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# Imagining the Jewish God

Edited by Leonard Kaplan
and Ken Koltun-Fromm

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# Acknowledgments

For Philip Anisman, Lawrence Rosen, and Alan J. Weisbard: three friends with heart and intellect; and for my family—my wife Martha the poet, my son Jonathan the quant, and my daughter Sarah the photographer.

And for our students, who will imagine the Jewish God in ways unimaginable in this volume.

*Chapter Twenty-One*

# God's Inside/The Line of a Poem

## *A Philosophical Commentary*

Zachary Braiterman

In the opening lines to his short study of medieval piyyut, *Theology and Poetry*, Jacob Petuchowski defined theology as rational discourse about God and about religion in general. As rational beings, Petuchowski understood that human beings verbalize, rationalize, and systematize their discourse. Presented this way, theology is framed as an interpretive discipline. In this familiar view of it, theology does not constitute a primary source of religious knowledge. It wades only in the shallows, just outside such human experience as love, suffering, and death. Prior to its crystallization into theological statements, religion would stand in a closer bond with poetry as a form of lived sensation. The language of prayer would be poetic, if not poetry itself. Comparing it to theology, whose presuppositions and conclusions pass and fade, Petuchowski saw a quality of consistency in the tradition-based form of liturgical expression. Recommending not to mistake poetry for prose-like or conceptual doxa, Petuchowski took a dim view of Abraham Ibn Ezra in his castigation of the payytan Eleazar Kallir, or nineteenth century traditionalists and reformers alike, who viewed liturgy as a list of literal propositions whose truth one had either to affirm dogmatically or to reject critically.[1]

On Petuchowski's lead, I am introducing this brief commentary to these secular poems about God with a short line from the *musaf amidah* service recited specially for Sabbaths and holidays. The phrase forms a part of the so-called *kedushah* or holiness section of the prayer. "Where is the place of His glory?" (*aya makom kevodo*)? Playing its part on the liturgical stage structured by the Siddur, the congregation joins the chorus of angels in asking a question which would mock that fixed tenet of rationalist-philosophical theology according to which an infinite God transcends time and space. Where is God's place, God's glory, or semblance of God's glory? An answer might be simpler than it appears. Phenomenologically structured as a speech act,

perhaps it turns out that the place to look for God's glory is situated along the poetic line that constitutes the liturgical expression itself, the poem conceived as a place to which nothing in the world necessarily corresponds.

The point conveyed by Petuchowski is both counterintuitive and not. As a tradition based form, a liturgical image of God enjoys a measure of temporal consistency. While the precise definition of a concept signified by a liturgical image might change, the sign itself stays more or less the same across a larger historical duration. In traditional Jewish liturgical settings, one assumes that "God" will look consistently masculine: an overpowering and sublime presence, enthroned like a Canaanite deity in a bright nimbus as the skirts of "his" robe fill the sanctuary place. Brought directly from the prophet Isaiah into the image world of the *kedushah*, that is the way God has been traditionally pictured in Jewish prayer up until and through the modern period. While the liturgical poems of the later Spanish or German payytanim might shade this figure with this or that affective quality, the figure itself remains pretty much the same.

As the place to look for a poetic image of God now transfers out of the synagogue, the old rules and conventions may no longer hold in modern and contemporary non-liturgical poems like the ones collected here for this volume. It could be that the actual figure of God will assume the same buff masculine pose, but the aura of "his" nimbus may very well have dimmed and disappeared. Holding precariously in the poetic imagination, God has been colored in the modern and contemporary poem by agnosticism, secularism, skepticism, and atheism. "He" looks like the same God, only limned less by awe and more by anger. Gone is the grand style of the Spanish court or the baroque and rococo synagogue.

In reading through the poems presented here, I decided that the best approach for my purposes would be not to address individual poems or poets one after the other in sequence. Instead, I have decided to present them all together as a single aggregate voice, solely on the accidental basis of their happening to sit here together in this collection. On the first and then second and third reading, whatever insight about the poetic form of God that I might have wanted to draw from each individual poem or poet will have blended together into a common sensibility formed out of my own interpretive making. For my purpose in this commentary, what's more important than the individual statement is the serial form in which the poems and poets are framed by their inclusion in this volume. It is my own sense that the poems belong with each other, their locus situated outside the synagogue, outside naïve piety, outside in the open. As I have sought to read them together, the figure of God coalescing in these poems is structured by simple concepts—*imagination, place, time, form, creature, affect.*



## IMAGINATION

George Santayana's *Interpretation of Poetry and Religion* (1900) is a group of reflections penned at the American fin de siècle. In part, he wrote them against what he thought as the mystical attempt to shuck the human imagination. In Santayana's view, mysticism rejected imagination precisely because the imagination is "infected with humanity." In this polemic, mysticism represents a form of thought that seeks to leave behind the finite, specific, personalist, and relative figure for a vision of absolute truth, the intuitive grasp of a vast reality that lies beyond the scope of human sensations and imagination. "Instead of perfecting human nature, [mysticism] seeks to abolish it." What Santayana nonetheless regarded as the "better side of mysticism" is its "aesthetic interest in large unities and cosmic laws," which gives a "foretaste of that perfect adaptation of things to our faculties and of our faculties to things which, could not extend to every part of our experience, would constitute the ideal life."[2]

Based on the modal form of possibility, Santayana posed the complex relation of religion and poetry as a set of two complementary but potentially contradictory vectors between "common sense," on the one hand, and imagination on the other hand. To call religion the highest form of poetry meant more to Santayana than mere poetry or fantasy insofar as the religious element to this kind of poetry necessarily involves matters of belief and a practical bearing on life.[3] For poetry to begin to count in the religious domain, it must be "interwoven with the figures of and events of real life."[4] At the same time, the confluence between religion and poetry also lends itself to expansive, wider views.[5] Poetry involves us in "scenes" beyond the narrow ken of that understanding or experience of "real life."[6] Another way to grasp this tension between real and ideal elements is to see with Santayana in religious poetry both a critical and a reconstructive function. "The plastic moment of the mind, when we become aware of the artificiality and inadequacy of what common sense perceives, is the moment of poetic opportunity. . . . The great function of poetry . . . is precisely this: to repair to the material of experience, seizing hold of the reality of sensation and fancy beneath the surface of convention ideas, and the out of that living but indefinite material to build new structures, richer, finer, fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul."[7]

## PLACE

With the figure as its building block, poetry would represent a plastic form of human expression more like religion than philosophy and philosophical theology. In *What is Philosophy?* Gilles Deluze and Félix Guatarri distinguished between conceptual personae and figures. Philosophy they defined as thinking through pure concepts, determined by problems. Along the same pragmatic lines sketched out by pragmatists like Santayana, these problems defined by Deleuze and Guatarri are expressed as possibles. As the open originative organ of philosophical thought, the single conceptual persona is not a finished or complete proposition, but a transcendental condition. Like the idea of infinite substance in the philosophy of Spinoza or like the idea of a plane of immanence in their own work, philosophical personae are conditions for the exercise of thought as the creating of concepts.[8] In contrast to philosophers, "oriental sages" are said by Deleuze and Guatarri to think in figures more given to representation. In art and music, figures are understood as powers of percepts and affects that surpass ordinary percepts and affects. Not one opposed to the other, figures and concepts pass through each other, one such passage being through religion, which Deleuze and Guatarri lay out as a type of thinking through figures.[9]

Pragmatically, this distinction drawn by Deleuze and Guatarri between conceptual persona and figure would push Jewish philosophy into considering questions relating to space, body, praxis, and craft. Can Jewish philosophical concepts give clarity and rigor to the Hebraic or Talmudic figures the interpretation of which has shaped its own exercise over historical time? Touching upon the relation between philosophy and non-philosophy, Deleuze and Guatarri insisted that the concepts that matter to philosophy come to it from elsewhere, from non-Greek sources, which transform and have always transformed the practice of philosophy.[10] Deleuze and Guatarri would have us see that the points connecting the disparate components that make up such a complex are not smooth or jigsaw-like. Concepts and figures are supposed to resonate, holding together only when each part is well-made.[11] In terms drawn by Deleuze and Guatarri, one might be led to ask if Jewish philosophy can establish new variations out of hitherto unknown or unrealized potential. Are the concepts, personae, planes, and figures of Jewish philosophy and theology flimsy and formless? Are they too regular and formulaic?[12] Can they even start to do the work they are supposed to do without poetic figuration?

Poetry would offer ways to think about God in contrast to philosophical theology, whose concepts would appear to inhabit zones outside time, place, form, or mood. In rationalist philosophy and theology, sheer content will do, just names or concepts, which can be thought anywhere and anytime, *sub specie aeternitatis*. As a utopian project, rationalist theology and philosophy dwell less securely on the problems that no god can resolve, problems that are always cast in situ. Is God figured as present or as absent? "Where are you?" seems indeed to be the primary question our poets ask about God, not in the abstract, but as direct address in relation to particular physical sites.



The dove came back,
its feathers wet and shiny, but no word
from you unless we consider the dove
itself your word. Perhaps you followed
the stream of Monarchs to New Mexico
and right now you are floating over the Mississippi River.[13]

A little later on, the same poet asks,

Why have you disappeared so thoroughly?
I shake the bush, no fire or voice.

This determination of God's presence or absence mediated by a place name might very well be a trick that American poets have picked up from Whitman. (One could point to the importance of place names in Hebrew poetry going back to psalms and to the earliest strata of the Bible.) Of absolutely no interest to philosophy, names like "New Mexico" and "the Mississippi River" bound up with the figure of Noah matter very much inside the poem. They are its essence and aura. In our poems, they provide the figurative ground set up for the play between God's presence and non-presence.

## TIME

"*Where has God gone this time?*" the poet asks. The more generic question would have been "where has God gone." Instead, the poet asks the more particular form of the question. Where has God gone *this time?* The temporal urgency to this phrase underscores the assumption that God as a figure is not omnipresent, not in a poem of this questioning sort. Is this a pagan conceptualization of deity, confined as it is by the accident of terrestrial time? That would be too pat a designation. Jewish thought, if not necessarily Jewish philosophy, knows very well this conceptualization of God's hiding face already in the Bible. Considered a piece of anti-phenomenology in its immediate disappearance to the human subject, it is utterly beside the point whether or not this hiding is caused by human misdeed or if it is a more basic aspect

of God's nature. The theological aspect to God's hiding is structured by the nature of the poem itself with God as a figure oscillating between presence and absence, revelation and concealment, being and non-being.

In our poems, that is the form of God's "being-in-the-world." As a spinning figure, God cannot guarantee a secure, settled place in time much less guarantee truth. That is what adds such pathos to the liturgical expression of monotheistic religion. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Again, not the generic God, but the personal "my God." Not as a generic or constitutive condition of absence, but rather, why have you forsaken me "*this time*." The one and only God who matters has left the poet, even as the sense of the poem depends upon that invocation of the very name. In this time, in our time, God's presence with me and for me in the world, God's presence in history is no longer reliable—by definition.

Ripped out of its original context and grafted into new ones, the manipulation of psalms in the Jewish and Christian liturgical tradition should have been evidence enough that the figure of God in a poem is temporally unstable in its intentions and possible ramifications. While Petuchowski was right to see in Jewish liturgy a trope-like consistency, more recent scholars of religion have come to understand that religious life and the philosophy of religion are less stable and structured. Without new iterations there would be, as it were, no such "thing" as God, at least not as a conceptual persona or poetic figure. As established by postmodernism, poststructuralism, and reader response theory, the basic insight about the fungible operation and futural orientation of meaning (understood here as an unstable confluence between poetic form and conceptual content) is so common and accepted today that it lies, in principle, beyond dispute.

For all that, I would like by way of an exercise to set aside temporarily the contemporary truisms about the instability of poetic meaning and about the disruption of fixed origins in order to reconsider Petuchowski's claim. I recommend this in order to play with an alternative temporal truth based on the notion that referential "meaning" of a poem is mobile in ways that the "sense" of a poem may not be. "Meaning refers to the intelligible semantic reference of a speech act, whereas "sense" speaks to the sensible materiality of a word or image (the poetic sensation or affective impression made by that word or image). Meanings can be picked up, packed, and moved from one name to another without any due effect on the object itself. For instance, the planet Venus is always planet Venus. It does not matter scientifically or philosophically if one names the planet by any other name; for scientists and philosophers it simply doesn't matter whether the planet Venus is named "the evening star" or the "morning star." But to the poet, what Ludwig Frege called the "sense" (*Sinn*) or mode of representation matters more than meaning (*Bedeutung*),



i.e., more than the meaning of the referent and more than the referent itself.[14] Because they trade in such crude and concrete stuff, poets are unable to make the grand trans-temporalizing gestures made by philosophers, idealist and poststructuralist alike. Their sense of the poem cannot move beyond the words that name it. While it might be true that the "meaning" of a poem might elide its time and space, the "sense" of the poem itself inhabits only the horizon of its own articulation in place and in time. The poem itself is unable to get out of its own skin, the formation of a content around particular problems and moods. No less than the names "morning star" and "evening star," the appearance of the crystallized figure of God depends upon the time of day.

## LINE

Anyone who has ever read Hegel will immediately recognize how a philosophical thought can be made to unspool along never-ending sentences that scroll down fat, block-like paragraphs filling up most of a printed page. In contrast, poets express themselves more deliberately. As a unit of sound, every word has to matter in a poem. Down to the single syllable, each word forms an indispensable part of the poem's technical sense. A thought that predates Heidegger's reflections on poetry, this was the fundamental contention to the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible translation. In particular, the notion that the content of thought is enmeshed in linguistic form served as the rationale for the high fidelity the two German Jewish translators afforded each and every instance of word repetition as it appeared in the Hebrew Bible. This notion also accounts for the rough and often peculiar word choice for which the Buber-Rosenzweig translation stands out as a strange, often ridiculous example of religious poesies. But Buber and Rosenzweig also understood that the form-shape that matters most to poetry, almost as much as language itself, is the arrangement of words along lines. Santayana had thought that poetry expands the horizons of thought and theology.[15] In fact, poetic words do not simply float as much as they contract that thought-horizon onto the material line where the single word takes up its own distinct and definite position as a unit of sense, not meaning.

Indeed, a standout feature of the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible translation, visible to the eye before any sound reaches the ear, is the way it breaks up and presents the text along individuated lines. The effect of this arrangement is to transform the entirety of Hebrew scripture onto the shape of a poem. Rosenzweig saw in the relatively short line or cola a diaphragm allowing the textual expression to breathe, for the person reading it to inhale and to exhale. The upshots are contradictory. On the one hand, organized onto lines, a

technical text such as Leviticus turns out to be just as poetic an expression as a prophetic-poetic work such as Isaiah. On the other hand, arranged in lines, even the wildest and most intemperate poem proves more "measured" than the most staid philosophical expression.[16] In philosophy, clumsy long word-columns ramble out into endless paragraphs the conclusion of which comes as a mercy, whereas, with the exception of long prose poems, the form of a poem works by way of tight, little bursts of word-imagination whose sense is encapsulated by the last word of the line in which that burst is bundled up. The end of a shorter poem, or at least the end of a stanza, is almost always in view before the line even starts. Along the short form of a line, the poet can come to that sense of an ending in order to say and sense more quickly what the philosopher could ever hope to say. As single sentence split along two elegant lines, to quote one of our poets, "the confirmation / comes in desolation, if it comes at all."

With no mind for style, in philosophy or philosophical theology it almost never matters where a word appears on a line. In contrast, consider how much it might mean where on the line the word "God," the name of God appears or is sensed. Unlike in philosophy, both poetic sense and poetic meaning are invested precisely in the place and temporal sequence made manifest on the line, surrounded on all sides, above and below, before and after by white space and silence.

> I flick the lights to get God's
> attention. I draw another glass.

or:

> Today Cain lifted his head
> in prayer. This time
> God would accept his offering,
> the smell of charred flesh.[17]

It will "matter" to the art of the poem where the sentence starts or ends on a line and with what word. Most important to the poem is that the sense of sentence or sentence-fragment is not confined to a single line. The line can stop up the sentence in mid-flow, which then skips, like a gazelle, over to the next line. A strong word from the middle of a sentence might get highlighted by its location at the end of a line. Will God appear on a line composed of three words or in a stanza composed of four lines? Will the word "God" be the first word of the line, the last, or be situate somewhere in the middle? Will the single sentence that carries the name of God occupy one complete line or



multiple lines on the poem which might fragment the appearance of God's place on the sentence?

Made out of lines, a good poem has to be well built like a house, which is the Hebrew word for stanza (*bayit*). As observed by Santayana, "Every human architect must do likewise with his edifice; he must [mold] his bricks or hew his stones into symmetrical solids and lay them over one another in regular strata, like a poet's lines . . . The stuff of language is words, and the sensuous materials must be made beautiful by being themselves subjected to a measure, and endowed with a form."[18] Santayana's view of the word-stuff of poetic creation is old-fashioned. With shifts in the history of style, beauty and solidity may not be the single most important criteria in the construction of a modern or contemporary poem. Modern lines can be short, jagged, and pointed. Even as we continue to assume that content is inseparable from form, poets understand how provisional the construction is. Perhaps they understand better than theologians that without carefully constructed lines, the language that builds the house of God will totter and collapse in upon itself.

## JEWS AND ANIMALS

Some Jewish poems are less like a house and more like a bestiary. Animals and Jews take up their place before God on the same lines where God takes up "his" place before Jews and animals. In either case, they will have done so in both meanings of the term "before." First of all, their lives appear before each other on the line of a poem. In their life before God, their own human or animal presence lend a creaturely ambience to God's appearance in the world-house of the bestiary-poem. It is also the case that their figure as creaturely-figures figures first in our poems. Reversing the usual metaphysical order of things, in these contemporary poems the creature matters more than the God whose sign-like life their semblance signals. God happens to them, but it is upon them that God's appearance in the poem depends entirely. Dumb or hyper-verbal, these are impious figures whose creaturely life stands in the form of a tensed theological counterpoint. God's place in the poem does not exist apart from the creaturely life creeping, crawling, and fighting along the line of the poem. Animal creatures, biblical figures, on safari in Africa, Shimon bar Yochai, Judah Halevi, Maimonides, Kafka, American Jews and Jews from Cochin India, mothers and grandmothers and Hebrew school teachers—God takes up a particular place deep inside their midst.

The animal figures perform something akin to what Religion Studies theorist Donovan Schaefer has called "animal religion":

The moths clinging to the screens
pray to get in. The orchids open
their lovely legs
At the end of the row, crows badger
each other over hymnals.
I cut the shofar loose.
My dog smells the blasts
and heads downstairs.[19]

In another poem, the image of animal life is more violent:

In a bowl of sand two scorpions fighting.
What do you see? he said.
I said, scorpions fighting.

God then pours fire into the bowl:

What do you see now?
Ashes, I said.
He emptied the bowl, filled it
with wine. Drink, he said.
I drank.[20]

Following Schaefer, the animal life in our poems would seem to correspond to that form which can be seen to "emerge directly out of the vast variety of animal bodies and can take observable forms in practices such as burying the dead or waterfall dances, or nonobservable forms—embedded in the subtle dynamic between bodies and worlds." Whether domestic or prophetic, "how do these affective ingredients feed into broader arrangements that come to look, for the world, like what we would call in humans 'religion'"?[21]

Animals are no strangers to Jewish art and poetry. On a visual register, there is the lush creaturely life that animates the Hebrew Bible, and also ancient Byzantine era or medieval Ashkenazi art, including synagogue decoration and book illumination. Lion and deer, bears and rabbits, and human figures with bird heads wearing Jew-hats, they look like griffins.[22] Without them, God has no vehicle in the world or in the poem. In Genesis from Noah on and in the priestly literature, animals are human food the smoke and smell of whose burnt flesh give pleasure to God. In the Song of Songs, animal figures lend special animation to human eros. In the book of Job, the animals illuminated in the bright light of God's theophany out of the whirlwind remind us that there is nothing moral about the structure of the world. In that poem, or in the image of the chariot given to the prophet Ezekiel, animal creatures project a fearsome quality upsetting mundane human life and social conventions. More alive and free, in Jewish tradition the wild, non-human register lends itself to pictures of creation in relation to the sublime figure upon His chariot, God the Creator, Lord of Hosts.



As human animals, the Jews in our poems turn out to be more complex than merely animal. Other kinds of animal don't suffer the same kind of attention to problems that self-sentient creatures suffer. In our poems, the human person before God appears in aggregate as fundamentally confused, belligerent, subject to violent, anxious, profane, and impious mood swings. Caught up in maelstroms beyond their control, as poetic figures, they are brought before our gaze in moments of dread, panic, and stunned disbelief.

There is Adam choosing souls:

I want the soul of the tree of souls,
from which all souls are suspended.

Jacob is belligerent:

As he ticked off numbers—
how many sheep
I'd pilfered from Laban
and their rate of reproduction—
he opened and closed
his fists, cracked
his knobby rough-
skinned knuckles.

A rough and muscular man, here's what he did to that angel:

I put him in
a choke hold he never
escaped from, buried his
crumpled carcass in the hard
white sand.

And with God?

"If you keep my covenant, you shall be a nation," God said. "The hell with your covenant," Jacob answered, "I shall be a nation anyway." God touched Jacob's hip, dislocating it. "You shall be called Israel," he proclaimed. Then when God rose, Jacob punched him in the gut.

The fate of the medieval poet is tragic:

Judah Halevi I think about
and his brutal death his first day in Jerusalem

when he was in his early sixties
and the poems he would have written
into his ninetieth
or even six years later
when he was approaching a hundred.

We see,

the Palestinian people
who are the Jews
of our time,
bombed, killed, yet still
walking on a sea of blood.

And a mother, father, and son dancing,

my mother red with laughter, my father cupping
his left hand under his armpit, doing the dance of old Ukraine, the sound of his
skin half drum,
half fart, the world at last a meadow,
the three of us whirling and singing, the three of us
screaming and falling, as if we were dying,
as if we could never stop—in 1945—
in Pittsburgh, beautiful filthy Pittsburgh, home
of the evil Mellons, 5,000 miles away
from the other dancing—in Poland and Germany—
oh God of mercy, oh wild God.[23]

Piteous figures full of rage at a wild God, the presence of these people in our poems makes a point made by Andrew Benjamin about the in-tandem appearance of Jews and animals in western philosophy.[24] By "Jews" and "animals," Benjamin critically investigates the excision of both figures from the history of western philosophy in favor of some more abstract and universal subject, "forms of life [that] are themselves already understood as abstractions," be it the Cartesian subject, Heideggerian Dasein, or Levinasian alterity. For Andrew Benjamin, the philosophical stake represented by the Jew and the animal lies in singularity and relationality that exceeds the hold of the universal.[25] Looking upon them as particular singularities, Benjamin helps us see that the figure of the Jew and the animal in our poems would each lend itself to new modes of thought that do not give way to privation or sacrifice, to extermination or extinction before that universal.[26]

Complementing Benjamin's excursus, our poems include God in the tandem between Jews and animals. The effect of Jews and animals on God—the most abstract and universal figure of thought—is to bring that concept down back to earth, reinvested in its figure and animated by creaturely bodies, aggressive gestures, and wild moods. Benjamin notes how "Jews and animals, in being there, make demands."[27] Our poems here make demands not just on philosophy, but on God, not just on the idea of God, but on the living God of Israel. In their material balance and affective form, the ideas and affects that form here around that figure of God fly in the face of both classical, critical, and speculative idealism. The contemporary poem is dead set on making it harder for God. The poems are that angry.



## AFFECT AND EMOTION

Our poems exemplify two kinds of affect that Affect Theory would have us see as technically separate. On the one hand, there are the "emotions" that constitute a conscious proprium that belongs to a single subject, whose awareness is intentional, caught before the cosmos and its Creator in surface representations. On the other hand, there are pre-articulated waves that the theorists designate as "affect" proper. Just under the conscious surface of an individual's intentional awareness, affect inundates human situations as latent forms of distributed sensibility that pass between persons as a shared environment. "In the process" the subject-position of one person vis-à-vis another person and vis-à-vis other types of material thing is rendered less discrete. For the most part, our poets and their personae feel emotions deeply as their own and with thick pathos. But where do we look for that more subliminal affect, the sense that is sensed but never gets named, the sense of subtle mystery undergirding over the top rage?

The subterranean force of an affect or a tangle of affect just below conscious sensation is carried by the materiality of elemental forms like air, liquid and fire charged by intensities that pass between discrete bodies as "sensations" just below their conscious perception at the level of the unsayable, the unhearable, the unbearable, and the unseen. At this level of streaming affect right on the border between appearance and non-appearance, the figure of God remains invisible. The poetic lines speak more at the level of creative emergence than crystallized form and personhood:

The air is polyphonous
Rife intensifications of line
hone down into the life of vibration.
Ready for all the pulsing powers of earth—
air, liquid, fire, colored dirt and sands.
It flashes its emanations
of accumulated restlessness.
The whole thereby becomes suffused,
with a yearning that streams across the daily dapple.

There is a tangle lower than the lowest low.
The unhearable, unbearable pressures of bass
pulse somber-sonorous under
surface treble-trouble shimmer.
Odd that the universe of music shines
like this for any watching eye to hear.
Doomed or driven,
drawn to write poem
after poem, to enter
some space like that
and fail so mercilessly.
The attraction of (almost)
saying the unsayable
is palpable.
Even tiny claims made
by tiny words like "the"
an any-word
at any-time
should jostle
certitudes
with intimations
of unseen
and unspeakable
complexity.[28]

If we include these lines alongside the other more representative poems in this little collection, what is given to sense is the violent emergence of angry emotion out of more subtle forms of pulsating affect. In other words, the poems signal the rough emergence of God as a figure out of more ambient sensation. That would be the "revelation" point in the poems, in which the reader is given to hear and to see something of God in a more rough figurative form as overt and angry expression.

The anger at God in most of the poems is not too subtle:

Let the old man rant about injustice again
as the wind blows in his face
as he spits and spits to clear
the phlegm and bile from his throat.
Let him fall from your hands
as ash, bits of bone, impotent seed,
a last tiny ember burning out
on your fingertip.



They are full of rage:

Fuel of rage
at this mass
acre of explosions
into ruins of hapless,
hopeless, homeless now
Gazans
strewn in the open
or under rubble limbs
of children.

Not with wonder, the air is here now heavy with questions that reflect keen disappointment:

K. finds the air rarefied, stifling,
in the attics of The Law.
We leave class puzzled & disappointed
to be left
hanging
beneath the tree of knowledge.[29]

With but one vision into the world to come, the image of God in the majority of our poems offers no resolution or peace, not even a semblance. The poets are left waiting and wanting. God remains in the poems on the earth for the little time that remains to us, cocooned in the short columns of words composed of short horizontal lines. The relations remain awkward. The poems mark out the finitization of God around a human mood or problem, the permeation of God by the hard concretization of negative human emotion:

To let the thing beyond
remain untainted by our
terrible yearning
is impossible.[30]

Hell on earth, the poets express anger at God. But like the proverbial apple from the Tree of Knowledge, God is stuck in the poet's craw. He can't spit it out.

Lastly, for these poems to work, to be able to spit God out, God has to have a body. Indeed,

How can we pray to God's unity if He remains bodiless
And freed Himself from earthlings' sights and smells
And if He created all things
Can the tribulations of the just
Be nothing other than His master plan.[31]

## POETRY AND BELIEF

If I were to guess, I would think the reason why this volume's editors chose to include these poems and my commentary in this book of Jewish philosophical reflection on God has to do with poetic forms of "imagination" and "imagining," in which literal or propositional language gives way to figurative expression. But to what effect? Are we supposed to conclude from the poems that the poets think that God can be sensed and imagined, if not actually known? But just how tongue in check is the reader supposed to read these poems? Do our poets actually believe in the God against whom they rage and beat? Or do they only do so "figuratively"? What is the status of imagination? Or irony? To complicate the matter, consider the tacit theology or anti-theology that drives these poets in the specific forms they take from and give to "Judaism." It is safe to assume that poets are almost always going to lie about things that lie close to heart.

In a review of *Telling and Remembering: A Century of Jewish American Poetry*, the scholar of rabbinic religion and "formative Judaism," Jacob Neusner took up the question of God and Jewishness with a bluntness peculiar to him in his capacity as a critic of American Judaism. Published in 1998, the anthology collects poets known and lesser known under the rubric of "Jewish poetry." They include Stanley Kunitz, Howard Nemerov, Carl Shapiro, Anthony Hecht, Maxine Kumin, Louis Gluck, Philip Levine, Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, and Robert Pinsky. Neusner's complaint about this first collection of twentieth century American Jewish poetry is that none of it is "Jewish" in a deep or trenchant way having to do with "Judaism." Neusner notes the way in which the poets in *Telling and Remembering* address the immigrant experience, the "pathos of . . . unrealized dreams," alienation and isolation, and the Holocaust, of course. But to him the poems are illiterate. Like potatoes and Coca Cola, they are nothing but ordinary, which the scholar of Judaism finds boring. With no prophets, no Talmud, no Kabbalah, Neusner looks in vain in these poems for the magic of the Sabbath God encountered in the here and now, because for him, sublimity is the aesthetic of Judaism and holiness.[32]

Neusner's criticism is useful not so much for the judgment it conveys as much as for the terms in which he has couched it. What if the sublime and the beautiful belong to the history of western style, as critics more invested in the arts and critical theory might very well suspect? What if their very appearance today depends upon not a little irony? How then could these eighteenth century categories of aesthetic judgment be expected to continue to work in works of serious contemporary theology? Writing as a philosophical critic, I would not want to submit our poets here to this Neusnerian rigor. But let us



examine the rhetorical flourish to the language used by him. As if echoing the point made by Andrew Benjamin about the in-tandem figuring of Jews and animals, the poets in *Telling and Remembering* are in Neusner's estimation merely "monkeys," "imitators," "players of games," "virtual Jews." One might wonder. Indeed, are there any other kinds of Jews today? What if the lived sense of authentic Judaism to which Neusner aspires is itself vicarious?

Turning away from Neusner, the first thing to note is the way in which Jews, God and the Bible stand out in our poems. What kind of Jews are they? What kind of God? What kind of Bible? The aesthetic is vulgar.

Our poets and the personae they bring to life are not the tradionalist kind of Jews who would declare hand on heart, "*Ani ma'amin be-emunah shelemah*" (I believe with perfect faith). But neither are they the kind of modern Jew criticized by Petuchowski who might have once gone down a list of doxa in order to tick off, individually, principles of faith to which she or he might or might not assent. They don't act in "good faith." The poets are more comic in character, like:

> the kind women at cash registers
> glare at, the kind with scalloped
> edges and frayed hair
> whose voice rises into prophetic zeal
> over the slightest hint of a problem.[33]

How do these kinds of Jews imagine God? As figured by our Jewish poets, God is not an idea, or a cosmic principle, not Ein Sof, or perfect as was once conceived in the medieval philosophical and kabbalistic traditions. God is imagined in the very ordinary as deity in de-sublimated dimension. By way of parody, God is gendered, patriarchal, canny, crude, rough, and raw.

The vast majority of our poems are biblical. But from which books of the Bible? The image of God resembles nothing like the God of Exodus, salvation, revelation, or law, nor the God of the priestly texts who is pure, distant, and removed, squirreled away in some sanctuary of silence. These figures come from *schmutz*, mostly from Genesis, that is from the book of J, and from the book of Job. The God on view here is the God of creation pressured by the problem of human suffering, very much like the way R. Crumb pictured "him" in his graphic novel of the book of Genesis.[34] The God who hangs over the human predicament in the great cosmic scheme has been perceived by the poets as if from under the shadow thrown by the Tree of Knowledge.

What does God do in the world? In our poems, "he" casts out angels, frowns. Dropping darkness, "he" accepts Cain's offering of charred flesh from Iraqi battlefields. "He" breaks his covenant with the beasts, disowning broken promises, feigning humility, recalling old lovers, boasting of

"his" bravery as "he" storms through windows and veils. God tortures an innocent man, and boasts about "his" power, an example that bedevils Mr. Prystowski and his Hebrew School students:

> (But what about the dead children??!, the question),
> the question, Mr. Prystowski points out, lingers:
> Life is unfair.[35]

Above it all, just like in classical theology, God presides over the created universe which seems to have something to do with God as its creator.

A canny reader might wonder if the contemporary poet's God enjoys the attribute of existence outside these poetic impressions, knowing that this would be the wrong question. But as readers of the poem, for now at least, we only care about God's existence inside the poem. In the best modern or contemporary poems it might very well be that, in a determinate way, God does not exist apart from the very questions that hang over "him," that God does not exist apart from only an indefinite sense of deity in the universe, as part of a problem that will not go away no matter how hard one might push it away. As a nominal figure in the history of religious thought and culture, but also as a phenomenological presence that appears to human consciousness, God would not exist apart from the names that name God in poetic and other types of discourse—visionary, theological, and philosophical. That is the point of the rabbinic commentary to Isaiah 43:12, "And you are My witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God." In the famous dictum attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, the rabbis conclude by way of explanation, "When you are my witnesses, I am God, and when you are not my witnesses, I am not God" (*Sifre to Deuteronomy*, 33:5).[36]

About the curious naming and not-naming of God in prewar and postwar European poetry, Hans-Georg Gadamer asked a simple question in the title of a philosophical reflection, "Are The Poets Falling Silent?" Building upon an insight by Paul Valéry, Gadamer makes the nominalist point. "In poetry, when one is directed away from the word, one is at the same time directed back to it; it is the word itself which guarantees that about which it speaks."[37] Bracketing the problem of belief and good faith, the very poetic word "God" brings poets and their readers back to God. Gadamer cites Rilke on the absence of God in that poet's later work, most famously in the *Duino Elegies*. In a 1923 letter, about his relation to God Rilke remarked, "There is an indescribable discretion between us" in such a way as to beg the question. Some forty years later, pressed in by new social contexts and psychic stress determined by social unrest in the 1960s and the postwar impact of anonymous mass society,



Gadamer's conclusion was that European poets still speak about things that matter, like "I," "man," or "God." They just do it very quietly.[38]

Our vulgar American Jewish poets are not refined and as quiet as Gadamer's modern and postwar European poets. Our "postmodern" poets are loud, rambunctious, and salty. They are less burdened by the immediate past, by the wartime destruction of their own city life. They are more technologically comfortable in our "epoch of electronically amplified voice."[39] Certainly, they are far less discrete than Rilke. But do they believe in the God whose name comes back in their poems? Do the poets assembled here in this volume of Jewish philosophy believe in God, in a God to whose discourse they were asked by the editors to add their own contributions? This indiscrete question has to be asked, even if it is a vulgar question that turns out to be ridiculous. The question of belief is ridiculous not because poets are necessarily going to lie, but because the question assumes a referential function to non-propositional expression.

Santayana would have called these noisy, indiscrete Jews "barbarians," by which he meant the type of person "who regards his [*sic*] passions as their own excuse for being, who do not domesticate them either by understanding their cause or by conceiving their ideal goal." Like our own contemporary Jewish poets, a barbarian poet "merely feels and acts, valuing in his life its force and its feeling. . . . His delight is in abundance and vehemence." For Santayana, the defects to this kind of poetry lie in the "lack of distinction, absence of beauty, confusion of ideas, incapacity to please."[40] In this, he has described our poets to a tee. While Santayana included the poetry of Robert Browning, his attention to Whitman matters more for our own purpose here trying to get a handle on the figure of God in these American Jewish poems. Whitman's style is described by Santayana as innocent, personified by Adam and the animals filing one by one before him. Barbarian poetry is flooded with the images of the poet's own sensations. "The world has no inside; it is a phantasmagoria of continuous vision, vivid, impressive, but monotonous and hard to distinguish in memory . . . sublime only by the infinite aggregation of parts," composed of "detail without parts," emblems of the crude democracy despised by Santayana.[41]

Whether or not our poets match up to Whitman, his is the standard to which on Santayana's lead we can measure their lines, in that their Jewish poetry is quintessentially American and essentially barbaric. Demanding more than just image or vision, in writing about religion and poetry, Santayana placed a premium on the matter of belief. His concern is a common sense one that the image of God be more than just an image, something more than a play of fancy. Religious poetry would seem to demand an extra-poetic reference, cognitive assent, and the ontological condition defining the image in relation

to being. As the highest form of poetry, religious poetry surpassed "mere" poetry or fantasy.[42] In a similar vein, C. S. Lewis conceded the point that Christianity becomes poetry. Christianity in this sense is no different than Marxism or Freudianism. But beauty will not be the reason why believers chose an ideology in the first place. About this, perhaps Lewis knew from his own conversion to Christianity. The poetic value of theology is secondary to the believer. A heightened sense of beauty is the result of belief, not its cause. The very fine distinction is that theology is poetic only because I believe it, but I don't believe it because its poetry.[43]

One could suspect Lewis of underselling the goods to make a polemical point about the value of theology versus that of poetry. It might very well be that having once made the caveat then allowed Lewis to explore religion and Christianity in their poetic as opposed to their dogmatic dimension. His argument is that images are not what believing Christians were chiefly interested in, and that with even a modicum of philosophical probing they would have known how to recognize that these images were only images. An early Christian is compared to a man with a nut which he has not yet cracked, but who would know which part to throw out. On the other hand, Lewis also understood that one cannot restate belief without metaphor and symbol. All our theological language is imagistic. "God enters history" is no less metaphoric than "God came down to earth." Lewis insisted that one can make language duller but not less metaphoric, pictures more prosaic, but not less pictorial.[44]

In contrast to the early Christian, the more severe problem of art and belief in modern times is the one picked up by Gadamer in another essay, "The Verse and the Whole." Gadamer observes with Hegel the gap between the appearance of God in a work of art and the reality of God—or rather a person's belief in the reality of God. Hegel's example is Greek sculpture. The modern person looks at and enjoys it without believing in its religious value as truth. In other words, the tight bond with which belief traditionally bound poetry and religion as seen by both Santayana and Lewis would appear to be a broken thing from the past. Less pessimistic than Hegel, but more melancholic, Gadamer concedes, "What has passed away is not art, but rather its *religious immediacy*," the very loss of which being that which allows us to look at an object and listen to a poem and to conceive them in the first place as art, not religion.[45] When poets going back to Goethe, Hölderlin, Kleist, and Wagner invoked the gods, these reflected "a type of playful variation of what was once obligatory." They no longer represent "church" or "the knowledge of a whole people."[46]

That is how Gadamer sets up the problem, but it is not quite the end of it. Can the bind between religion and poetry survive the breaking of the binding between one and the other? For it to work, does poetry about God demand the



immediacy of belief without ambivalence? Will it be worth reading without it? In addition to being loud, rambunctious, and indiscrete, our Jewish poets do not shy away from the "playful variations" mentioned by Gadamer. It might be because the word God in contemporary American poetry may hang on much less than the "religious immediacy" that Gadamer maintains that tradition once claimed. Gadamer himself claims to hear in the word "God" something of an "echo" in the way poets reawaken and re-appropriate that name.[47] But one could just as well confess against Gadamer that instead of insisting upon any fusion of horizons, we contemporary Kantians live more comfortably in the gap between the phenomenal appearance of God in a poem and the noumenal reality of the divine outside the cave-like house of the poem.

What if the poem come first? That would mean that the image of God, or the word God in a poem stands on its own, regardless of the intentional faith position of the poet. As Harold Bloom famously had it, a poem is about another poem, not about the isolated intention of a poet. In our case, with this kind of poetry about God, clearly what we are looking at goes beyond an isolated authorial intention vis-à-vis a confessional object of faith. The poem resonates or it does not. It resonates with the image of God culled by the poet in his or her weak or strong misreading of tradition. That would depend on large measure upon the quality of the line, even as the image also has to resonate at a particular historical moment for it to ring true.

Maybe fifty years ago, no self-respecting poet, especially Jewish poets, would have written a word about God. In contrast, our poets are "after God," by which I follow Mark Taylor. On one hand they come after the death of God, meaning after the collapse of conventional faith and religious expression. On the other hand, the poets are after God in either hot or cool pursuit.[48] Refusing to let go, they are "after God," not to say pious things to God or about God, but to say their piece. Without badgering the poet about what she or he may or may not believe about God or the use of the word "God" in a poem, it would be safe to assume that the contemporary idiom with which the poets build their lines is simultaneously critical and post-critical. This might be the only style with which a thinking person can write about God in poetic good faith, slyly.

More likely than not, the anxiety refracted first by Hegel and then by Gadamer is modern, while Petuchowski, in his own way "postmodern," took a more relaxed approach to the relationship between aesthetics and religion. As a scholar of Judaism and as a scholar of piyyut, not a philosopher, it could be that he knew more about "religion" than did Gadamer, and therefore worried less about the problem of reference. What caught his eye in medieval piyyut were poetic reflections on human finitude and the finality of death, not the immediacy of naïve faith. In fact, he chided gently the modern Jew who goes

to synagogue for moral edification, leaving the "aesthetic and intellectual joys of 'problem solving' for the crossword puzzle in [the] daily newspaper." In his view, the medieval synagogue was a more comprehensive institution than the modern one. The kind of problem solving and intellectual games represented by medieval piyyut were once a part of the "total worship experience."[49] The notion has much to recommend itself vis-à-vis the more secular and less believing frame presented by our contemporary poems.

I have turned to these poems collected here as a touchstone with which to assess questions of concern to the philosophy of religion. Representing crossover territories, poetry and religion stake their common share in the human imagination. For all of its commitment to reason, philosophy insofar as its turns to consider religion, either to critique it or extend it, enters necessarily into that same uncertain turf, and renders itself uncertain in the process. Should philosophy or theology be more like a poem? In what kind of time or rhythm, with what kind of form shaping what kind of content around what kinds of problem or mood? Obsessed with "meaning," can Jewish philosophy or the philosophy of religion forsake the terrain represented by poetry and still make a shred of "sense"? Or should philosophy hew with poetry ever more closely to the earth? It might only be a judgment of taste to conclude that the best theology was always poetic in the attentiveness paid to crafting the linguistic body of its vision.

## NOTES

1. Jacob Petuchowski, *Theology and Poetry* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2000), 1–6.
2. George Santayana, *Interpretation of Poetry and Religion* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 5–7.
3. Ibid., 8–9.
4. Ibid., 34.
5. Ibid., 4, 82.
6. Ibid., 85.
7. Ibid., 82.
8. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 3–4, 7, 16.
9. Ibid., 65–6, 89.
10. Ibid., 4–5, 198–9.
11. Ibid., 35.
12. Ibid., 4–5, 198–9.
13. All poems referenced in this essay are taken from poems listed in the section "Poetics: God in Language." The reader should refer to that section to see the fuller context for these poetic excerpts, both here and in all following citations. Rather than list and discuss specific authors and poems, I have chosen to read them in aggregate as a way to shape these philosophical reflections.
14. Gottlob Frege, "On Sense and Reference," ed. by Peter Geach and Max Black, *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).
15. Santayana, *Interpretation of Poetry and Religion,* 4, 7, 8.
16. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). Also see Zachary Braiterman, *The Shape of Revelation: Aesthetics and Modern Jewish Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
17. All poems referenced in this essay are taken from poems listed in the section "Poetics: God in Language." The reader should refer to that section to see the fuller context for these poetic excerpts, both here and in all following citations.
18. Santayana, *Interpretation of Poetry and Religion*, 76–77.
19. All poems referenced in this essay are taken from poems listed in the section "Poetics: God in Language." The reader should refer to that section to see the fuller context for these poetic excerpts, both here and in all following citations.
20. All poems referenced in this essay are taken from poems listed in the section "Poetics: God in Language." The reader should refer to that section to see the fuller context for these poetic excerpts, both here and in all following citations.
21. Donovan O. Schaeffer, "Do Animals Have Religion? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Religion and Embodiment," *Anthrozoös: A Multidisciplinary Journal of the Interactions of People & Animals*, 25:1 (2012): 173–89, especially page 186. See also Donavan Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), chapter 7.
22. See Marc Epstein, *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink: Jewish Illuminated Manuscripts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
23. All poems referenced in this essay are taken from poems listed in the section "Poetics: God in Language." The reader should refer to that section to see the fuller context for these poetic excerpts, both here and in all following citations.
24. Andrew Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 65–6.
25. Ibid., 9–10, 18, 191.
26. Ibid., 10, 16.
27. Ibid., 191.
28. All poems referenced in this essay are taken from poems listed in the section "Poetics: God in Language." The reader should refer to that section to see the fuller context for these poetic excerpts, both here and in all following citations.
29. All poems referenced in this essay are taken from poems listed in the section "Poetics: God in Language." The reader should refer to that section to see the fuller context for these poetic excerpts, both here and in all following citations.
30. All poems referenced in this essay are taken from poems listed in the section "Poetics: God in Language." The reader should refer to that section to see the fuller context for these poetic excerpts, both here and in all following citations.

31. All poems referenced in this essay are taken from poems listed in the section "Poetics: God in Language." The reader should refer to that section to see the fuller context for these poetic excerpts, both here and in all following citations.

32. Jacob Neusner, "What's Jewish about American Jewish poetry?" in *Judaism* 47:4 (1998): 487–9.

33. All poems referenced in this essay are taken from poems listed in the section "Poetics: God in Language." The reader should refer to that section to see the fuller context for these poetic excerpts, both here and in all following citations.

34. R. Crumb, *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

35. All poems referenced in this essay are taken from poems listed in the section "Poetics: God in Language." The reader should refer to that section to see the fuller context for these poetic excerpts.

36. The first reference to this midrash in modern Jewish philosophy was Buber's in the early 1916 address, "Jewish Religiosity," in Martin Buber, *On Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 84.

37. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Are the Poets Falling Silent?" in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. by Dieter Misgeld (Albany: State University of New York Press), 73.

38. Ibid., 74.

39. Ibid., 81.

40. Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 55, 54.

41. Ibid., 56, 57.

42. Ibid., 8–9.

43. C. S. Lewis, "Is Theology Poetry?" in *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 122.

44. Ibid., 131–2.

45. Hans Georg Gadamer, "Verse and the Whole," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics,* 87 (emphasis added).

46. Ibid., 88.

47. Ibid.

48. Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 345.

49. Petuchowski, *Theology and Poetry*, 142.

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