

ROUTLEDGE JEWISH STUDIES SERIES

Judaism in Contemporary Thought

Traces and Influence

Edited by
Agata Bielik-Robson and Adam Lipszyc



Judaism in Contemporary Thought

The central aim of this collection is to trace the presence of Jewish tradition in contemporary philosophy. This presence is, on the one hand, undeniable, manifesting itself in manifold allusions and influences – on the other hand, its presence is difficult to define, rarely referring to openly revealed Judaic sources.

Following the recent tradition of Lévinas and Derrida, this book tentatively refers to this mode of presence in terms of “traces of Judaism” and the contributors grapple with the following questions: What are these traces and how can we track them down? Is there such a thing as “Jewish difference” that truly makes a difference in philosophy? And if so, how can we define it? The additional working hypothesis, accepted by some and challenged by other contributors, is that Jewish thought draws, explicitly or implicitly, on three main concepts of Jewish theology, *creation*, *revelation* and *redemption*. If this is the case, then the specificity of the Jewish contribution to modern philosophy and the theoretical humanities should be found in – sometimes open, sometimes hidden – fidelity to these three categories.

Offering a new understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology, this book is an important contribution to the fields of Theology, Philosophy and Jewish Studies.

Agata Bielik-Robson is Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Nottingham and at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Science in Warsaw. Her research interests include modern Jewish thought, psychoanalysis, and philosophy of religion. She is the author of *The Saving Lie: Harold Bloom and Deconstruction* (2011).

Adam Lipszyc works at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Science and at the Franz Kafka University of Muri. His most recent publication is a study of Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of language and justice. He edited the volume *Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy, Theology, Politics* (2006) and co-edited *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Philosophy, Theology and Interreligious Dialogue* (2009).

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Adam Lipszyc*

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List of Contributors

Agata Bielik-Robson works at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Science, and is the professor of Jewish Philosophy at the University of Nottingham.

Danielle Cohen-Levinas works at Sorbonne – Paris IV and directs the Collège des études juives et de philosophie contemporaine, also known as Centre Emmanuel Levinas; she is also an associate researcher at the Archives Husserl de Paris/École Normale Supérieure.

Michael Fagenblat is Bori and Helen Liberman Lecturer in Jewish Thought and Literature at the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation, Monash University, Lady Davis Fellow at the Hebrew University and John Templeton Fellow in Philosophical Theology, Shalem Center.

Willi Goetschel is professor of German and Philosophy at the University of Toronto.

Karl E. Grözinger is professor emeritus of the History of Religion and Jewish Studies at Potsdam University.

Urszula Idziak-Smoczyńska is assistant professor at the Institute of Religious Studies of the Jagiellonian University, Kraków.

Yoav Kenny is a post-doctoral researcher in the department of philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and research fellow in the Minerva Humanities Center at Tel Aviv University.

Karen Kilby is Bede Professor of Catholic Theology in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham.

William Large teaches philosophy at the University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham.

Andrzej Leder works at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Science.

x *Contributors*

Adam Lipszyc works at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Science, and at the Franz Kafka University of Muri.

Paweł Mościcki works at the Institute of Literary Research, Polish Academy of Science.

Yvonne Sherwood is professor of Biblical Cultures and Politics in the department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent.

Introduction

Alexandria Revisited

Agata Bielik-Robson and Adam Lipszyc

The essays collected in this volume were presented at a conference which took place in Kazimierz, the former Jewish neighborhood Kraków, Poland, in October 2010. The idea behind the conference was to trace the presence of Jewish tradition in contemporary philosophy: on the one hand, presence undeniable, manifesting itself in manifold allusions and influences – on the other hand, however, presence difficult to define, rarely referring to openly revealed Judaic sources. Following the recent tradition of Lévinas and Derrida, centered around the concept of *trace de l'autre*, we tentatively referred to this mode of presence in terms of “traces of Judaism” and asked the participants to grapple with the following questions: What are these traces and how can we track them down? Is there such a thing as “Jewish difference” that truly makes a difference in philosophy? And if so, how can we define it? Our additional working hypothesis, accepted by some and challenged by other participants during discussions, was that Jewish thought draws, explicitly or implicitly, on three main concepts of Jewish theology, which have been determined by Franz Rosenzweig as – *creation, revelation, and redemption*.¹ If this indeed is the case, then the specificity of the Jewish contribution to modern philosophy and the theoretical humanities should be found in – sometimes open, sometimes merely hidden – fidelity to these three categories.

It must be stated emphatically that the aim of the conference was *not* to establish the Jewish identity of given modes of thinking, this *je-ne-sais-quoi* of Jewishness which Oliver Leaman calls wittily a “Shabbat flavour.” The actual purpose of the gathering was twofold. First, we wanted to explore what happens to certain elements of Jewish tradition when they become translated into the idiom of Western philosophy. Second, we hoped to see how the philosophical idiom itself benefits from this translation, i.e., how contemporary philosophy uses the elements of Jewish tradition in order to cope with the most challenging issues it confronts today. In other words, we wanted to observe the complex trajectory of the “traces of Judaism” in late modern thought and their impact on the intellectual landscape they have been constantly marking for the past century.

The twentieth century witnessed the most fateful events in modern Jewish history: the Shoah and the establishment of the State of Israel. But the events in the intellectual realm, although certainly not of comparable consequences, were also highly memorable. The idiosyncratic return to Jewish tradition and identity so common especially among German Jews of the so-called post-assimilatory generation, a return that rarely meant a simple embracement of Orthodoxy, resulted in a breath-taking rebirth of Jewish thought, leading it to a new peak after the relatively weak period of modern Jewish philosophy. This peak is perhaps most vividly marked by the names of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and then, later, Emmanuel Lévinas. But like other Jewish philosophers before them, even the thinkers relatively close to traditional Judaism felt compelled to speak in idioms that combined elements of Jewish tradition with the language of European philosophy. This combination is even more evident in the work of those Jewish thinkers who move much further away from Judaism, but still find certain elements of their religious heritage not only attractive, but also vitally crucial for their intellectual projects. Even if “Jewish” nature of the psychoanalytic theory is debatable, it is perhaps not too far fetched to mention in this context two vast intellectual projects, the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory and the deconstruction, that can be seen as making crucial use of Jewish intellectual tradition, a fact that the key exponents of these projects, Max Horkheimer and Jacques Derrida respectively, were quite explicit about in their later years.

But gradually this process, in which Jewish authors learn to use various elements of Jewish thought to refashion the style of European philosophy, becomes indistinguishable from a larger phenomenon, i.e., the growing interest in the possible uses of this tradition among authors not directly attached to Judaism by their Jewish identity, however conceived. This interest may be due to many reasons, of which we can list at least three: the linguistic turn characteristic for most of the twentieth-century thought, whose exponents might have found their ally in Jewish mode of thinking, traditionally preoccupied with linguistic problems; the growing awareness of the relevance of Jewish messianism for the radical political thought; and the increasing focus on singularity as opposed to general essences, which may also be seen as anticipated in Jewish intellectual heritage.

These two tendencies which can be detected in the development of contemporary humanities – Jewish thinkers impregnating the philosophical mould with “traces of the other,” as well as non-Jewish thinkers gaining interest in an alternative intellectual tradition, offering different “conceptual schemes” – formed the timely theme of the conference and the present volume in which we decided to sum up these phenomena and give them a coherent theoretical shape. We hope that the traces of Judaism, tracked down by its authors and drawn all together into one picture, will eventually form a constellation of the future “new thinking”: a vivid speculative thought which will no longer seek home either in Athens or Jerusalem.

Three Concepts of Judaism

Volumes have been written on the difficult relationship between Athens and Jerusalem; there is probably no Western thinker, from Tertullian up to Derrida, who would not ponder on this issue at least for a moment. For some, the Tertullian division still holds fast: philosophy remains Greek, while Jerusalem represents a passionate spirit of faith opposed to the former's rational *logos*.² For some, on the other hand, the synthesis of Athens and Jerusalem is possible, but only under the auspices of Christian thought, most of all the Thomist tradition and its third locus in the Catholic Rome.³ The very existence of a yet another, separate line of negotiation, which would result in "Jewish philosophy," is usually neglected or treated merely in the categories of historical influence. Instead of talking about a structurally different approach to the problem, one prefers simply to enumerate Jewish instances of philosophising: Jewish Aristotelianism of Moses Maimonides, Jewish Enlightenment of Moses Mendelssohn, Jewish Kantianism of Hermann Cohen, etc.

The purpose of this collection is to resume the Athens-Jerusalem problem as negotiated, separately and originally, by what we call here tentatively "Jewish philosophy": a systematic form of thinking irreducible to the Christian formula but also avoiding a direct adoption of Greek philosophical *topoi*. The aim of the book is to trace down the presence of Jewish mode of reasoning in contemporary thought, the criterion of which may seem at first glance arbitrary, but its advantage lies in the fact that it does away with such uncertain categories as descent or confession of thinkers themselves and allows to focus only on the content of their theories. We propose, therefore, that "Jewish philosophy" should be comprised only of those theories in which, regardless of a given author's overt identification with the world of Judaism, operate in their deep structure with the basic concepts of Jewish theology we have mentioned above: creation, revelation, and redemption. Moreover, the emphasis should be made immediately on the *Jewish* theology in order to distinguish this conceptual triad from its use in Christian thought. In a very sketchy outline, this *differentia specifica* could be defined as follows.

First, creation must be understood in the strictest terms of "creation out of nothingness." Such formulation does not yet differentiate it from the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, but the conclusions drawn from it, on either Jewish or Christian side, already do. For, while Christian theology, strongly influenced by Neoplatonism and its theory of emanation, presupposes a presence of the uncreated divine element in the world, shining through the created matter – Jewish theologians insist on the moment of absolute separation. The idea of separation states that although the world is created by God, nothing in this world is or can be God; therefore, nothing within the creaturely reality is worth of sacred awe and nothing can represent the divine. The created world is disenchanted from the start: "degodded" (*entgöttet*), i.e., purified of all immanent *sacrum* and its magical powers.

This difference isolates the Jewish concept of creation not only from the Christian notion of divine presence in the world and from the Neoplatonic idea of emanation from the *nihil* of *superessentia* (the nothingness of hyper-being), which so heavily informed Christian thought. The very idea of “creatureliness” emerges here also as clearly opposite to the majority of philosophical doctrines which emphasize the innerworldly presence of the *arche*, or the guiding ontological principle: for instance, the Stoic belief in the immanent order of reality (*logos*), or the typically modern Spinozist conception of the monistic substance, eternally self-sustained and self-perpetuating in its perfect fullness. The created world, devoid of God’s direct presence, is the anarchic world-without-principle: as separated from the divine perfection, it remains unfinished and incomplete. As such, it can never come to full presence itself. The “metaphysics of presence,” so fiercely criticised by Derrida as the natural mode of philosophical thinking “from Ionia to Jena,” assumes that the world can be seen in its entirety by the divine view from nowhere, capable of capturing the whole of reality in one instance of a perfect synchronicity. The created world, on the other hand, cannot become full and unified, “rounded up” in one divine glance (as, for instance, in the all-encompassing divine vision-knowledge of the whole universe, envisaged by Leibniz). The world that can fully come to presence is only the world equipped with the divine immanent order, which is absent in the separated creatureliness. We can deplore this condition and call it “fallen” (as indeed would be the case with the more Gnostically minded kabbalists and their modern followers, as Benjamin, Scholem, or Bloch) – but we can also try to draw positive consequences from the incompleteness of the creaturely reality, as it will be done, for instance, by Derrida: for the world which never comes to full presence is also irreducibly heterogeneous, dispersed in time and space, naturally refusing to be captured by any conceptual totality.

The second principal category of Jewish theology is revelation. However, the proper understanding of this concept is possible only if we derive it directly from the specificity of the first one. So, if creation means most of all separation, and separation means most of all disenchantment, then the world, as it gives itself to experience, offers man no privileged point of existential orientation; it remains uncertain what within the created reality could inform the subject about the world’s transcendent origin. Revelation, therefore, from the very beginning becomes tinged with a paradox: on the one hand, it should be completely absent from the “degodded” world, yet, as completely absent, it could not reveal anything. The key to this paradox lies in the special status of man as the recipient of the potential revelation: not a Christian “crown of the creation,” in which culminates the divine presence in the world (up to the point of its incarnation in man), but rather an outcast thrown out from the natural pleroma, a nomad leading a separate existence in the desert. In order to be able to receive and then live according to revelation, man must repeat the gesture of separation: he must separate itself from all natural, immanent whole which, although incomplete, tends to fall into an illusion of

self-sufficiency. He must commit a brave act of exodus from natural totality, which already occurs thanks to the divine intervention, issuing in the new codex of life in the desert, *bamidbar*. Yet, man's allegiance to the transcendent revelation, even if codified in the system of the Law, must forever maintain the trace of the original antinomy, for the dialectical play of absence and presence never allows for absolute certainty and security of the chosen path. The righteousness of the Law, which within Jewish theology is meant to reduce the moment of fundamental uncertainty, can always be questioned in the name of more antinomian solutions in which the paradox of radical transcendence comes more visibly to the fore (and many modern thinkers, who are the heroes of this book, will indeed decide to follow this more difficult antinomian "crooked path" instead of the legal "right path" of the Rabbinic orthodoxy).

This tension between the well established ethical code of behaviour and the antinomian subversion of the Law is one of the most characteristic features of the Jewish concept of revelation. On the one hand, the more conservative tendency within Judaism tells us that revelation is strictly synonymous with the normative teaching of the Torah: it never teaches man any metaphysical secrets, but only instructs what to do. According to this view, shared by Rashi, Maimonides, and Lévinas, the Jewish revelation does not consist in disclosing any truths that could appease our "temptation to know,"⁴ but only in giving a normative underpinning for the existence expelled from the "natural order" and thus taken out from the dominion of "natural law." On the other hand, however, there would always emerge Jewish thinkers deeply discontent with this neat reduction of revelation to the ethical order which is *lo bashammaim* ("no longer in heaven").⁵ Faithful to the paradox of the radical transcendence, they would insist on the antithetical and incomplete nature of Jewish revelation, which, pace Hegel's definition of Christianity as *die ver-offenbarte Religion* (religion fully revealed, meaning also made publicly open and no longer mysterious thanks to Christ's mundane incarnation), must remain partly hidden. Their "antinomian" intervention, directed against the fixity of the Jewish halakhah, would vary in the degree of radicality of their subversion – from the Sabbatian straightforward rejection of the Law to the more subtle kabbalistic pursuit of the "other meaning" of the Teaching, as in the image of the *Torah Aziluth* ("The Torah of Redemption") – but the general thrust remains the same: the revelation is an ongoing process, yet unsealed by any seemingly final event (*mattan Torah* or incarnation of the Son of God), still emerging from its mysterious concealedness.⁶

The concept which helps to elucidate, but also hopefully solve this aporia is the third category: redemption, or, in other words, the messianic idea. Within the Jewish context, one should never associate this idea with the passive awaiting of the Second Coming or a Christological notion of individual salvation through suffering; in most of the Jewish thinkers who are present in this volume, the messianic idea takes on a distinctly activist character. For if the created world is a separated world, and as such remains incomplete, it is

also self-evident that it calls for a practice of completion and perfection, even repair (depending on how “fallen” or simply “unfinished” it appears within the Jewish theological spectrum, ranging from negative Gnosis to affirmative Rabbinism). The Jewish concept of redemption is thus rarely bound with the private salvation of the soul, but, as Scholem argued convincingly, it involves a future-oriented image of a public utopia where the object of the redemptive action is not the individual but the world, sometimes even in its material entirety (as in the Lurianic version of *tikkun*, the wholesale apocatastasis of everything that ever was, is, and will be).⁷

But, precisely because revelation in the created world can only appear as partly hidden, broken and paradoxical, so are our messianic practices which attempt to follow the revelatory traces; all remains in our hands, yet our redemptive activity must necessarily take into account the unattainable goal of turning the immanence fully and unequivocally into the transcendent Kingdom. The messianic practice, therefore, would usually take one of the two forms which result from two visions of creation and revelation: either a progressive, non-apocalyptic messianism, which issues from the understanding of the created world as merely “incomplete” and already partly completed by the revelation of the Law, offering the right orientation and the proper “path” within the creaturely reality; or a subversive, apocalyptic messianism, which derives from the understanding of the created world as deeply “fallen” and only ambiguously illuminated by the teaching of the Torah, which, revealed in the world, becomes as vulnerable and prone to falling as everything else within the creation. The former, non-apocalyptic messianism assumes that the passage between the unredeemed and redeemed stage may indeed be infinite, yet it does not require a quantum leap; the latter, apocalyptic messianism, on the other hand, advocates a violent break. And while the former perceives our messianic vocation in abstaining from all kinds of violent action (as in Cohen, Rosenzweig, and Lévinas), the latter ties it strongly to the apocalyptic belief in the beneficial, destructively creative, impact of the divine violence (as in Bloch, Benjamin, and sometimes Scholem).

The Game of Hide-and-Seek: Tracing Down the Traces

But how shall we treat the presence of these three main concepts of Jewish theology in the writings of modern thinkers whom we tentatively classified as “Jewish philosophers”? The status of the “theological categories” within a philosophical discourse requires a separate reflection, since they are taken out of their natural context and translated into a foreign idiom. Instead of functioning in their full radiant glory as theological pillars of Judaic faith, they emerge merely in a vestigial form: concealed and minimised. They emerge precisely as *traces* that need to be *traced down*. Benjamin spotted this concealment of theological categories in his famous metaphor of the puppet and the dwarf, in which the former figures as the seemingly secular historical materialism and the latter as the “ugly and wizened” theology that must be

kept away from sight; yet, it is nonetheless theology that pulls the strings of the Marxian puppet, bestowing it with at least an appearance of life.⁸ Similarly, Hent de Vries wrestled theology from the philosophical works of Lévinas and Adorno, calling it very aptly “minimal.”⁹ It does not show easily, it does not boast with the splendour of tradition; tracing it down requires a skill of a theological detective, a Jewish version of Chestertonian Father Brown.

But why this game of hide-and-seek? For ages, Jewish thinkers have been criticised by Christian philosophers, who claimed to have come into possession of two universal media: Christianity and philosophy, for their particularism; their message was regarded as lacking the general appeal to all humanity. To show openly their indebtedness to Jewish theology would expose them as “merely” Jewish and thus only confirm the prejudice. However, the Jewish response to the language of the Western, predominantly Christian, philosophy was, in fact, far more cunning; not only did it refuse to give in to the particularistic prejudice, but it turned the tables on its seemingly universalistic interlocutors. For them, Western Christian philosophy seemed nothing but a “speech of strangers,” far from being as transparent and universal as it would claim to be.¹⁰

Thus, Hermann Cohen, though a convinced rationalist and great admirer of Greek thought, believed that philosophy can achieve its universalistic ideal only if it lets itself be influenced by another logic and another language coming from the prophetic tradition, “out of the sources of Judaism.”¹¹ Following Cohen to a certain point, Franz Rosenzweig, would attempt to dehellenise the philosophical discourse, yet with the purpose to create a new idiom, offering an innovative *tertium* that would insinuate itself in between well established idioms: he named it *neues Denken*, “new thinking,” which, although deeply hebraised, could not be seen as “simply Jewish.”¹² Walter Benjamin, as we have seen, turned his Jewishness even more secret, imagining Jewish theology as an “ugly dwarf,” not to be shown to the public, who nonetheless animates the philosophical puppet from beneath the chess table. This enables us to see the very project of Jewish philosophy as often deeply informed by what can be called a “Marrano tendency”. Later on, Max Horkheimer would allude to this secretive nature of the project and virtually identify the philosophical practice of the Frankfurt School as Judaism undercover.¹³ And finally, this “Marrano tendency” will become fully explicit in the philosophical meta-reflection of Jacques Derrida who would argue that there is no such thing as “Jewish philosophy” pure and simple, only a “third language” where the Jewish *source* turns into a *trace* which immediately erases itself as such.¹⁴

But, this way or another, openly or secretly, officially or undercover, as “Jews” or as “Marranos” – all these thinkers wanted to convey a more complicated message as to the status of the philosophical language in general. They wished to emphasize the particular character of any monolingual tradition, regardless of its overt universalistic declarations, either Greek or Christian, and show how the true universality emerges only through the clash of

two or more separate idioms. In order to approach universality, languages must infect one another; they must leave their traces in the language of the other and thus disturb the illusion of its linguistic autarchy. The truly universal language, therefore, can never be spoken as such, i.e., as one homogeneous idiom; neither Greek philosophy nor Christian religion can undo the catastrophe of Babel which resulted in the scattering and particularisation of languages.

The Babel predicament of linguistic dispersion is a fact but it needn't be a curse; though there is no meta-language which could raise above the clatter of differences, men are still capable of "marrying the speeches of strangers" and thus complete the broken whole on the horizontal level. They do not reach universality "vertically," i.e., by rejecting or growing out of their particularity; this way was clearly shown as wrong by the story of the tower of Babel, which was supposed to hover above the plane of human differences. Yet, the temptation to repeat the Babel mistake persists, and the easy, all-too-easy universality of philosophy, which claims to be a transparent language of every man as *animal rationale*, or of Paulinian Christianity, which claims to know "neither Jew, nor Greek," only one general "God's child," is a good illustration of this misguided persistence. The only way to reach universality is horizontal, never pretending to abandon the realm of particularity; the way leading through, as Walter Benjamin put it in his essay on "The Task of Translator," translation and completion, making various languages clash, marry, meet, befriend, mingle with and confront one other. Commenting on Benjamin's thought, Derrida will go even further and claim that Babel is, in fact, the divine name and that "the proper name of 'confusion' will be his [God's] mark and his seal."¹⁵ The legend of Babel, therefore, tells an alternative story of God's revelation where "confusion" turns out to be His proper name, perhaps even more real than the one revealed at Sinai. To know the confusion and to work through confusion horizontally, without any vertical escapes into an abstract universality, such is the task of the translator, marrying the speeches of strangers with one another, as well as the task of the modern thinker.

In this utopian horizontal mixture of idioms, which constitutes the messianic ideal both for Benjamin and Derrida, all categories, not just Jewish theological concepts, are destined to function as *traces*: not as recognizable tokens of belonging to a well-defined tradition, pointing to their secure sources, but as free-floating *theologems* which can engage in a free exchange with other notions, equally uprooted from their context of historical identity. And even if we don't quite follow the Benjaminian-Derridean utopia of such perfect mix, we can nonetheless see the rationale standing behind their strategy of hiding sources and leaving traces only: the rationale of invigoration and true universalisation of a speculative language which does not want to claim any thought for the Jewish camp, but, to the contrary, wants to open Jewishness to an exchange which for so long was refused to it.

In fact, the whole evolution of modern Jewish thought can be seen as such gradual turning of tables: the radical shift in regard to the issue of

universality. First, it would arouse an envy and desire to be “properly” universal, to imitate philosophers as well as Christians, who, as it is stated very clearly in Spinoza, seemed to offer two distinct ways to achieve rational transparency: in knowledge and in morals. Then it would gradually provoke a protest against such one-sided claims and, as in Cohen, would give rise to counter-claims, arguing that the language of prophets is, in fact, even more universal than the language of philosophers. And, finally, the issue of the universal meta-language would simply dissolve by giving way to the “horizontal” view which grants particular biases to all languages, and – as in Benjamin and Derrida – merely wants them to play against each other in the movement of both mutual deconstruction and completion, where all solid monolingualism melts into air of free-floating traces.

It seems to us that only when seen from this perspective the idea of “Jewish philosophy” becomes truly interesting from a philosophical and not just historical point of view. The opposite attempt would be to humbly approach philosophy as an established universal discipline and only then to carve within it a little niche for the so-called “Jewish philosophy.” On such an approach, the history of Jewish philosophy would be divided into three periods: 1) the period of the Hellenistic *influence*, marked by the emergence of such late canonical texts as the Book of Kohelet or the thought of Philo; 2) the medieval period of *appropriation*, the “golden age” of Jewish philosophy which, in the works of Saadia, ibn Gabirol, and Maimonides, established itself as a separate scholarly discipline, and 3) the modern period of *confusion*, in which nothing is clear any longer, Jews stop being Jewish, and they talk Hebrew through the speeches of strangers where it is no longer possible to tell Plato, Aristotle, or the Stoics from the words of the biblical revelation. This period, it goes without saying, is certainly not very much loved by the historians who usually condense it just to a few chapters and give them rather helpless derivatory titles as: “Jewish Idealism,” “Jewish Romanticism,” “Jewish Existentialism,” or “Jewish Marxism.” But if one believes that “Jewish philosophy” can be nothing more than just a local declension of the general philosophical *lingua franca*, then, we think, he turns it into something merely marginal and parochial, capable of inspiring only a historical interest.

In fact, “Jewish philosophy,” if it deserves its name, is a kind of a *clinamen* on the seemingly neutral corpus of Western thought, but this swerve cannot be simply reduced to a local colouring. There is something more intricate and interesting involved in this maneuver; a very deliberate translation/dislocation which twists the philosophical language into its ironic double. All the Jewish thinkers who figure in this collection believe in the power of the trace in which both traditions, Greco-philosophical and Jewish-religious, clash – yet not in the form of an open polemic, but rather an invigorating contamination. In most cases, therefore, Jewish thinking uses forms inherited from philosophy in order to swerve from its safe systematic self-enclosure. Thus, Cohen “disturbs” the Kantian system, by impeaching its dogma of the autonomy of reason and insisting on the heteronomous origin of human rationality which