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Enlightenment as Exodus: Jewish Ulysses¹

Yes, there is plenty of hope – but not for us ...
Franz Kafka, in conversation with Max Brod

We must paint images of what lies ahead and
insinuate ourselves into what may lie ahead.
*Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia**

[...] schlief ich nachmittags und träumte: ich
war in Süddeutschland [...] Es war eine warme
Nacht – viel wärmer als je eine deutsche Som-
mernacht. Sie war von dem tiefen Grünblau,
das der Himmel nur in Theaterdekorationen
aufweist. Er enthielt zahllose kleine, leuch-
tende aber ganz regelmäßig angeordnete und
miteinander identische Sterne [...] Zu meiner
größten Freude entdeckte ich, dass eine Gruppe
von Sternen – ein Sternbild – aus dem Muster
sich herauslöste, die aus größeren und leuch-
tenderen Sternen bestand [...] Das Ganze kann
nur eine Sekunde gedauert haben. Der Traum
äußerst glücklich; bunt.

Theodor W. Adorno, “Los Angeles,
31st March 1945”²

Jewish Messianism thinks in terms of *Etz Hayim*, the starry Tree of Life, which never bears bitter fruit, but is life augmented and intensified, light and life itself. This heavenly tree constitutes the esoteric manifestation of Yahweh who, as *Elohim hayim*, is the very essence of vitality: it is a ceaseless joy without sorrow and eternal Sabbath without effort.

Such thinking is admittedly difficult, for it relies wholly on elusive images, vague anticipations, omens, and hunches. It is indeed a science of what is not, *not-yet*, which can be studied only on the shaky grounds of our psychotheological presentiments which can never form a clear pic-

ture, merely a ‘spectral’ one. This spectral image is the projection of the most hidden and most precious desires of life which, so far trapped in the Egypt of nature, perhaps venturing out only tentatively into the desert, dreams them half-consciously and unsurely. To be ‘otherwise than being’ which rolls in the monotonous rhythm of becoming and perishing; to be antinomically, against the *nomos* of this Earth which dictates its seemingly inexorable rule of death; to get a starry glimpse of the bliss of the eternal Shabbath that knows no suffering and hardship – these dreams come from the very centre of the living which gradually reaches self-awareness thanks to them. And this self-awareness cannot be detached from the ‘promise of happiness’ – *une promesse de bonheur* – which Adorno, following Stendhal, ascribes to all genuine images of art.

We could thus say that Jewish Messianism is the *Traumdeutung* of life that, through the process of dreaming and dream-wishing, comes to its first self-knowledge: the living begins to know what it really wants. Although this self-knowledge is hardly knowing, since the navel of the messianic dreams of life, just like the ‘dream-navel’ in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, it is not something one can grasp directly. Perhaps it doesn’t yet even have a fixed meaning that the interpretive work could recover right now; perhaps the effort of dreaming and the effort of interpreting go hand in hand only in order to work out the messianic meaning that is yet to come, has not yet matured. The dream-navel is thus both full and empty: it is a matrix which springs into images and words, but is still in a process of producing a meaning, so far graspable only in vague premonitions. It is, as Adorno explains in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectic*, a *Begrifflosigkeit*, the absence of conceptuality, pregnant with images, which are nonetheless “essentially linked to the concept.”²³ Himself deeply interested in dreams, which he dutifully recorded for the last twenty years of his life, Adorno was convinced that his *Traumprotokolle* would provide a canvas for what he called a *happy reflection*: a less repressive type of thinking which manages to escape the one-sided interests of imageless *logos*, chained to the sober games of conceptual dominations. Contrary to what is usually assumed – that it was only Benjamin who cared about dreams and their surrealistic imagery, while Adorno staked his own project solely on the dialectical power of concepts – I would like to show that the latter too has something to say on the ‘interpretation of dreams’ which underlie Western modernity.

The so-called postsecular turn is, in a way, such a *Traumdeutung*: the interpretation of dreams dreamt by Western culture. It is a rediscovery that

the West also has dreams, not just logos, and the most persistent and obsessive of them is the dream of a messianic happiness. With this recovery of the significance of dreams, postsecular thought breaks with the Löwithian thesis of the secularization of modernity. If Gustave Flaubert were to put out an updated version of his famous dictionary of clichés, Löwith's thesis would certainly occupy the top of the list, but Löwith's thought is more complex than his own slogan of secularization. He shows in his studies on Nietzsche and Hegel that modernity is, in fact, a discursive battlefield where two opposite sacral sensibilities fight with one another, constantly producing hybrid results: one, Greco-mythological, which privileges the idea of being as a totality encompassed by a finite cycle, and the other, Judeo-messianic, which strives beyond mythic totalities in the restless search for the infinite. Only on the surface, therefore, which hides the secret dimension of the struggle, does modernity appear to be secular, i.e. devoid of any sacral commitment.⁴ As Charles Taylor demonstrates in his *Sources of the Self*, when two hostile 'horizons' confront one another in the fight for cultural hegemony, they both lose the capability of full articulation. It does not mean, however, that they disappear; they rather slide into the regions of the unconscious and emerge on the surface in the form of symptoms, just like the Freudian imagistic language of dreams.⁵

The postsecular analysis sets itself the task of deciphering: it wants to reveal the antagonistic sacral horizons and their mutual hidden interactions. It does not add anything to the modern condition: it does not postulate a return of fervent piety, does not convert, does not press toward the reinstitution of theology as the crown of sciences. It is most of all an analysis, which, in its ambition to reveal the repressed horizons of modern thought, indeed resembles psychoanalysis. This similarity amounts to something more than just analogy; in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the first truly postsecular work *avant la lettre*, Adorno and Horkheimer freely use the suspicious technics of decoding elaborated by Sigmund Freud. Just like Freud, who in his last essay, *Moses and Monotheism*, deconstructed the shallow secularity of modern man by showing that his unconscious still partakes in a pre-historical struggle between monotheism and paganism, the Frankfurt duo also demonstrates the repressed persistence of religious motifs in the seemingly solid and objective rationality of modern Enlightenment. The eponymous dialectic of Enlightenment amounts to the conflict between two types of sacral sensibility: Greco-mythological, on the one hand, and Judeo-messianic, on the other. Each of these conflicting types

translates immediately into two models of enlightenment itself: the one, based on the *myth of Enlightenment*, represented by the story of Odysseus, and the other, more concealed, based on the *promise of Enlightenment*, represented by the story of Exodus – less explicit in Adorno's and Horkheimer's narrative, but nonetheless very much present as the hidden guiding thread of their critique.⁶

Between Myth and Exodus: A Half-Modernity

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno claim that the main civilizational force which created modern culture is the *escape from mystery*. Only by setting himself free from myth, the traditional site of everything mysterious, was man able to make an exit from the world of nature; only by raising himself above the ambivalence of the elements could he create his own transparent rules of existence and thus enter the way of enlightenment.

Like everything the Frankfurt School founders ever wrote, this message is anything but simply secular. One of the greatest and most deplorable misunderstandings of our disenchanted age is the interpretation of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* as a purely profane work which places itself within the irreligious, skeptical lineage of Enlightenment. This dominant interpretation disregards its wholly adversarial, violently dialectical, and deeply uncanny style. Walter Benjamin was lucky to have a friend like Gershom Scholem, who immediately reacted to his religious, however non-normative, Jewish sensibility. Horkheimer, less lucky, had to do it himself: many years later, in a famous interview for German radio, he quite suddenly declared that all the early Frankfurt School was really just a 'Judaism undercover.'⁷ This Marrano characteristic, which at the same time betrays and covers its traces, applies all the more to Adorno, who was the most reluctant of the three to confess his religious indebtedness – yet all his works, from *Minima Moralia* onwards, bear the distinctive pathos of the Hebraic prophet who preaches to errant hosts in the midst of the wilderness.⁸ It thus will not be an exaggeration to say that *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with its high-pitched hysterical idiom, is nothing else but a typically Jewish type of commemorating narrative called *zakhor*. Remember – or, to put it in the words of Jacques Derrida from *Archive Fever*, "in the future, remember to remember about the future," that is, remember that no closure, however

perfect, is ever final, and that there must always be a *futurity*, a way to transgress all systematic and immanentist closures.⁹

Zakhor tells us to remember what we all would like to forget because – as Jewish tradition well knows, from the era of the golden calf to Sigmund Freud – it is easier to forget than to remember. And the specific *zakhor* which Horkheimer and Adorno proclaim to modern humanity, fallen into the ‘dogmatic slumber’ of self-contentment, deals with the secret message of Enlightenment as, primarily, Exodus: *yetziat mitzraim*, literally, ‘getting out of Egypt,’ and metaphorically, leaving once and for all the domain of the mythical cycle of life and death, the house of bondage of false mystery, and the humiliating domination of nature.

The first founding symbol of the process of *yetziat*, the struggle with mythical mystery and its oppressive domination, is the Biblical image of the Creator hovering above waters. In the midrashim on *Bereshit* we read that the waters of chaos were populated by the ever-first creation which was rejected by God (in David’s Psalms these primary, undifferentiated beings appear under the collective emblem of a dragon called Rachab, being also a synonym for Egypt, as in Isaiah). God rejected them because they were created merely of dark waters without a share of light; what Christianity will later euphemistically call *creatio ex nihilo* was, in fact, an act of destruction of the original, miscarried creation. Yahweh had dried the waters of chaos, letting the earth emerge: a dry, solid ground on which the very crown of the new creation, a human being, could stand safely and surely, ready to continue the plan of Earth’s further transformation. This founding gesture will later recur in the crucial moment of the parting of the waters which allowed Israel to commit a grand act of Exodus: thanks to God’s miraculous intervention, Jacob’s nation left the house of bondage, administered by the cyclical structure of myth, and entered the desert of lawful self-constitution.¹⁰

This image will return many times, always as a symbol of man’s Promethean power challenging the mythical rule of the elements, taking control over the uncontrollable which initially constitutes the definition of the word ‘mystery.’ This is how the second part of *Faustus* begins: the hero, already tired of trifling pleasures offered to him by Mephistopheles, finally wants to do something constructive. Contemplating the ocean, his eyes wandering restlessly over the surface of waters, he begins to feel what a truly modern man always feels in the presence of a sea: he wishes to dry it up. To dry it up, to harden the desiccated ground, to build a city. The same motif appears in the decisive moment of Kant’s third critique, devoted

to the concept of *das Erhabene*, the sublime. Man facing the stormy sea may indeed experience fear, but it is fear immediately incorporated into an emotion of a higher order, which is the pride of being human: he has an inkling of his power which equals or even surpasses the raging power of the elements. And finally the last, crowning re-emergence of the archetype of Exodus, which appears three millennia after Genesis: Freud's leading metaphor of *Suidersee*, the Netherland bay which became 'meliorated' and thus turned into fertile soil, as a fitting figuration of the broad open land of modern subjectivity. The enlightened ego, the only instance of psychic life capable of development and self-perfection, imposes its 'melioration,' i.e. the improving efforts on inner elements. *Wo es war, soll ich werden*: wherever the timeless, inscrutable cycle of desire and death presides, time and its temporal, linear order shall enter.

Yet these magnificent images of man's coming out of the sphere of the mythical rule of mystery are always overshadowed by fear. Kant's immediate urge to reinterpret the notion of *Angst* which co-constitutes the experience of the sublime as something positive seems a very obvious case of what psychoanalysis would later call a reaction-formation: a denial of the inhibiting presence of anxiety. Just before his death, Faust allows himself to be overwhelmed by the ghost of Fear who, as he now realizes, had been his subconscious companion for all those years he spent with Mephisto. And the same applies to the Freudian ego which constantly lives on the verge of neurotic breakdown caused by the high level of anxiety. In terms of psychic costs, Exodus is thus an expensive enterprise: the more we 'get out' from the natural pattern, the more we cross beyond the vital order, the more we reach into uncharted, unnatural territories – the graver, the more pervasive grows our fear, anxiety, and incertitude.

But there is yet another existential calculation, characteristic only of the project of Exodus, which partly compensates for the losses in certainty; the very opposite of a safe bet, in fact, a terribly risky venture implying a notion which had never played an important role in the archaic, mythological universe – *the category of hope*. Søren Kierkegaard, in his *Concept of Anxiety* – the most insightful psychological analysis of the *yetziat* – says that this is precisely what differentiates the Greeks from the Jews and sets the eternal non-negotiable opposition of Athens and Jerusalem. The Greeks have the sense of tragedy in which every individual hubris has to be punished by the mythical, all-leveling power of fate, while the Jews want to challenge the natural order by promoting a notion of hope which only

then becomes an ‘ontological category’: that is to say, not just a subjective state of a mind overwhelmed by hubris, but an objective potentiality of the world which is not yet finished.¹¹ The same motif appears in Ernst Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia* (then elaborated in his three-volume explorations of the ‘images of hope,’ *Prinzip Hoffnung*), and later reemerges in Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “For in its figures mythology had the essence of the *status quo*: cycle, fate, and domination of the world reflected as the truth and deprived of hope.”¹² It is thus only Exodus that brings a promise, which, in turn, gives birth to hope – but, also, when the promise is unfulfilled, the sense of hopelessness it engenders becomes far worse, far more damaging than the original ‘deprivation of hope,’ inscribed in the safe mythological logic of small expectations and disappointments anticipated in advance.

Yet the hopelessness of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s tone is precisely the reverse of a still possible hope which they do not want to abandon. A few years later, in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno would summarize their standpoint as follows: “So, when we are hoping for rescue, a voice tells us that hope is in vain, yet it is powerless hope alone that allows us to draw a single breath.”¹³ What the authorial duo offer in their book is a sort of transcendental deduction of the category of hope; it is an inquiry into the very possibility of hope as such, which now, in the conditions of late modernity, finds itself on the verge of total extinction. They demonstrate the dependence of hope on the persistence of a strong anti-mythological narrative, endangered by the opposite mythology of *Kreislauf* which, in its turn, abandons all hope, by giving in to either mythic nostalgia or cynical reason; either a false enchantment of modern myths, which exalt the permanence of ‘what is,’ or a disenchanting cynical affirmation of the *status quo*, which relinquishes all dreams of change. From the depths of their hopelessness – *de profundis* – Horkheimer and Adorno cry for the scattered remnants of hope, hoping for the recreation of a more integrally hopeful idiom. Just like Benjamin in his *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* wished for a miraculous reversal of the ultimately nihilized world into a word of revelation, they yearn for a similar *Umkehr* where the all too painful loss of hope will lead to a crisis so powerful that it will suddenly reveal the cure: the renewed and re-actualized project of Exodus. In the midst of the *Apocalypse Now*, this ancient narrative should once again reverberate with all its now lost freshness: *Exodus Now*.

Dialectic of Enlightenment is one of the most terrifying and depressing

books ever written. Or, perhaps, ‘written’ is not the best word here, for this book belongs primarily to the more ancient oral tradition; before it was turned into a scripture, it was first chanted out in a kind of a psychotic-prophetic trance by its authors during their American exile; overshadowed by the war and the Shoah, the book radiates with a particularly bleak aura of ultimate doom. It constitutes the most severe accusation of Western modernity, and, at the same time, a desperate attempt to defend the Enlightenment against the Enlightenment itself. The Western *Aufklärung* is but a demonic formation which, having unsuccessfully challenged the power of myth, is now being haunted by myths that return with a vengeance. The modern world, obsessed by ‘the myth of that which exists’ (DE, 12), turns into a positivistic second nature, far more oppressive than the first one: technology gets out of control while individuals, quite to the contrary, become cogs in its universal machine. The Kantian idea of individual, courageous subjectivity is gone, destroyed by semi-elemental forces from without and from within. The banned nature takes its cruel revenge in the process of ‘repressive desublimation’: raging distorted instincts turn the promised land of technological self-fulfillment into a regressive, frightening stage of second wilderness. Everything modernity tried to suppress comes back with the threatening air of the return of the repressed.

The reason for this disastrous failure lies in the fact that this suppression was not a proper exit out of the mythic world, but – precisely – only a *suppression*: a superficial and partial maneuver of gaining distance from nature, which did not prevent mankind from imitating *the worst* aspect of nature itself, namely the principle of domination: “What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim” (DE, 4). But if that is the only purpose – just the reversal of the poles of domination – then Enlightenment, as a strategy of getting out from mythological world, must be doomed: “Just as the myths already realize enlightenment, so enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology” (DE, 12).

The question Horkheimer and Adorno pose is the following: can Enlightenment be saved from its mythic distortion in a mere disenchantment and returned to an original project of Exodus? Can there be a future Exodus from the Exodus gone wrong? And, if there is an exit into another modernity, leading out of the house of the present bondage, where can it be found? *Is* there still hope – with the special emphasis on *is*, the endangered ontology of hope as such?

The Language of a Corrupted Myth

There is a palpable sense of inhibition in the text of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which lies in its fully deliberate pragmatic inconsistency, in the predicament of writing that is, in Hegel's phrase, 'grey on grey': without a glimmer of hope, in the midst and from the depths of hopelessness only. If Horkheimer and Adorno interrogate mercilessly all traces of the dialectics of Enlightenment, it is only because they themselves are – to use Adorno's formulation from *Minima moralia* – the prisoners of its language: their 'knowledge,' as the last entry in this book announces, "is also marked [...] by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape" (MM, 247). They portray the modern Egypt from the inside and with the help of its cursed idiom, equipped with nothing more than a shimmering presentiment of a very, very weak messianic power (if 'power' is the right word here at all), being nothing else but a 'consummate negativity' flipped into a 'mirror-image of its opposite' (ibid.). The language in which they define modern subjectivity – the monotonous disenchanting discourse of mastery, control and domination – takes on the same circular, repetitive form they find so abhorrent in all pre-modern myths. But they don't want to pretend to be able to speak an idiom that would be radically different from the Baconian, thoroughly disenchanting language which turned enlightenment into a dreary, positivist 'myth of factuality.'

Their position in this book is, indeed, very twisted, but – again – deliberately so. On the surface, they seem to be assuming the role of Erynia, the goddess of fateful revenge, who comes to destroy the project of enlightenment for its *hubris*, that is, its delusion that it could ever leave the world of mythic powers. While seeing the enlightenment as gradually devoured by myth from which it never truly arose, they appear to administer to it a final blow coming from the highest mythical authority: the sacred retribution of *nemesis*. Yet, in fact, their true vantage point is different: they look upon the mythicized enlightenment from the hardly tangible, ideal, anti-mythological perspective of Exodus, as an originally corrupted enterprise, propelled only by a partial and merely negative motivation of escaping the mystery. The enlightenment they criticize is, therefore, analogical to the liberal negative freedom which tells us that as long as we are free from the state of nature we are allowed anything; such a concept of freedom only wants us to get out from the sphere of natural dominion, but does not offer any positive goal instead, or any promise of a qualitatively different

life. It only disenchantments the natural mystery, but disenchantment – being a weapon of instrumental reason – merely manages to revert the relations of power, where it is now rational subjectivity that gains domination over nature. In the end, therefore, the Enlightenment, confused with nothing more than disenchantment-*Entzauberung*, reproduces the very essence of myth from which it wanted to free itself in the first place: the structure of power. The ‘true,’ now totally forgotten, enlightenment wanted something more when it offered itself as a promise of getting out of all the Egypts of this world, that is, from all structures of power as such. By forgetting about the promise, and leveling itself only to the strategy of instrumental inversion of power-relations between reason and nature, the Enlightenment inevitably slides back into the mythological world:

The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, that the Enlightenment upholds against mythic imagination, is the principle of myth itself. That arid wisdom that holds there is nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played, and all the great thoughts have already been thought, and because all possible discoveries can be construed in advance and all men are decided on adaptation as the means to self-preservation – that dry sagacity merely reproduces the fantastic wisdom that it supposedly rejects: the sanction of fate that in retribution relentlessly remakes what has already been. What was different is equalized. That is the verdict which critically determines the limits of possible experience. The identity of everything with everything else is paid for in that nothing may at the same time be identical with itself (DE, 12).

The main hero of Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s analysis is thus what can and should be identical only with itself: the individual life, or, even better, the singular living (*das Lebendige*) – which, according to the motto from Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, “does not live.” It remains stifled and repressed, closed in its hopeless natural form of becoming and perishing, strained under the demands of a bare self-preservation – despite the promise that offered to lead it out of Egypt-stricture into a broad open land of liberty, individuation and joy. It is in the name of this repressed particular life which they unleash their vitriolic tirade; they see themselves as the last righteous ones, the last *Fürsprecher*, spokesmen of the creaturely condition of a singular living. For in modernity, life fares no better than in all mythological systems: it is as reduced to the natural cycle and the struggle of self-preservation as it always was, which means that it is still being offered as a sacrifice at the altar of the general idea of Life and its sublimely mysterious eternal rhythms of repetition. By constituting no more than what Benjamin used to call pitifully a ‘bare life’ (*bloßes Leben*), a cog in the

vegetative machine of the eternal return of the same, it stands no chance in the face of what Adorno in *Minima Moralia* dubs ‘an abstract concept of life,’ characteristic of the German *Lebensphilosophie* which formed a theoretical springboard for the fascist ideology as the most pernicious ‘myth of the 20th century.’ In the following fragment, in which Adorno criticizes all forms of modern vitalism, Life emerges as an adversary – but only in the struggle for the dignity of a singular living being:

The concept of life in its abstraction [...] is inseparable from what is repressive and ruthless, truly deadly and destructive. The cult of life for its own sake always boiled down to the cult of these powers. Things commonly called expressions of life, from burgeoning fertility and the boisterous activity of children to the industry of those who achieve something worthwhile, and the impulsiveness of woman, who is idolized because her appetite shows in her so unalloyed; all this, understood absolutely, takes away the light from *something else, something merely possible* in blind assertion. Exuberant health is always, as such, sickness also [...] To hate destructiveness, one must hate life as well (MM, 77–78; my emphasis; translation slightly altered).¹⁴

The failure of modernity, therefore, consists in a total remythicization, the syndrome of which is the quasi-mystical bubbling of the ‘grand mystery of life’ (see Adorno’s fierce attack on the New Age movement just a few pages later); the return to a false *Geheimnis* which, at the same time, deprives life conceived as a singularity of ‘something else, something merely possible’ that fuelled its messianic dreams and resided at the core of the exodic promise.

René Girard would call this vicious circle the effect of a myth corrupted, a myth that went awry, *le mythe gâché*. In his *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard describes unhappy incidents of holy rituals that go wrong: instead of bringing *katharsis*, the final fulfillment of purification and relief, these myths gone awry merely exacerbate the dramatic tension from which they started and result in an uncontrollable cascade of violence.¹⁵ The corrupted myth, analogically, is the myth that undertakes the dangerous notion of violence, power and evil in human existence, but instead of finding solution or, at least, consolation, it only makes things worse. This seems to be the exact fate of the myth of Enlightenment: it promised man mastery over the world, but it ended up by staging a new world of technology far beyond any possibility of human control; it wanted to reverse the relationship of domination between man and nature, but failed by producing the discourse in which there is no escape from the dialectics of master and slave. Yet for the Frankfurt duo, who would agree with Girard only to certain extent, no

myth as such could ever be healthy: as a myth, i.e. as a structure which half-problematizes and half-covers the relationships of power, it constitutes the very source of corruption. Just like the Heideggerian *aletheia*, it thrives on a half-concealment, which ultimately resides in the mystery, *das Geheimnis*, the abyss of non-differentiation, engulfing and annihilating everything that dared to appear as a singular phenomenon; it thrives on a closed cycle for which every singularity – be it an individual thing, an experience, an event, or simply ‘something to remember’ (*zakhor*) – is nothing but a passing aberration. And the cycle is the true horror for the Jewish imagination; unlike that of the Greeks, it does not fear the vacuum, quite to the contrary, what it really fears is the all-encompassing plenitude and its inner repetitive rhythm. It suffers a fierce *horror plenitudinis*, which finds its best expression in Adorno’s most anti-Hegelian epigram: “Totality is untrue.”¹⁶

In his attempt to restore the ancient dignity of mythological thinking, paralleling the Heideggerian enterprise, Mircea Eliade would surely say that the language Horkheimer and Adorno use to talk about myth is characteristic for what he calls an ‘nonreligious man,’ that is, someone for whom the sense of cosmic sacrum becomes obscure. In “Sacred Time and Myths,” Eliade states:

Hence religious man lives in two kinds of time, of which the more important, sacred time, appears under the paradoxical aspect of a circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythical present that is periodically reintegrated by means of rites. This attitude in regard to time suffices to distinguish religious from nonreligious man; the former refuses to live solely in what, in modern terms, is called the historical present; he attempts to regain a sacred time that, from one point of view, can be homologized to eternity.¹⁷

Horkheimer and Adorno would thus find themselves in the position Eliade calls a contradiction between modern and pre-modern man, the tense predicament of half-modernity: on the one hand, they find the religious will to return and reconstitute the mythic situation unbearable and humiliating – while on the other hand, however, they sincerely diagnose the ‘tendency to repeat’ which they detect at the core of the broken paradigm of Enlightenment. But although they may seem thoroughly ‘nonreligious’ to Eliade, who himself was a strong advocate of the return of myth and saw, unfortunately, nothing *unheimlich* about its half-repressed modern manifestations,¹⁸ they nevertheless do not give in to a complete abandon. They rather rest their hopes in the world of aesthetic images, the only

remaining refuge of utopia, the very navel of messianic dreams, which contradicts the mythological, cyclical and timeless, imagery of archetypes:

Men had to do fearful things to themselves before the self, the identical, purposive, and virile nature of man, was formed, and something of that recurs in every childhood [...] The road [of civilization] was that of obedience and labor, over which fulfillment shines forth perpetually – but only as illusive appearance, a beauty deprived of power (DE, 33).¹⁹

It is a double-edged formulation, this *entmachtete Schönheit*, ‘beauty deprived of power.’ On the one hand, in the language solely determined by relationships of domination, such moments of beauty are, indeed, nothing but an appearance on the surface of things – on the other hand, however, we might ask, is it really *power* which they lack? Or, perhaps, their powerlessness is a sign of their transcending beyond the claustrophobic, self-defeating dialectic of mastery and self-preservation? As ‘beauty deprived of power,’ Horkheimer and Adorno describe a rare experience called – among others, most notably by James Joyce – ‘modern epiphany’: an ambivalent vision, which, when measured by the rules of the mundane, practical world, seems indeed merely *epiphenomenal*, that is, of no substance or value, but which also, precisely because it transcends these profane measures, offers an intuition of something radically different that resists reduction to the power games of everyday life. It is thus something more than just the Schopenhauerian consolation brought by art. In the context of their ‘grey on grey,’ self-devouring language of sole power, the very phrase ‘powerless moment of beauty’ begins to sound like a *promise*. And, at the same time, they suddenly intimate a far more esoteric interpretation of *yetziat* itself: more Kabbalistic perhaps, where the privileged ‘spots of time,’ in which the world bursts into a vision of singular beauty, are nothing but the hopeful sparks of Shechinah, the scattered light of the original creation, which needs to be lifted and released from the bondage of the fallen, cyclical, repetitive, deeply unhappy nature. Just like the constellation – the ‘starry image,’ *Sternbild* – in Adorno’s happy dream, they need to be detached from the totality, and then opposed to the natural *das Ganze*.

Epiphanic Dream-Images: Towards a Messianic Aesthetics

While myth relies on cycles, generalities and repetitions, and as such “abandons all hope” – the epiphanic holiness is absolutely singular and

because of that it is *hopeful*. Unlike the *archetypic image*, characterised by a timeless validity and universality, the *epiphanic image* is based on what William Blake called *particularisation* and Walter Pater after him *concretisation*: its sole interest is to show the phenomenon in its singular uniqueness.²⁰ And although this ‘Romantic Image’²¹ must remain as discontinuous with the rest of life as the Wordsworthian privileged ‘spot of time,’ its seemingly powerless beauty can nonetheless exert a power on life through the utopian promise it contains and guards as if in the messianic navel of dreams. The ethics of singularity, which constitutes the *practice of transcendence* here and now, in the immanent conditions, derives initially from the domain of aesthetics: the *entmachtete Schönheit* that makes the very core of the modern epiphany, the starry image (*Sternbild*) momentarily detached from the oppressive totality.²²

For it is always originally an image as an absolute singularity that hurls an obstacle against the machinery of general concepts which destroy every particularity, the image-like *das Diese*. Thus, while in Hegel the power of the Spirit is associated with the annihilating force of death, which turns into dust ‘soft’ beauty of images, in Adorno the Spirit will locate itself in the negativity of an image itself: in the resistance it poses towards conceptual dissolution in the general element – or, in other words, in the promise of the name thanks to which language will be able to give justice to singularity. In Benjamin, the same function of a fortunate obstacle will be performed by a ‘thought-image,’ a hybrid construct of words and figures, possessing the impenetrable density of the Freudian ‘navel of dreams.’ Benjamin’s and Adorno’s investment in the powerless power of images, in this peculiar *messianic aesthetics*, comes from their recognition that in the resistance, impenetrability and agonistic thrust of the epiphanic image, there resides the only trace of revelation, with all its precious antinomianism. If the antinomian message of radical transcendence is to be made operative at all within the immanentist predicament, it is only via the translation into the categories of singularity and generality – or, in other words, into the agon of a singularized, epiphanic image against the army of concepts.

Unlike, therefore, the subtly ironizing Joyce, who watches the antinomies of the half-modern man, half a wandering Jew and half a nostalgic Ulysses, with the detached smile of an aesthete – Adorno is not ready to give up the hopes of Enlightenment, no matter how deeply fallen. Equipped with nothing but a weak messianic power of merely spectral ‘imageless images’ (as he calls them in *New Philosophy of Music*), he embarks on a project of

aesthetic messianism. Adorno sees the Enlightenment as failing precisely in its attitude towards images: taking the side of a non-dialectical iconoclastic disenchantment, the Enlightenment throws out the child of imagery with the bathwater of mythological chant – yet the images stubbornly keep returning, though now always only in their sinister archetypic function where “the abolition of the particular is turned insidiously into something particular” (MM, 141): “The objective tendency of the Enlightenment to wipe out the power of images over man, is not matched by any subjective progress on the part of enlightened thinking towards freedom from images” (MM, 140). But Adorno’s goal is more dialectical: he does not want to free the enlightened mind from images altogether and replace them with abstract concepts, but to deprive images of their mythic generality and return to them the ‘honour of the name,’ their rightful representation of particularity which would then be capable of opposing the general forces of myth in a ‘methodical’ way.

We can thus say that although Adorno’s project plays with the weaknesses of *Entmachtung*, it has nothing to do with the ‘weak’ *as-if-ness*, of which Jacob Taubes accuses him in his *Political Theology of Paul*. It is not a fearful, defensive and half-hearted use of messianic tropes, which apprehensively stops at the gates of an ‘apocalypse now,’ conceived as the only true messianic event. Adorno’s understanding of messianism is different: it is, to repeat again, not ‘apocalypse now,’ but ‘exodus now’; not the exercise of an apocalyptic divine violence, coming down to administer a final blow to the sinful world (which, in fact, is nothing but a mythic justice of retribution, the very archetypic image of *nemesis*), but the truly exodic practice realizing itself on an everyday basis in the ethics of singularity.²³ Adorno’s effort, therefore, consists in forcing the seemingly powerless beauty of epiphanic images to reveal their messianic – however weak, however nontransparent – aspect and to make it operative in the immanent world. And it is precisely their *Entmachtung*, making it so frail under the scrutiny of the mundane, suspicious, cynical and power-driven modern eye, which becomes the source of an alternative *Macht* that points to an altogether different world, sharply cut off from ‘everything that exists,’ *der Bannkreis des Daseins*. The *Entmachtung* is precisely *beauty’s strength*: the only possible form in which the messianic moment can appear in the world as it *is*. Weak – meaning also: evanescent, fleeting, and thus strictly singular in its evasiveness, non-submittable to the mechanical repetition which constitutes the essence of all being as such, the very mark of its dark mythical fallenness:

What beauty still flourishes under terror is a mockery and ugliness to itself. Yet its fleeting shape attests to the avoidability of terror. Something of this paradox is fundamental to all art; today it appears in the fact that art still exists at all. The captive idea of beauty strives at once to reject happiness and to assert it (MM, 121).

Never relaxing in his vigilance, Adorno warns us also against any positive, affirmative use we can make of beauty, thus trying to empower it within our collapsed world and make it “flourish under terror.” Beauty is ambivalent, for it can commit itself to the service of either Life or the Living, either Nature or the not-yet-existent promise, either the System or the repressed singularity – and it is precisely this ambiguity which must be turned into a sharp antinomy by a messianic gaze. Just like images that can be either archetypic or epiphanic, beauty also is a double-edged weapon which can be used either for the sake of the mythical reconciliation with being as it is, or for the sake of suspicion towards being, safeguarding a hope for ‘something else, something better.’ Adorno says, who knows if not in reference to the major epiphany of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (but also, perhaps, to the opening, vaguely mythological, epiphany of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*):

Even the blossoming tree lies the moment its bloom is seen without the shadow of terror; even the innocent ‘How lovely!’ becomes an excuse for the existence outrageously unlovely, and there is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better. Mistrust is called for in face of all spontaneity, impetuosity, all letting oneself go, for it implies pliancy towards the superior might of the existent (MM, 25).

Mistrust is called for – which is nothing but the personal effort of Exodus that the Talmud so strongly recommends by ordering that “every individual must think of himself as if he personally came out of Egypt.” Suspicion, vigilance, anxiety, incertitude – all these costly affects are the necessary price the individual life must be ready to pay for its right to dream and then act on the grounds of the messianic hope to get out, to live a better, happier, freer, truly singular life. The moment this ‘price of messianism’ (as Taubes called it) is felt to be too high, the singular living immediately loses hope: gives in to nostalgia and a secure sense of belonging to a remythicized totality which it sublimates by a recaptured notion of ‘mystery.’ And not only does it lose hope; it also forgets about those images and narratives that used to sustain the possibility of hope, its fragile anti-ontological, antinomian *hauntologie*.

The post-secular turn in modern thinking makes sense only when it illuminates precisely this alternative: between myth and Exodus, between

modernity returned to mythological totality and modernity still kept open to its ‘not yet’ realized promise. But even this is not enough; postsecular thought, if it does not wish to be simply a hollow echo of the long-gone theological orthodoxy, must make a normative claim and, conceiving its intervention emphatically in the terms of the *exodic thrust*, which defends the Enlightenment against the Enlightenment itself – openly struggle against the return of *any* form of mythic sensibility. Not all dreams are, in fact, worth dreaming; some of them quickly turn into nightmares. Postsecular thought must, as Habermas once put it, cooperate with Enlightenment,²⁴ though not on the grounds of its false semi-mythic consciousness. Postsecularity is either a vigilant maintaining of a broad open space in which individual life can further dream its messianic dreams of emancipation – or it is nothing at all.

Notes

- 1 This article constitutes a shorter and slightly modified version of the essay, “Jewish Ulysses: Postsecular Meditation of the Loss of Hope,” which appeared in my book, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos*, London & New York: Routledge, 2014, 292–318. I would like to thank Routledge for their permission to reprint parts of it here.
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Traumprotokolle*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005, 42. In my translation: “I fell asleep on afternoon and dreamt: I was in the Southern Germany [...] There was a warm night – much warmer than any German summernight. It had a deep green-blue hue which the sky shows only in theatrical decorations. The sky was full of innumerable little shining stars which seemed absolutely regular and identical with one another [...] With great joy I discovered that one group of them, which consisted of bigger and brighter stars – a constellation – detached itself from the pattern [...] The whole thing couldn’t have lasted longer than a second. A most happy dream; colourful.”
- 3 Theodor W. Adorno, *Vorlesungen über negative Dialektik. Fragmente zur Vorlesung 1965/66*, herausgegeben für das Theodor Adorno Archiv, Frankfurt am Main, 2003, 104. In his insistence on remembering and writing down his dreams, Adorno may be said to follow both his friend, Walter Benjamin, who in *One-Way Street* recommends telling one’s dreams as the decisive moment of dividing the ‘nightworld’ and the ‘dayworld,’ as well as Talmud which states that the uninterpreted dream is like an unread letter.
- 4 See Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, trans. David E. Green, New York: Anchor, 1967, as well as *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949.
- 5 See Charles Taylor, *Sources of The Self: The Making of The Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

- 6 The messianico-exodic element is usually completely ignored by Adorno's interpreters who take his dialectical view of enlightenment as poised between *mythos* and *logos* at face value, remaining insensitive to the implicit non-Greek canvas of Adorno's narrative. Thus, when Raymond Geuss or Martin Seel write about hope and happiness in Adorno's teaching of a good life, they naturally refer it to the Aristotelian eudaimonian scheme, paying no attention whatsoever to the other framework of the *happy blessed life*, which is contained in the messianic image of the eternal Shabbath. The only exception here is Richard Wolin who introduces a philosophical equivalent of redemption into his reflections on Adorno's aesthetics. See: Raymond Geuss, "Happiness and Politics," in *Outside Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005; Martin Seel, *Versuch über die Form des Glücks: Studien zur Ethik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995; Richard Wolin, "Utopia, Mimesis and Reconciliation: A Redemptive Critique of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," *Representations*, 32 (1990): 33–49. That Adorno did not frame his longing for happiness in the classical discourse of *eudaimonia* can be best attested by one of his dreams, which betrays a different, more anxiously messianic, context: "In the night ... I had a dream. When awakened I still could hold fast to its last words: *I am the martyr of happiness*," Berkeley, 24th March 1946, in *Traumprotokolle*, 52. This paradox, 'the martyrology of happiness,' suggests that Adorno locates the concept of happiness in a different rhetorical register, belonging rather to some heterodox (crypto)theology.
- 7 See Max Horkheimer, "Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen [Gespräch mit Helmut Gumnior 1970]", in: Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften in 19 Bänden*, Vol. 7: 385–404.
- 8 According to Hannah Arendt, this alone would make Adorno an heir of the hidden Judaic tradition, manifesting itself mostly in a prophetic zeal: Hannah Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition. Acht Essays*, Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1976.
- 9 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 76.
- 10 On the 'exodic' thrust of the biblical images of creation see most of all Michael Fagenblat's *The Covenant of Creatures. Levinas' Philosophy of Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), which builds a strong connection between Levinas' and Maimonides' understanding of God's creational act as a decisive exit from the fluid chaos of elements. Being emerges here as a dry land separated from the flux of *il y a*.
- 11 See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- 12 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Ed. G. Schmid Noerr, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, 27. Later in the text as DE.
- 13 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, London: Verso, 2005, 121. Later in the text as MM.
- 14 And this hatred for a mere life is a very traditional Jewish motive indeed. In the final section of *Pesach Haggadah*, beginning with *Had Gadya*, we are offered a terrifying image of nature as a hopeless, self-devouring cycle in which animals consume one

another in a seemingly endless chain until finally God, together with his helper, man, intervene to put an end to this existential scandal. Adorno's and Horkheimer's definition of myth is precisely the closed system of immanence, dominated by the cycle of raising and falling powers – or, as Benjamin used to call it, a 'kaleidoscope.' Adorno's mistrust towards Life in General finds also an expression in one of his dreams from the 5th September 1955: "Life is Myth. The proof: the root *bi* in *bios*, *vi* in *vita* is identical with *mi*," in *Traumprotokolle*, 63.

- 15 See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.
- 16 "Das Ganze ist das Unwahre." This horror of Being's fullness is also shared by Levinas who devotes to this affect his early phenomenological analysis in *L'évasion*: the escape from the false plenitude of *il y a* is for him precisely the personal effort of Exodus, which Talmud explicitly recommends as something to be remembered and repeated on individual basis.
- 17 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1987, 70.
- 18 On Eliade's engagement in the fascist myth see a fascinating book: Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco: l'oubli du fascisme. Trois intellectuels roumains dans la tourmente du siècle*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002.
- 19 Translation slightly altered: while John Cumming translates *die entmachtete Schönheit* as 'devitalized beauty' I want to emphasize beauty's dis/connection with power.
- 20 See William Blake's epigram: "To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit": M. L. Johnson and J. E. Grant, eds., *Blake's Poetry and Designs*. New York & London: W. W. Norton Company, 1979, 440.
- 21 See Frank Kermode, *The Romantic Image*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957.
- 22 One of the best examples of such contemporary reappropriation of the romantic motives, mostly from Hölderlin and Hofmannsthal, is Eric Santner's *Psychotheology of Everyday Life. Reflections on Rosenzweig and Freud* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), where the aesthetic, epiphanic moment of absolute singularity becomes reintegrated with the domain of life, by delivering a new ground for ethics.
- 23 The famous fragment which incriminated Adorno in Taubes' eyes comes from the conclusion to *Minima Moralia*: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. *To gain such perspective without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought*" (MM, 247; my emphasis). Pace Taubes, who (together with early Benjamin) believes divine violence to be the most direct messianic action, Adorno perceives *all* violence as mythological and advocates a radical exit from it. Adorno's dislike for thinking in terms of apocalypse, which can only scorch, burn down, and kill twice over without offering any renewal, manifests itself nicely in his dream from the 18th November 1956: "I dreamt about a terrible heat-catastrophe. In the cosmic fire, there were burning all the dead who, just for this

shortest moment, reassumed their past form – and I knew: only now they were really dead,” in *Traumprotokolle*, 67.

- 24 See Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001.