask for their first names, so that they could enter into them and fill them with their being?

Bruno Schulz, *The Crocodile Street*, p. 133

It is almost impossible to find a modern Jewish thinker who would not express a special interest in the name. Cohen, Buber, Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Adorno, Levinas, Derrida, even Spinoza - may not have much in common, but they all nonetheless share their focus on the name and what it stands for: a "true concretion" of a material singularity which could not thrive philosophically in the tradition of Western idealism and its "icy wasteland of abstraction."¹ Would it thus be justified to talk about 'Jewish nominalism' as an overall theoretical attitude which privileges the singular name over the general concept? Is it possible to rename this loose constellation of thinkers and their ideas concerning name and singularity with one, philosophically more rigorous, term?

But the introduction of this new term meets with serious difficulties. My essay will attempt to confront them, beginning with the discussion of differences and similarities between our stipulated 'Jewish nominalism' on the one hand, and the nominalistic tradition as we know it from the mainstream history of Western philosophy, associated mostly with the late medieval slogan of "Ockham's razor" which facilitated the modern development of empirical science, on the other. Those Jewish thinkers I have mentioned

at the beginning can be called nominalists in the traditional sense of the word, but only to a certain extent and with a decisive difference. Though they all perceive the world as comprised ultimately of singularities, they do not treat “names” as mere *flatus voci*, i.e. arbitrary conventions which express our cognitive helplessness in face of the material chaos of things. Far from fostering any kind of magical realism, which would attribute an ontological power to the act of naming, they nonetheless believe that naming as such opens the gate to a special relationship with reality: a relationship maintained not in the mute operations of Ockhamian-Baconian instrumental reason, but in the dialogical process of linguistic communication, where names and naming constitute, in Benjamin’s words, its very essence and true calling.

Return to the Hebrews: Name Empowered and Name Powerless

If there is a unique linguistic conception which derives, in a Cohenian phrase, “out of the sources of Judaism,” this is certainly the idea that language, ideal and true language, is comprised of names only. As Gershom Scholem, a great exponent of this view, put it in a private letter to Franz Rosenzweig: “A language is name. The power of the language is bound up with the name, and its abyss is sealed within the name.”²² And in another place, in the essay “Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories,” while discussing the linguistic theories of early Kabbalah:

Revelation is first of all revelation of the name or names of God [...] God’s language has no grammar; it consists only of names [...] Thus, the Torah is the texture fashioned out of the names of God and, as the earliest Spanish Kabbalists already put it, out of the great, absolute name of God, which is the final signature of all things. It constitutes a mysterious whole, whose primary purpose is not to transmit a specific sense, to ‘mean’ something, but rather to express the force of the divinity itself which is concentrated in this ‘name.’²³

Let’s leave aside for the moment the elucidation of these dark and dense passages, which talk about the “abyss” of language and the infinite expressive-creative power hidden in the one and unique name of God. What is important now is to see that according to this specific vision, *creation is a linguistic activity*. God creates by expressing his absolute name, i.e. by leaving his secret signature in all things he creates and thus bestowing upon them their names; creation is but an articulation, both the expression and

fragmentation of the divine name. And if Scholem says “God’s language has no grammar,” he means that creation does not need any additional metaphysical structure of mediation between the divine source and created world, no auxiliary scheme of emanation. The relationship between the one and unique God and his creations, conceived in an equally singular way is direct and strictly nominalist. What unites the creation within itself and with its Creator is not the neoplatonic structure of participation, where all beings share in various degrees the flow of divine power, but language and linguistic communication, in which all of these ontologically separate elements come into a cosmic dialogue. This emphasis on language as the only metaphysical “glue” of the otherwise fragmented and horizontally diversified universe, accounts also for the special, elect, position of man who is the only being capable of using language, that is, of maintaining a relationship with created reality via giving names. As Walter Benjamin puts it in his early essay, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”:

Man is the namer, by this we recognize that through him pure language speaks. All nature, insofar as it communicates itself, communicates itself in language, and so finally in man. Hence he is the lord of nature and can give names to things [...] God’s creation is completed when things receive their names from man [...] Name is not only the last utterance of language but also the true call of it... The theory of proper names is the theory of the frontier between finite and infinite language [...] the proper name is the word of God in human sounds [...] The proper name is the communion of man with the creative word of God.⁴

This text, written in 1917, shows that the kabbalistic theory of language had not only not disappeared into the dark wells of history, but had been given a new life which soon would become a characteristic trade-mark of those few very important Jewish thinkers, who at the beginning of the 20th century entered the world of Western philosophy. Benjamin himself called his little piece, after Johann Georg Hamann, his favourite writer, *eine kabbalistische Rhapsodie*, stating that it does nothing but philosophically translate the encoded message of the Hebrew Bible: “In what follows,” says Benjamin, “the nature of language is considered on the basis of the first chapter of Genesis [...] on the discovery of what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regard to the nature of language.”⁵

Already these two quotes from Scholem and the one from Benjamin demonstrate that this metaphysical focus on the name as the true substance

of language, which will eventually issue in the highly original philosophical position of what I call here ‘Jewish nominalism,’ does not have much in common with nominalism as we know it from the late medieval and modern tradition of Western philosophy. Due to what philosophy calls, quite rightly, the *nominalist crisis* of the once ordered medieval universe, the system of hierarchical mediations translating the flow of meaning from the highest to the lowest regions of existence, collapsed and gave way to a much bleaker vision of creaturely disarray. What remained of these ruins were just two extreme poles: to the one extreme stood God, a sheer voluntarist power, and on the other sat his creatures, reduced to passive objects of his inscrutable verdict. Formerly, created reality was perceived as an intelligible order guided by *lex divina*, the divine law of reason and grace, which secured the adequation of the hierarchy of beings to the hierarchy of concepts. Now, however, at the beginning of the modern age, nature becomes radically disenchanting; no longer seen as an emanation of God’s loving rationality, it begins to reveal disquieting features of disorder, anarchy, and arbitrariness – while conceptual language gradually loses its grip on things, no longer able to grasp their chaotic particularity. Thus when William Ockham uses the word *nomen* to express the ultimate ontological status of fragmented reality, he does so in a radically skeptical and negative manner – as a token of our ignorance in face of the multitude of particulars, which does not imply any natural order in itself. It is only we who impose order on the anarchy of beings; concepts, therefore, have no metaphysical reality, they are – as Francis Bacon will say a few centuries later – mere tools.⁶ Being “just names,” powerless noises, which express our reaction to stimuli in exactly the same manner as animal cries, they do not represent any cognitive grasp of the world; this can be achieved only by a speechless instrumental reason whose pragmatic calculations replace linguistic knowledge of reality, deemed as merely subjective and illusory.

Yet, although the final outcome of nominalism may seem remote from the Jewish belief in the power of naming, the original intentions of the thinkers of the nominalist school were, at least at first glance, quite convergent with the main vision of Judaic theology which wanted to return to the original idiom of Hebrew revelation and thus preserve its two, strictly non-Platonic, ideas: creation out of nothing and God’s omnipotence. Hence, when William Ockham says in *Quodlibeta*: “*Deus multa potest facere quae non vult facere,*”⁷ he defends divine absolute freedom; and when he adds in

Commentary on the Sentences: “*creatio est simpliciter de nihilo*,”⁷⁸ he goes back to the basics of the major theological dogma which connects God’s omnipotent liberty with his power to create the world out of nothingness, without the help of any preexisting materials, or preexisting forms called “secondary causes” by the scholastic tradition. In his monumental work, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, devoted to the influence nominalism exerted on the newly-emerging modern mind, Hans Blumenberg gives the most succinct account of Ockham’s intentions, as well as of the “unintended consequences” which issued in the destruction of the medieval neoplatonic system of mediations:

Much of what He could create, He does not choose to create... This conception of creation is not an incidental piece of doctrine of the Nominalist school but is connected to its philosophical center, to the denial of universals and the assertion of priority of reality over concepts. It is easy to show this since a realist doctrine regarding concepts, which holds that they possess a binding force as exemplary entities independent of things, is demonstrably incompatible with the strict concept of a *creatio ex nihilo*. The *universal ante rem* as that which can be and is repeated at will in concrete things makes sense only so long as the universe represents a finite embodiment of what is possible. The concept of the *potentia absoluta*, however, implies that there is no limit to what is possible, and this renders meaningless the interpretation of the individual as the repetition of a universal. Creation is now supposed to mean that every entity comes into existence from nothing, in such a way that even in respect to its conceptual definition it was not there previously. Only in this way can the possibility be excluded, as Wiliam of Ockham argues, that God might restrict His own power by creating a particular entity, because any aspect of other concrete creations that happened to be identical in species with the first could only be imitation and repetition, not creation. Absolute power is original in every one of its creations. It does not recognize the Aristotelian distinction between definite essential form and individuality but produces only what is essentially unique. (LM, 153)

Blumenberg, whose main interest lies in securing the possibility of human cognition, sees only negative consequences in such a return to “theological absolutism.”⁷⁹ The destruction of neoplatonic conceptual realism leaves man with nothing: “just names,” flat voices representing powerless concepts which can eventually gain only a relative power, derived not so much from a relation of *adequatio* with the order of creation as from the sheer economic imposition. Instrumental rationality, therefore, is born out of the clash between perpetual miracle, being an operative principle of God’s creative omnipotence, and the economy of reason, which is the exigency of a finite mind. Says Blumenberg:

Divine spirit and human spirit, creative and cognitive principles, operate as though without taking each other into account. The gratuitousness of the Creation implies that it can no longer be expected to exhibit any adaptation to the needs of reason. Rather than helping man to reconstruct an order *given* in nature, the principle of economy (Ockham's razor) helps him to reduce nature forcibly to an order *imputed* to it by man [...] It is only from this point of view that it becomes possible to characterize nominalism as *the system of breaches of system*, as the shift of interest and accent onto the miracle, the *paradigmatic reduction of the bindingness of nature*. (LM, 154; 189)

In Blumenberg's interpretation, Christian nominalism does not achieve what it wished for. Its intention was to go back to theological basics and restore the glory of the monotheistic Hebrew God: all-powerful, absolutely free, one and unique. Yet, its only, though unintended, result was to annihilate not just God's knowability but also the knowability of the whole world; the only consequence that issued from this return to Hebrew origins was radical skepticism, far more damaging than any of its Greek predecessors. Blumenberg does not state his diagnosis in precisely this manner, but we may nonetheless stipulate that the reason for this peculiar failure lies in the wrong choice of idiom. Return to theological fundamentals, or the so called "theological absolutism" of late Christian scholastics, was conducted in the idiom of Greek philosophy which defines man's basic attitude to reality in terms of an epistemological correspondence of truth: *adequatio intellectu ad rem*, adequacy of intellectual concept to reality. Translated into this idiom, the idea of an infinite divine will can issue in nothing but havoc and destruction: all ties securing the relation of adequacy must be severed; the safety of the timeless, preexisting cosmos must be taken away. God's absolute sovereignty, when seen from the Greek perspective, can manifest itself only negatively as a "breach of the system" and a "paradigmatic reduction of the bindingness of nature" – that is, as a *lack* of order and predictability. This is precisely why Blumenberg could accuse medieval nominalism of bringing back from the abysses of antiquity the specter of Gnosticism which, in his account, is a monotheism gone seriously wrong, i.e. monotheism so absolute that while empowering God limitlessly, it completely disempowers human being, cognitively as well existentially: "The Gnosticism that had not been overcome but only transposed returns in the form of the 'hidden God' and His inconceivable absolute sovereignty. It was with this that the self-assertion of reason had to deal" (LM, 135).

But is it possible to resume the monotheistic concept of God without falling into the pitfalls of Christian nominalism? All of the Jewish think-

ers we have enumerated at the beginning of this essay would strongly endorse the intention of recovering – to use Blumenberg’s words again – the idea of the Hebrew God whose “absolute power is original in every one of its creations and does not recognize the Aristotelian distinction between definite essential form and individuality, but produces only what is essentially unique” (LM, 153). At the same time, however, none of them would accept the destructive effect of the Nominalist School: its radical skepsis, which gradually finds a way out of the hopelessness of human condition only through the pragmatic self-assertion of instrumental reason. Ockhamian nominalism, which came to Christian Europe by way of the theological speculations of Islamic *kalam*, has a rather ominous connotation, which continues up to now¹⁰ – whereas the other, Jewish type of nominalism I would like to defend here, is viewed altogether positively by most modern Jewish thinkers who rarely treat a disjointed singularity with metaphysical horror. Clearly, their manner of negotiating the vision of God-Creator evades the danger of a “hidden God and His inconceivable absolute sovereignty” (LM, 135). But how? Where lies the difference between these two idioms of the “return to the Hebrews”?

Two Nominalisms

Our conjecture here is that this crucial difference consists of alternate epistemologies of the name. Yet, this special epistemological formation, which explains the divergence of two types of nominalism, is closely connected with an even more fundamental metaphysical difference: two very distinct visions of creation. One, Christian and predominantly neoplatonic, is based on the idea of participation – while the other, Jewish, always somehow tangential to Neoplatonism, is based on the idea of separation. In the participatory model of creation, world is created and sustained by God’s permanent emanation; beings, granted the gift of being, remain ontologically dependent on the divine power in which they participate in different modes and degrees, and thus form a hierarchical order of higher and lower regions. On the other hand, in the non-participatory model of creation based on the notion of strict separation, this metaphysical hierarchy is replaced by a quite anarchic “ontological multitude” (as Spinoza could have called it), which cannot be ordered according to the modes and degrees of existence, because it exists in exactly the same way and

manner as the God who created it. In a way, therefore, this vision contains *avant la lettre* the famous argument of Duns Scotus, who, in his thesis on univocity “equalised” the notion of being against the whole neoplatonist tradition of modes and degrees of eminence, still very fiercely defended by Thomas Aquinas. Here, creation means making something other than God himself: something truly alter and distinct which, as Levinas puts it in *Totality and Infinity*, should be able to exist on its own without being a *causa sui*.¹¹ Just as God is unique and singular [*echad*], bearing a distinct Name, so is his creation: equally separate, singularized, and free to express itself in the particularity of the name.

Seen alternately from these two perspectives, the nominalist crisis shows two very different facets: for the participatory, emanantist vision of creation it spells the destruction of the meaningful order of ideas and the emergence of a chaos of disjointed individuals which fall out of the reach of language – yet, for the non-participatory and non-emanantist vision of creation it ends up being rather liberating. It inaugurates a welcome emancipation of language from the tyranny of general concepts and ideas, thanks to which it can finally become, as Scholem wants, a “language composed solely of names,” i.e. a language freed from the exigencies of the human economy of reason. The crucial difference here also lies in the disparity of cognitive interest: while post-neoplatonic, negative nominalism focuses mostly on the status of conceptual order, which it now perceives as ontologically uprooted and thus devoid of legitimacy, Jewish “positive nominalism,” which never had and therefore never lost the neoplatonic sense of conceptual realism, focuses mostly on the status of creaturely particulars which are made and known by their Creator by name.¹²

From this very moment, the evolution of modernity seems to take two parallel routes, divided by the negative and positive understandings of modern nominalism. The first occurrence of positive nominalism, springing directly out of the sources of Judaism, is without doubt Spinoza’s *Ethics*, which, as Hans Blumenberg and Gilles Deleuze independently attest in their commentaries, makes an unabashedly affirmative use of Duns Scotus’ thesis of the univocity of being. It thus allows a full transfer of attributes from God to the created world, which not only becomes fully existent, but also shows the anarchic face of an “ontological multitude,” where every particular enjoys an equal right to be.¹³ This positively nominalist focus on ontologically liberated particulars connects modern Jewish thinkers as different in all other aspects of their thought as Baruch Spinoza and his

famous adversary, Hermann Cohen, who also regards the defense of the singular, possessing a unique name of its own, as the most advanced ethical imperative. And the next generation of “Cohen’s children” – Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Adorno – will see this imperative as particularly urgent in a late modernity whose enlightened, purely instrumental reason threatens to reduce everything individual to the formal order of general concepts.¹⁴

Thus, in *Negative Dialectics*, Theodor Adorno will openly attack “philosophical nominalism” as a negative position which shook our trust in language, yet, at the same time, will speak in favour of the name properly understood as, in Benjamin’s words, “the true call of language.” According to Adorno, modern philosophy vacillates between two equally wrong standpoints: negative nominalism on the one hand, which reduces language to a merely pragmatic tool of instrumental reason – and on the other hand, idealism, culminating in the thought of Hegel, which continues the line of neoplatonic metaphysics, now shifted to the domain of epistemology. Both nominalism and idealism express the false focus of Western philosophy, which has always privileged *logos* in the form of concept: “the icy wasteland of abstraction” (ND, 4), claiming either instrumental power over reality, or, as in the case of Hegel, the ability to turn reality in its own image. Negative nominalism, therefore, is not so much a wholly independent philosophical position, as a skeptical shadow of conceptual realism and its detrimental focus on the abstraction of pure ideas. Thus, writing against both Ockham and Hegel, Adorno famously states: “the individual cannot be deduced from thought [...] The subject lies under a spell from which nothing but the name of subjectivity will free it” (ND, 163; 182).

Seeking a proper understanding of singularity, Adorno is also looking for the right clarification of the nominalist position, which he contrasts violently with what he calls “vulgar” (ND, 202), or “unreflective nominalism” (ND, 103), perceived by him as a false alternative to conceptual realism (or idealism): “Unreflective nominalism [is] as false as the realism which endows fallible language with the attributes of a revealed one” (ND, 69). The blunder of the Western nominalist tradition is that it takes the existence of an isolated atomistic singularity for granted, whereas the singular is a constant task for the work of concepts which should rather “open up the non-conceptual, without making it the same as them” (ND, 20). The singular, therefore, is never a solidly given point of departure – it is always a challenge for the subject who, forced to rely on its conceptual economy of

generalities, cannot reach the individual directly. Both conceptual realism with its modern idealistic avatar and its empirical counterpart, Ockhamian nominalism, are wrong in assuming too much certainty of their respective “givens”: the former by bestowing on human language the powers of the “revealed one,” of the divine language knowing no economy of grammar and reaching straight into the life of things created – and the latter by investing too carelessly in sensual images of particularities as empirical “sense data,” which the Hegelian critique rightly exposes as an empty *das Diese*, the most general of all concepts:

Without the moment of the general, which the “my” points to by distinguishing itself from it, the pure *tode ti* is as abstract as the generality which the isolated *tode ti* scolds as empty and nugatory. The philosophical personalism of Kierkegaard, and perhaps also its Buberian offshoot, senses the latent chance of metaphysics in nominalism; however, consistent Enlightenment recoils into mythology at the place where it absolutizes nominalism, instead of dialectically penetrating its thesis – there, where it breaks off the reflection in the belief of something ultimately given. Such a cessation of reflection, the positivistic pride in one’s own naivete, is nothing other than non-reflective self-preservation, turned into a recalcitrant concept. (ND, 78–9)

In his constant dialectical negotiation between Hegelian idealism and Ockhamian nominalism (or, in other words, German transcendentalism and British empiricism), Adorno wishes to achieve a position which, by combining approaches from the philosophical tradition, would come as close as possible to what we call here ‘Jewish nominalism’ and what he himself perceives as the “latent chance of metaphysics,” vaguely sensed, but never properly realized by Kierkegaard and Buber. In Adorno’s interpretation, this position amounts to three dialectical moments: 1) the name is the true call of language whose role is to guard the process of individuation which can never be assumed as safely given; 2) yet, such naming can only be an attribute of “revealed language,” and remains inaccessible to human language which is forced into the economy of general concepts; 3) still, the language of concepts should be used in such way as not to absolutize the moment of conceptual generality but rather should be used in a “utopian” manner, i.e. as “the utopia of cognition [that] would be to open up the non-conceptual with concepts, without making it the same as them” (ND, 20).

In the meantime, however, the icy abstraction of vulgar nominalism reigns unchallenged, and, as Adorno says ominously in *Dialectic*

of Enlightenment, “The oldest fear, that of losing one’s name, is being fulfilled.”¹⁵ It is precisely for the sake of this endangered, individual and name-bearing existence that these Jewish thinkers embark on their unique and highly original critique of the whole idealist tradition, in which they attempt to formulate their own positive meaning of nominalism, coming not from the late-medieval demise of neoplatonic metaphysics but straight out of the sources of Judaism.

Naming the Bits of the Real: Rosenzweig and Lukács

One of the first critics who would devote his entire philosophical career to transforming the modern approach to language and moulding it according to the rules of “biblical grammar,” was Franz Rosenzweig. *The Star of Redemption*, a book literally written in the trenches of the First World War, offers a scathing critique of the whole philosophical tradition “from Ionia to Jena,” which, in various historical disguises, constantly repeats the same pattern of thinking: by giving the “idealist” primacy over the concept, it always obliterates the individual; or, by stressing the necessity of participation in the system of *Allheit* [totality], and thus neglecting the principle of individuation, it turns singularity into something secondary, of a lesser ontological significance.

The blunder of philosophy consists in making singular being, in Rosenzweig’s notation designated as B (*das Besondere*), wholly dependent on its participation in the general concept (A for *das Allgemeine*), and thus of conceiving it in terms of a meaningless, dark “remainder” of the meaningful emanation of ideas. This neoplatonic scheme is dominant not only in metaphysics; after the nominalist crisis, it becomes all the more operative within idealist epistemology: priority is always given to the concept, no matter whether under realist or purely instrumental auspices, i.e. either as a Platonic idea or a neo-Kantian *a priori*. The purpose of Rosenzweig’s *neues Denken*, which sets new priorities within philosophy, is thus to rescue the singular from the thrall of the general; to save it from imprisonment in the rigid structure of *Allheit*. This goal is not just descriptive; it is redemptive in the strongest sense of the word. The role of the human “soul,” who, in Rosenzweig’s system, becomes the agent of this messianic practice, is to break open false totalities, single out particulars, and breathe life back into their being in the act of naming:

The soul demands, as object animated by it, an articulated life. It then exercises its freedom on this life, animating it in all its individual members, and everywhere inseminating this ground of the living structure with the seeds of name, of animated individuality, of immortality (SR, 241).

Articulated life, i.e. life fragmented into separate living singularities of which everyone can be named, is the target of the operation – simultaneously ethical and linguistic – which Rosenzweig calls *die Belebung*, “animation.” The soul as the source of animating activity, addresses its “neighbours,” i.e. anything that happens to be “nigh” and as *this* or *that* occupies a place nearby; neighbour being simply a *Platzhalter*, or a *locum tenens* of old metaphysics (a term used by the nominalist school to describe things characterized by ostension). The gist of this messianic metamorphosis, which, to repeat, is most of all a linguistic operation that reveals the ethical dimension of language, consists in establishing a new relation with the neighbour, be it a person or a thing. The messianic “fullness of life,” marked by “animated individuality,” which, in the act of naming, becomes eternalized, realizes itself in a new way of addressing our neighbours who no longer emerge in front of us as concrete examples of general ideas, or, as Rosenzweig puts it, as *in-stances*, standing here and now *in-stead* of the concepts they represent, but as *meta-ethical* entities: “meta-ethical” indicating here their ultimately individuated status of beings that have fallen out of the *ethos*, i.e. the totality of the order-of-being.¹⁶ Thus, when Lurianic Kabbalah talks about the “breaking of the vessels” [*shevirath ha-kelim*], Rosenzweig paraphrases the kabbalists and says, this time quite affirmatively, that divine love, manifesting itself as the love of the neighbour, is the power which breaks wholes [*shevirath ha-kolim*].

Rosenzweig seems very clear on this point: only when idealist totalities finally lie in ruins can the true, positive meaning of nominalism emerge, which not only no longer deplors the demise of the neoplatonic metaphysics of emanation, but welcomes it as a necessary step in restoring the proper understanding of creation and creaturely reality. Referring to the neighbour via the name *anticipates* the messianic state of redemption in which every singular instance of being will no longer be just an *in-stance*, but will achieve a state of perfect living anarchy: “an enduring content, an individuality which contains something imperishable, something which remains in existence once it exists” (SR, 222). The essence of this

messianic concept of life, which is so close to Rosenzweig's heart (but also to Spinoza's, from whom Rosenzweig seems to be borrowing heavily), is *to resist death*: both literally, by intensifying one's *conatus*, but also symbolically, as a resistance offered against "totalitarian" attempts to dissolve this singular essence into a deadening generality of concepts and ideas. It is precisely the condensation of this active resistance which constitutes Spinoza's eternally enduring essence of a singular thing, and which in Rosenzweig's *Star* becomes the real designation of the proper name. Name is a true locus of revelation and belief; against the nominalist skepticism which sees in the name nothing but a vacuous "sound and fury," Rosenzweig insists on its peculiar substantiality:

With the proper name, the rigid wall of objectness has been breached. That which has a name of its own can no longer be a thing, no longer an everyman's affair. It is incapable of utter absorption into the category for there can be no category for it to belong to; it is its own category [...] For name is in truth word and fire, and not sound and fury as unbelief would have it again and again in obstinate vacuity. It is incumbent to name the name and to acknowledge: I believe it (SR, 186–8).

Let me just point at this moment to a striking analogy which may come as a bit of a cognitive shock. If you compare *The Star of Redemption* and *History of Class Consciousness* of Georg Lukács, a writer Rosenzweig greatly admired (though not necessarily in his Marxist period which this book inaugurates), you will see that there exists a very clear parallel between Rosenzweig's critique of idealism and Lukács' critique of "the antinomies of bourgeois thought."¹⁷ If we disregard Lukács' political intentions, the structure of reasoning turns out to be basically the same, very much in the vein of the mode of thinking which I try to champion here as 'Jewish nominalism.' They both point to a certain inevitable aporia within the structure of idealist thinking which – as Rosenzweig convincingly shows – continues the scheme of neoplatonist emanation in the sphere of modern epistemology.

This aporia consists in the fact that idealist thought – unintentionally, yet by necessity – produces a barrier which unavoidably blocks the flow of emanation (in metaphysics), or projection of the *a priori* category (in epistemology): this process, which Rosenzweig designates as $A=B$, must eventually reach the wall – "the rigid wall of objectness" (SR, 186). For the neoplatonists it is the Abyss, which contains the primary elements – mind and matter – in its most original, indistinguishable form; for

Kant it becomes “thing in itself”; and for Jacques Lacan, the last great representative of this tradition, who ingeniously combines both views, neoplatonist and Kantian, it will be the Real, the Abyss of the Real, which always threatens to suck in and destroy the precarious symbolic order of both creation and cognition. Thus, when Rosenzweig says that “with the proper name, the rigid wall of objectness has been breached” (SR, 186), he means most of all *the change of the position of the real*, its transformation from the non-categorizable, marginal remainder of the idealist emanation-projection into the very centre of our symbolic activity: what he calls a “grounding” – “a midpoint and a beginning” (SR, 187). Lukács’ analogical argument is even stronger, for he, by resorting to his dialectical skills, demonstrates that this remainder never really functions as *just* a remnant, something minor and irrelevant, but, precisely because of its non-absorption into categories, becomes a dark foundation of the whole rational edifice, always threatening to expose its arbitrariness and lack of legitimacy. The world of rational light is inevitably founded on and surrounded by the abyssal darkness of “irrationality”:

The situation is quite different when rationalism claims to be the universal method by which to obtain knowledge of the whole of existence. In that event the necessary correlation with the principle of irrationality becomes crucial: it erodes and dissolves the whole system. This is the case with modern (bourgeois) rationalism. The dilemma can be seen most clearly in the strange significance for Kant’s system of his concept of the thing-in-itself, with its many iridescent connotations [...] What they all have in common is the fact that they each represent a limit, a barrier, to the abstract, formal, rationalistic, ‘human’ faculty of cognition (HCC, 114).

Thus, if we want to avoid this untoward consequence, the real must be thought of differently: not as an untouchable remnant which immediately transforms into the Schellingian “dark ground” or “somber basis” of existence [*ein dunkler Grund des Seins*], unapproachable by categories, but as something more “positive” which will move to the very centre of our cognitive practice. And the word “practice” appears absolutely crucial for both Rosenzweig and Lukács. For, while Lukács criticizes bourgeois thought for being too contemplative and thus letting slip away “the bits of the real” into the furthest horizon of experience, Rosenzweig criticizes idealist thought for being too mute, and thus too remote from the everyday practice of speech. The following injunction of Lukács to switch from alienating contemplation to appropriating praxis, could be

easily found in Rosenzweig's passage on the special linguistic form that characterizes proper name:

[...] in order to overcome the irrationality of the question of the thing-in-itself it is not enough that the attempt should be made to transcend the contemplative attitude. When the question is formulated more concretely it turns out that the essence of praxis consists in annulling *that indifference of form towards content* that we found in the problem of the thing-in-itself. Thus praxis can only be really established as a philosophical principle if, at the same time, a conception of form can be found whose basis and validity no longer rest on that pure rationality and that freedom from every definition of the content [...] Theory and practice in fact refer to the same objects, for every object exists as an immediate inseparable complex of form and content. However, the diversity of subjective attitudes orientates praxis towards what is qualitatively unique, towards the content and the material substratum of the object concerned (HCC, 125–6).

Name, as used in our vocative living speech, as a form no longer indifferent towards content it addresses but interested in what is “qualitatively unique,” designates the real but at the same time changes its position: it is no longer the rigid wall of obtuse objectness, which cannot be penetrated by concepts and categories, but the very center of our symbolic activity, conceived first of all as a dialogic practice. It is no longer the negative and destructive “thing in itself” of the subjectivist, idealist, purely contemplative approach to language, signaling the absolute limit of every conceptual projection, but the real which has unpacked its “dark ground” and now reveals itself in the practice of speech as a singular and separate entity: our “neighbour” whom (which) we can address in vocative by calling out his/her/its name. For, as Rosenzweig asserts, “a name is alive only in the being called.”¹⁸ Thanks to this operation of living calling, the monolithic “dark ground” of the real dissolves into nominalistic “bits of the real” which then can be finally incorporated into speech. This incorporation is not the same as absorption, which leaves nothing “meaningless” outside of itself – yet it is also a form of living-with-the-real, which no longer threatens to overthrow the symbolic edifice of language.

Staying in Touch with the Real: Kripke

Our next step may seem even more surprising than the juxtaposition of Rosenzweig and Lukács. This time I wish to emphasize the strain of

‘Jewish nominalism’ in the absolute classic of analytic philosophy: Saul Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity*, in which Kripke refutes Frege-Russell’s descriptive theory of names. The analogy, in fact, is not so far-fetched as it might seem *prima facie*. Just as Rosenzweig struggles with the wrong priorities of idealist thought, which always privilege general concepts at the expense of the singular, so Kripke struggles with the idea that names, denoting particulars, have in fact meanings which are synonymous with the set of descriptions, composed only of general terms:

What I deny is that particular is nothing but a ‘bundle of qualities,’ whatever that may mean. If a quality is an abstract object, a bundle of qualities is an object of an even higher degree of abstraction, not a particular. Philosophers have come to the opposite view through a false dilemma: they have asked, are these objects *behind* the bundle of qualities, or is the object *nothing* but the bundle? Neither is the case; this table is wooden, brown, in the room, etc. It has all these properties and is not a thing without properties, behind them; but it should not therefore be identified with the set, or ‘bundle,’ of its properties, nor with the subset of its essential properties. Don’t ask: how can I identify this table in another possible world, except by its properties? I have the table in my hands, I can point to it, and when I ask whether *it* might have been in another room, I am talking by definition about *it*.¹⁹

This is a very Rosenzweigian fragment indeed, in which Kripke dismisses not just the description theory of names, formulated by Frege and Russell, but the whole epistemological tradition from which this theory sprang: the tradition of idealism that privileges the perspective of the subject and its abstract model of cognition over the object and objective reference (Kripke would claim that Russell, in fact, dissolves the issue of reference altogether). Just as in Rosenzweig, or for that matter, in Adorno, who claims that “the individual cannot be deduced from thought” (ND, 163), the primacy is given here to the object conceived as *it*, as the irreducible particular, which is neither behind its abstract properties nor just a bundle of them. This “it,” this “bit of the real,” cannot be addressed by any set of descriptions which use only combinations of general terms, since this “it” keeps its “identity across all possible worlds,” despite the fact that in this passage through parallel realities, it may radically change its qualities. Whether in this room, or in another, whether brown or green, I am by definition talking about “it,” this table, thus designating the true core of reality, something of which the reference as such is made. And to address this ultimate stuff of reality one must employ a name for which ostention, using the occasional pronouns of “this” or “that,” is the best approximation,

because it gives us a sense of what Kripke calls “rigid designation,” a form of addressing “bits of the real” which, going against the grain of idealist tradition, stresses the relation of reference at the expense of meaning.

Just as in Rosenzweig and Adorno’s case, it is once again Hegel who – of course, not explicitly – is being evoked here as the main adversary. Kripke’s argument radically opposes Hegel’s famous thesis from the first chapter of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, according to which the occasional pronouns of “this” or “that” are the most general of all concepts and thus cannot convey the sense of particularity of the phenomena to which they refer. According to Hegel, language is composed only of concepts and it is only the concept in the highest stage of its phenomenological development that can give account of the richness of the concrete (A=B, in Rosenzweig’s notation) – never the immediate sensual consciousness which only deludes itself that it refers to the world of the particulars, whereas in fact it remains the most abstract of all mental faculties. The Hegelian linguistic tradition, in which idealism culminates, snatches away the concrete from the sensual experience, and states its verdict openly: the concrete can only be reached via the evolution of the concept, which originates in the blank ostension of *das Diese*, eventually to attain the stage where it exhausts the richness of the experience and comprises in itself everything that is to be known, meaning at the same time all that is real. It won’t thus be too far-fetched to state that Frege-Russell’s descriptive theory of proper names, which gives names *meaning* synonymous with the cluster of conceptual descriptions (or their inclusive disjunction), sits very well within the Hegelian linguistic tradition – while Kripke’s intervention, to the contrary, situates itself within the line I have decided to call here ‘Jewish nominalism,’ because it totally rejects the idea that our cognitive sense of particularity can be accounted for by the combination of abstract concepts, which is precisely what the descriptive theory of names assumes. There is no single description, nor an inclusive disjunction of descriptions, which could give us the equivalent of what we mean when we address a singular called by us, for instance, “Aristotle”; all his descriptive properties – as “the greatest philosopher of antiquity” or “the teacher of Alexander the Great” or “the author of *Metaphysics*” – taken together or disjointedly, cannot account for the sense of rigidity with which the reference of this name is fixed. As Kripke argues, none of these properties may hold in other possible worlds, and we nonetheless will still think about *this* person as Aristotle. Here, the priority is given absolutely to the necessity implied by the very

act of naming which singles something real out there, “baptises” it with a name, and then “fixes the reference” by using some descriptions, which only help to stabilize the reference in the dialogic passage of the name “from link to link.” These descriptions, therefore, are merely auxiliary in the pragmatic process of establishing the name in spoken language, but never essential to the meaning of the name itself.

Strictly speaking, names do not have meanings; they defy and resist every effort to shift them from the realm of denotation to the realm of connotation. Names represent those “bits of the real” that actively resist all the attempts to dissolve them in any exhaustive set of descriptions; they rather represent reality as defined by Charles Peirce, i.e. as primarily that which poses *resistance*, and not just in the physical sense of the word, but also in a cognitive one, when we simply cannot take all that is there into our mind and then work on it from the inside, as is the case with Hegel’s ultimately idealist theory of cognition and language.

So, if Kripke is a realist, then it is not at all in the traditional sense of conceptual realism. Rather, he would be the realist of the Rosenzweigian kind, which, as he himself admits, comes closest to the position of Hilary Putnam and his notion of “loose realism.” It assumes merely a “loose fit” between the real world and our conceptual schemes, in which we elaborate our “internal” knowledge about reality, but this secondary “looseness,” says Kripke, is possible only because of the original “rigidity” with which we fix the initial, nominalist, reference to the world.²⁰

For Wittgenstein, Kripke, but also for Rosenzweig, each thinking and writing against the idealist linguistic tradition, the larger part of language is not about producing meanings, but about fixing and continuing reference, i.e. maintaining a relationship with the world, by naming, addressing, calling, and pointing to the singular objects. For them, the main part of our linguistic activity is *staying in touch with the real* – without yet attempting to bestow it with meaning. And thus, in forming the idea of language on the basis of dialogic practice, they go completely against the grain of the Hegelian tradition which proceeds according to the reverse scheme: it breaks touch with the real, turns it into a dark remnant-remainder, brackets and sublates the reference, and then takes the whole reality into the mind where concepts emerge *instead* of the things, first “killed” and then only represented *in effigie* in the process of conceptualization.

Conclusion: Nominalism Revisited

From Kabbalah – through Spinoza, Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Adorno – and finally to Kripke? Contrary to its appearance, this was not meant to be the strangest possible philosophical journey. In fact, it was (I hope) quite a logical itinerary, although designed according to an alternative logic, deriving from a different, non-Athenian intellectual tradition which, to paraphrase Benjamin’s words again, made the name and the singular it designates not only the last utterance but also the true call of thought and language.

We have tried to prove here that within this “other” logic, the name operates on the basis of a radically different epistemology. Thus, Jewish nominalism shares some affinities but also important differences with the late medieval and modern form of nominalism founded on Ockham’s razor, which disempowered and disenchanting the language, giving way to the secondary empowerment of instrumental reason and practice. Jewish nominalism is certainly not realistic in the Platonic sense of the word, but it has also nothing to do with magical realism, a position very frequently – though wrongly – attributed to Walter Benjamin, as well as to the whole post-kabbalistic tradition.²¹ The name, even in Benjamin, does not capture the essence of the thing; quite the contrary, it merely secures the existential reference while guarding the thing’s essence as, in Derrida’s words, “undisclosed abyss.”²² Name constitutes here the focal part of the process of communication in which each singular enters as such into dialogue with other singulars: “as such,” meaning its unprecedented *haecceitas*, its elementary “uninstantiability,” as Duns Scotus and Rosenzweig would call it. Here things do not reveal their essences to one another, but show themselves as ultimate *in-dividua* which cannot be exhausted by any chain of descriptions.

This is also why we can call the act of naming God in Jewish tradition the paradigmatic case of naming in the Wittgensteinian sense of the phrase, on which the whole of Kripke’s theory relies.²³ The name “I am that I am” does not reveal the divine essence as pure existence, as the Christian tradition maintains; once again, it is not the matter of knowing God’s true nature, his inner *essentia*. Rather, it is a matter of fixing the reference in the strongest possible way, in which the name calls the real itself directly (“He Is”) without telling us anything about its knowable qualities. It is thus a *pure name* where no auxiliary description is involved, no compromise with the order of conceptuality. Thus, if Jew-

ish speculative thought, most of all of a mystico-kabbalistic origin, sees every practice of naming a singular thing as an instance of the paradigm, i.e. the evocation of the divine name, it is because the act of naming God strikes a very peculiar contact with the real: it points to a singularity which, precisely because of its being, cannot be exhausted by any set of meanings. It is, as Scholem indicates, both meaningless and infinitely meaningful: it is “meaningless” as “I am that I am,” but simultaneously “infinitely meaningful” as lending itself to a never finished, inexhaustible process of descriptive interpretation. Yet, this privileged name does not signify occultation only, it is much more dialectical. “I am that I am” is not just the hidden God of Christian nominalism, for which names are purely conventional “sound and fury,” *flatus voci*. He is *both* hidden and revealed; capable of revelation precisely because of his abscondity. This is the gist of Rosenzweig’s polemic against Schelling’s notion of God as a late avatar of the nominalistic *deus absconditus*, with its unfathomable dark ground of existence; by the process of the dialectical “unpacking” of God in the act of naming-addressing Him, Rosenzweig draws God into dialogic relationship with Man, which both justifies and neutralizes His hiddenness. In order to communicate Himself, He first has to be; there is no need, therefore, to turn His being into a hypostasis (SR, 29). Name is thus a surface – a “face” – of the dialogic process of communication, but it is a surface suggestive of undisclosed depths.²⁴

Unlike in Christian nominalism, therefore, we do not deal here with a strict dualism of *deus absconditus* and indifferent *res extensa*. The mysterious process of communication, of which Benjamin talks in his early essay on language, replaces the mediations of neoplatonic metaphysics without posing any threat to strict monotheism. Everything that is shared in God’s dark ground of existence and only as such – dark, unfathomable, occult – can reveal itself, i.e. turn its “face” towards equally singularized others. Darkness of existence is not an obstacle to the process of communication (deaf-mute abscondity of nominalistic God), but, to the contrary, its necessary precondition. Only as “bits of the real” can things “communicate themselves in language.”²⁵ This is not the neoplatonic image of the universal *methexis*, in which connectedness is possible only on the basis of participation in the same totality, but the very opposite image of communication – not despite, but thanks to the nominalistic dispersion of singulars. Only because they do not participate in the same ontological totality, can they communicate themselves to one another. *Methexis* is mute;

it is to be admired as a miracle of being in silent contemplation. Dialogue, on the other hand, is noisy and for the most part confusing, for it negotiates the real connection which is not to be taken for granted metaphysically. Being may thus be a *transcendentale* in the scholastic sense of the word, but even as such works on a distinctly non-Platonic basis; everything that is, is necessarily separate. Or in other, more paradoxical words, everything that shares the predicate of being, cannot share anything else; *whatever is, does not participate*. Being may be a common concept, but it does not translate into any metaphysical commonness.

Can we thus talk about ‘Jewish nominalism’ as a separate philosophical position with a strong *clinamen* of its own? And to what extent is the affinity between Jewish and Christian nominalism justified? On the one hand, Jewish thought accepts the two most characteristic solutions of Christian nominalism: the univocity of being and the materialist singularization of ontology. Yet, on the other hand, by its unique focus on the alternative epistemology of the name as the “true call of language,” it avoids the pitfalls of the Ockhamian-Baconian option, most of all the concept of speechless instrumental reason which emerged out of the extreme devaluation of language as comprised merely of *flatus vocis*. Where language is understood as a construction of *logos*, devised to give a conceptual grip on reality, its crisis can solely mean a cognitive degradation of speech and a parallel promotion of a mute, purely pragmatic calculation of rationality, validating itself only in practice. But where language is conceived as a dialogic activity of “universal communication,” delivering the only “glue” for a singularized universe, the crisis of trust in concepts leads to an increase of interest in names which for so long remained in the shadow of “icy abstractions.”

Notes

- 1 See Theodor W. ADORNO: *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 4. From this time on in the text as ND. Actually, these words were uttered by Benjamin: “When Benjamin in 1937 read the part of the *Metacritique of Epistemology* which the author had finished at that time [...] he commented, one had to journey through the icy wasteland of abstraction in order to definitively arrive at concrete philosophizing [...] Concretion was for the most part smuggled into contemporary philosophy.”
- 2 See Gershom SCHOLEM: *Bekanntnis über unsere Sprache* (letter to Franz Rosenzweig from the 26th of December 1926), in Stephane MOSES, *Angel of History. Rosenzweig*,

- Benjamin, Scholem*, trans. Barbara Harshav, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 169.
- 3 See Gershom SCHOLEM: *The Messianic Idea in Judaism. And Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, pp. 293–4.
 - 4 See Walter BENJAMIN: *Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. E. Jephcott, New York: Schocken Books, 1978, pp. 319; 324.
 - 5 See Walter BENJAMIN: *Reflections*, pp. 321–2.
 - 6 Bacon will also grossly misunderstand the Biblical parable of Adam giving names to things in paradise and interpret it in terms of a purely pragmatic mastery. Later on the same mistake will repeat itself in Hegel who will confuse names of *lingua adamica* with general concepts.
 - 7 “God does not want to do a lot of things he can do.” See William OCKHAM: *Quodlibeta*, VI 1, in Hans BLUMENBERG: *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1985, p. 609. Later in the text as LM.
 - 8 “Creation is simply from nothing.” See William OCKHAM: *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, I d. 2, q. 4, D; in LM, 609.
 - 9 BLUMENBERG writes: “Nominalism is a system meant to make man extremely uneasy about the world – with the intention, of course, of making him seek salvation outside the world, driving him to despair of his this-worldly possibilities and thus of the unconditional capitulation of the act of faith, which, however, he is again not capable of accomplishing by his own power” (LM, 151). This uneasiness is only confirmed by Ockham’s famous declaration from *Sentences* (II d 19, H), which states very clearly that God is not obliged to anything by anything and that his might cannot be limited by any sense of obligation whatsoever: “*Deus autem nulli tenetur nec obligatur tanquam debitor: et ideo non potest quod non debet facere: nec potest non facere quod debet facere*” (in LM, 609).
 - 10 Vide Radical Orthodoxy in the domain of theology, most of all the works of its founding father, John Milbank who strings along Duns Scotus and the Nominalist School as the main villains, responsible for the destruction of meaningful cosmos (the best summary of this position was given by Milbank’s pupil, Phil Blond in his introduction to Philip BLOND: *Post-Secular Philosophy. Between Philosophy and Theology*, Routledge: London, 1998). Yet the most fierce critic of the nominalist crisis in the domain of philosophy was Martin Heidegger who never tired of exposing the dangers of *Un-fug*, i.e. of things “falling out of joint” with the overall harmony of being.
 - 11 “It is certainly a great glory for the creator to have set up a being capable of atheism, a being which, without having been *causa sui*, has an independent view and word and is at home with itself.” See Emmanuel LEVINAS: *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991, pp. 58–9.
 - 12 In this exposition of the difference between Jewish and Christian metaphysical approaches, we suddenly find a quite unexpected ally, Jacques Lacan, who in his seminar, *Encore*, says very perceptively: “Aristotle’s whole concern was [...] to conceive of being as that by which beings with less being participate in the highest of beings. And Saint Thomas succeeded in reintroducing that into the Christian tradition [...] But do people realize that everything in the Jewish tradition goes against that? The dividing

line does not run from the most perfect to the least perfect. The least perfect there is quite simply what it is, namely radically imperfect.” See Jacques LACAN: *Seminar XX. Encore. On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge. 1972–1973*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. B. Fink, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998, p. 99.

- 13 See Gilles DELEUZE: *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin, New York: Zone Books, 1992.
- 14 One of the reasons, frequently mentioned by these Jewish thinkers, why the nominalistic “return to the Hebrews” failed to deliver its promise was its mediation through the Islamic kalam which, having departed from the Jewish notion of God-bound-by-Covenant, produced a new image of God as an Absolute Sovereign. This explains why, in *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig, who advocates his own version of the return to the Hebrews, attacks Islam so fiercely, focusing mostly on the misled idea of God’s absolute sovereignty: it is not the *potentia absoluta* which constitutes the fundamental divine attribute, but His power of communication, which translates itself into three, closely related, activities: creation, revelation, and redemption. Hence, it is the power of communication which deserves to be called absolute; first, by creating the other who can be addressed – and then by addressing him in the act of revelation which no man can ignore or turn away from (even if he wants to in an initial act of defiance, as Adam or Abraham, who had to be called twice). God’s is an absolute speech, the Benjaminian *reine Sprache*: absolute acknowledgment of otherness coupled with the absolute power of address. See Franz ROSENZWEIG: *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo, Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985. Later in the text as SR.
- 15 See Max HORKHEIMER and Theodor W. ADORNO: *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Ed. G. Schmid Noerr, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 8. This “oldest fear,” having clearly a biblical origin, is best articulated by the *Wisdom of Solomon*: “And our name shall be forgotten in time, and no man shall have our works in remembrance, and our life shall pass away as a trace of a cloud, and shall be dispersed as a mist, that is driven away with the beams of the sun, and overcome with the heat thereof” (2:4).
- 16 Here again we must notice a striking affinity between ROSENZWEIG and Duns SCOTUS who not only created the revolutionary doctrine of *univocatio entis*, but also famously defined the individual in terms of non-instantiability, that is, as a being which cannot be exhausted by being addressed merely as an instance of something more general (e.g. a concrete man is always something else than just “man”).
- 17 See Georg LUKÁCS: *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971, p. 110. From this time on in the text as HCC.
- 18 As Rosenzweig says in the letter from the 23rd of June 1927 to Martin Goldner. See Barbara E. GALLI, “Rosenzweig and the Name for God,” in: *Modern Judaism* 14.1 (1994), p. 76. Perhaps, Eric SANTNER was right when in his book: *On Psychotheology of Everyday Life. Reflections on Rosenzweig and Freud* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), he tried to synthesize Rosenzweig and – via Freud – Lacan. Indeed, the late Lacanian notion of *les bouts de Réel*, “the bits of the real” corresponds

well to the “unpacked” and “unburdened” fragments of the “dark ground” which, for Rosenzweig, constitute the multiple references of proper names. Both thinkers seem to have a similar maneuver in mind, propelled by their wish to get away from the aporias of idealism: first, breaking the Real, so it does not appear any longer as a monolithic and transcendent *Ding an sich*; second, turning it into separate and numerous “bits of the real” (or, as Santner cleverly associates, the Rilkean “countless individuals”); and third, pushing them into the centre of our living practice, which for both, Rosenzweig and Lacan, means most of all a practice of speech.

- 19 See Saul A. KRIPKE: *Naming and Necessity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, pp. 52–3.
- 20 According to Kripke, we fix this reference *via* proper names and the so called common names which, as already Spinoza remarked in *Ethics*, constitutes the way we address the sets of things known to us as natural kinds. Thus, in a very Spinozist, and therefore also very nominalist, fragment of *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke states that “terms for natural kinds are much closer to proper names than is ordinarily supposed. The old term ‘common name’ is thus quite appropriate for predicates marking our species of natural kinds, such as ‘cow’ or ‘tiger’” (NN, 127). Again, they do have meanings – “certainly ‘cow’ and ‘tiger’ are not short for the conjunction of properties a dictionary would take to define them” (NN, 128) – yet none of them is analytically true about either ‘cow’ or ‘tiger’; some of these properties may be necessary for fixing the reference and thus held as necessary truths (as, for instance, that both cows and tigers are animals), but they can never exhaust the “essence” of the natural kind which remains “out there,” always open to further inquiry.
- 21 Here see most of all Winfried MENNIGHAUS: *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980.
- 22 See Jacques DERRIDA: *Acts of Religion*, trans. Gil Anidjar, New York & London: Routledge, 2002, p. 213.
- 23 Such is the main claim of Michael T. MILLER who ponders on the alternative epistemology of the act of naming God in his “Chaos and identity: Onomatology in the Hekhalot Literature,” also in this issue of *Bamidbar*.
- 24 If we are to believe Moshe Idel, the ultimate source of this dialectics of manifestation and occultation, can be found long before Schelling and Rosenzweig in the teachings of Moses Cordovero according to whom “hiddenness is the cause of revelation: *ha-he'elem sibbat ha-hitgallul*”; see Moshe IDEL: *Old Worlds, New Mirrors. On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, p. 111. This formulation suggests that God must be first hidden (and inaccessible) to make himself revealed (and thus accessible). Interestingly, Idel endorses this dialectics against Scholem whom he perceives as leaning too much in the direction of the Christian vision of divine ineffability and the non-dialectical *deus absconditus*. Yet, while it may be true that Scholem’s version of Jewish negative theology is indeed tainted with his interest in German mystics (most of all Reuchlin and Boehme), Idel’s contrary view tends to become an equally non-dialectical opposite in which revelation acquires a “maximalist” (in contrast to Scholem’s “minimalist”) form of an almost full and unimpeded communication of God to man (*ibid.*, p. 124). This is also why Idel interprets the tetragrammatic Name of God (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*) in an emphatically kataphatic way, as opposed to the long Christian tradition of its

apophatic reading. Having quoted many passages from Talmud, as well as Kabbalah, attesting to the “presentist” interpretation of YHVH (“Be with me and I shall be with you”), Idel comments: “It is a revelation not of a hidden God or a God who participates in the fate of His people, but of a God who is affected by the Jewish ritual: His appearance depends upon the human religious performances” (ibid., p. 44). Idel also mentions the figure of the divine face as a manifestation of God first addressed by the humans: “God therefore flows down, not as a predetermined order but as a face that responds to human action by an appropriate facial gesture. The divine face [...] reflects the form of the divine presence, but this presence is conditioned [...] by preceding human actions” (ibid.). Since Idel’s intentions are mostly polemical, directed against Scholem’s intellectualized High Judaism, he overemphasizes the positive moments of revelation at the cost of the Benjaminian-Scholemian negativity, but, when relieved of the disputational contrariety, his position turns out to be, in fact, quite dialectical itself and thus close to what we call here the dialogic aspect of naming.

- 25 See Walter Benjamin: “On the Language as Such and the Language of Man,” in: *Reflections*, p. 315.