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### *From Publicist to Author*

WITH THE DISSOLUTION of the *Neue Gemeinschaft*, Buber resolved finally to write a doctoral dissertation, apparently at Paula's insistence. At the time, she was living apart from Buber with their two children at the home of a friend in the Austrian Tyrol, while he was in Berlin engaged more with the city's intellectual life and Zionist affairs than with his university studies. To complete his doctorate, he returned to Vienna in order to prepare for his qualifying exams in his major, philosophy, as well as in his minor subject, art history; after a few months of intensive study, he successfully passed the exam in philosophy, but failed in art history. He was allowed to retake the art history exam, and barely managed to pass with the grade of *genügend* (satisfactory).<sup>1</sup>

With his exams behind him, he embarked on a dissertation under the supervision of Friedrich Jodl, a venerable professor of philosophy. His dissertation examined the problem of indi-

viduation in the writings of the German neo-Platonic philosopher Nicholas of Cusa and the German mystic Jakob Boehme, both of whom, he argued, anticipated the fundamental epistemological and existential problems of the modern age, individuation and isolation. All of forty typewritten pages, the dissertation was approved in July 1904. Upon completing it, Buber decided to write a second thesis—a so-called habilitation thesis, a monograph representing substantial and original research—which would qualify him for a teaching appointment at a German university. Setting his sights on a thesis not in philosophy but in art history, he resolved to conduct research in Florence, Italy, on the art of the Renaissance.

Eager to facilitate her grandson's path to a "respectable" career, his grandmother, who ran the financial side of her husband's various banking and commercial interests, agreed to underwrite the costs of his scholarly sojourn in the birthplace of the Renaissance. But once Martin, Paula, and their children had settled in Florence, his research agenda was soon richly complemented, if not utterly compromised, by a fascination with the cultural life and landscape of the city. On the eve of Christmas 1905, he dashed off a buoyant note to a friend, reporting:

Florence suits me, as all of us, well; we have no contact with other people at all and hardly miss it, for one lives with this city, with its houses, with its monuments, with its former generations. . . . I am writing various things about Florence. I hope in this way slowly to accumulate a whole collection of essays, primarily, however, about little or utterly unnoticed things (destroyed frescoes, street tabernacles, gravestones, Gothic traces, street culture, lay religious orders, street songs, sayings, the old [Jewish] Ghetto, etc.), which could be later united into one volume, perhaps under the title, *The Hidden Florence, Winter Strolls*.<sup>2</sup>

Above all, Florence brought liberation from what Buber had increasingly experienced as the oppressive effects of Zionist politics. As he plaintively wrote during the conflict with Herzl and Nordau in a letter to his close friend Chaim Weizmann—who was to become the first president of the State of Israel—these politics had paralyzed him, draining him of all creative energy: “I often lie on the sofa in convulsions for a half a day at a time, can work neither on my dissertation nor on anything else. I have in fact had to put all work aside.”<sup>3</sup> But in the aforementioned letter of Christmas eve, he described how Florence now made possible a

separation from all that only seemed to be ours, only seemed to belong to our own life, but which had not nurtured and enhanced our understanding, which had not excited and satisfied us, which had not carried us through the world and calmed us. Only through a separation from all this can we be brought to ourselves. . . . How do I live? How one feels at the beginning of a good journey, a journey that one does not fully know [where it will take one], but one knows it is the right way. . . . How happy I am that I have been released from flawed spheres of activity; I feel that I am now once again free to work as I have not for years. . . . I am happier. . . . And also my connection with Judaism free from the whirl of party politics has deepened; should I once again occupy myself with [Jewish matters], it would be something purer and greater than the slogans to which I once shamefully subscribed.<sup>4</sup>

Buoyed by the distance from everything that he felt had compromised his spiritual and intellectual integrity, Buber experienced a burst of creativity. While doing research for his habilitation thesis, he was also determined to enhance his appreciation of the cultural life of Florence by mastering Italian. A passionate polyglot since his youth, he retained as a household tutor a young woman named Santina, who came from

Siena, where the purest Italian was said to be spoken. Santina, who would remain with the Buber family as a governess and cook for the next two decades, was encouraged to speak only Italian with Buber and his family. As a result, they each gained fluency in Italian (though she would never master German).

Reminiscent of his initial days as a student in Vienna, when he would frequent the Burgtheater in order to hear and learn how German was truly spoken, Buber attended many theater performances at Florence's historic Teatro della Pergola. Among the first plays he saw was *Monna Vanna* by the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck. The principal role in this dramatic portrayal of the new, emancipated woman was played by perhaps the most acclaimed actress of the time, Eleanora Duse. In an article published in a Berlin theater journal, Buber focused on the thespian skills of "Madame Duse," who through the inflections of her speech and gestures "gathers into herself what in everyday life remains fragmentary, troubled and broken. . . . Within this givenness of word and gestures [of the Italian street, marketplace, and courtyard]," Duse, he said, "gave expression to the personal. By the subtle intonations of voice and movement, she portrayed the paradoxical effect of individuation"—the emergence of the individual as free from the constraints of tradition yet, at the same time, torn "from the security of the familiar into the threat of the infinite."<sup>5</sup> Thus Duse poignantly articulated the existential problem of modernity, the opening of "the abyss . . . between person and person," when "all tradition fades away, and the individual is awakened who can only defend itself and contest [its fate] but no longer speak. The individual's word is no longer communication but a battle." With this observation, Buber broached what would be a paramount issue in his life's work.

We have no record of the subject of Buber's habilitation thesis, which was near completion when he decided to set it aside unfinished.<sup>6</sup> The decision was probably due to the sudden

death in June 1905 at the age of forty-seven of his thesis adviser Alois Riegel, who together with Franz Wickhoff, his older colleague at the University of Vienna, had helped to establish art history as an academic discipline.<sup>7</sup> Buber's decision to postpone the completion of his habilitation thesis was perhaps also influenced by the looming deadline for submission of his first anthology of Hasidic lore, *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (The tales of Rabbi Nachman), the contract for which he had signed with Rütten & Loening just before he left for Florence. (He had contracted with the same publisher to edit the first volumes of *Die Gesellschaft*.)<sup>8</sup> But he was undaunted by the tight schedule of these literary obligations; indeed, he found working on them exhilarating. As he wrote to a friend in the fall of 1906 on the eve of his return to Berlin: "I can now utter an earnest and joyful yes to my life."<sup>9</sup> Years later, he would look back on his time in Florence as marking his transition from "a publicist to an author."<sup>10</sup>

Putting aside his habilitation thesis meant that, in all likelihood, he would forgo the possibility of ever becoming a university teacher (his heart had never been fully devoted to that prospect); instead, he would become a freelance writer and editor. In addition to writing and editing for the eminent publishing house Rütten & Loening, he became one of its acquisitions editors, in which capacity he solicited and reviewed manuscripts for possible publication.<sup>11</sup> This salaried position allowed him to reside with his family in a six-room rented apartment with a garden in the affluent Berlin neighborhood of Zahlendorf.<sup>12</sup>

Buber's contract with Rütten & Loening marked the auspicious beginning of his life as an independent scholar and author. As acquisitions editor, he was assigned to launch an ambitious new program. In 1903, Wilhelm Oswalds, at the age of twenty-five, had assumed the directorship of the publishing house from his deceased father, and was determined to challenge what he regarded to be the provincialism of Germany's

Wilhelminian culture. With Buber's editorial assistance, he issued—in addition to the forty volumes of *Die Gesellschaft* edited by Buber—translations of world literature, such as a novel by Stefan Żeromski, Polish realist; a novel condemning militarism by the Danish author Aage von Kohl; Micha Joseph bin Gorion's *Gesammelte Sagen der Juden* (Collected sayings of the Jews); Lafcadio Hearn's sensitive evocation of “exotic” Japan, *Das Japanbuch*; Waldemar Bonsel's *Indienfabrt* (Indian journeys); the Dutch author Multatuli's scathing critique of colonial rule in the Dutch East Indies and the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie; the novel *Manja* by the young Russian author Anastasia Werbitztaja, championing women's emancipation; and a book of Chinese ghost and love stories, edited by Buber himself. His two anthologies of Hasidic lore were an integral part of this program to render the scope of German culture more cosmopolitan.<sup>13</sup>

To enhance the appeal of his list of publications, Oswalt devoted a great deal of attention to their aesthetic detail. With the publisher's encouragement, Buber hired the famed architect and designer Peter Behrens—a pioneer in modern decorative and applied arts—to design the cover and decorative endpaper of *Die Gesellschaft*; the distinctive lettering of the volumes was designed by Hermann Kirchmayr of the Tiroler Kunstbund, a center of Jugendstil artists in Innsbruck, Austria. As a self-consciously modern aesthetic idiom, Jugendstil was fashionable among “the cultured and urbane middle class” of Wilhelminian Germany—that is, Rütten & Loening's target audience.<sup>14</sup>

Bringing Hasidism to this audience presented Buber with a considerable challenge. Emerging in eighteenth-century Ukraine and Poland, Hasidism, a popular movement of mystical piety, had come to represent—for German Jews and non-Jews alike—the quintessence of eastern European Jewry's cultural backwardness. Buber himself often found Hasidism's literary sources to be lacking in aesthetic grace, at least by Western

standards. Yet the increasing prestige that mysticism and folklore enjoyed among the educated elite of central Europe provided Buber with a way to leverage Hasidism as an intellectually respectable expression of religious spirituality. We can see this strategy reflected in a letter he wrote to the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal:

If you have no objection, I shall shortly be sending you a book now being printed by [Rütten & Loening]. It contains a number of tales and legends of an eighteenth-century Jewish mystic, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, which I have found and reworked. A number of the rabbi's sayings are quoted in the introduction, and one of them might particularly interest you: "As the hand held before the eye conceals the greatest mountain, so the little earthly life hides from the glance the enormous lights and mysteries of which the world is full, and he who can draw away from behind his eyes, as one draws away a hand, beholds the great shining of the inner worlds." *Isn't that a singularly simple metaphor for the thought common to Eckhart, the Upanishads, and Hasidism?*<sup>15</sup>

Echoing the hermeneutic approach of Gustav Landauer's "translation" of Meister Eckhart, Buber explained in a letter to Samuel Horodetsky, a scholar of Hasidism who wrote largely in Hebrew and Russian: "My aim is not to accumulate new facts, but simply to give a new interpretation of the interconnections, a new synthetic presentation of Jewish mysticism and its creations and to make these creations known to the European public in as *artistically pure a form* as possible."<sup>16</sup> Sharing Buber's reservations about the literary merits of the original texts of Rabbi Nachman's stories, the Russian Jewish historian Simon Dubnow wrote Buber from Saint Petersburg to congratulate him for expurgating the tales of their *anima vili*, their worthless, vile soul (apparently referring to what he regarded to be their primitive superstitious elements). Dubnow, however, deli-

cately questioned whether Buber had embellished the stories: “In the rendering of ‘The Rabbi and his Son,’ I notice an addition which is not in my 1881 Warsaw edition of [Nachman’s tales]. Perhaps you have [an] older edition or used a variant?”<sup>17</sup>

Although he would probably reject the charge of embellishment per se, Buber acknowledged that he retold rather than translated select legends and symbolic fairy tales by Rabbi Nachman and later the Baal Shem Tov. As he relates in an essay of 1918, “My Way to Hasidism,” after he tried several times to render the Hasidic stories from the Hebrew directly into German:

I noted that the purity [of the original text] did not allow itself to be preserved in translation, much less enhanced—I had to tell stories that I had taken into myself, as a true painter takes into himself the lines of the models and achieves the genuine images out of the memory formed of them. . . . And, therefore, although by far the largest part of [*The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* and *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*] is autonomous fiction composed from traditional motifs, I might honestly report of my experience of the [Hasidic] legend: I bore in me the blood and the spirit of those who created it, and out of my blood and spirit it has become new.<sup>18</sup>

Some five decades later, Buber would acknowledge that this approach had resulted in an undisciplined and overly free rendering in German of these Hasidic tales. “I was still at that time, to be sure, an immature man; the so-called *Zeitgeist* still had power over me.”<sup>19</sup> Hence he had tendentiously adapted Hasidism to the dominant cultural discourse of the period. “I did not listen attentively enough to the crude and ungainly but living folk-tone which could be heard in this material.”<sup>20</sup> What he did not acknowledge then was that his wife, Paula, had helped him to render the legends of the Baal Shem Tov into German. He would supply her with motifs he had translated, and she would



give them a narrative fullness. He recalled their collaboration in a poem he inscribed in a copy of an anthology of Hasidic tales he published later, in 1948:

Do you still know, how we in our young years  
 Traveled together on the sea?  
 Visions came, great and wonderful,  
 We beheld them together, you and I.  
 How image joined itself with images in our hearts!  
 How a mutual animated describing  
 Arose out of it and lived between you and me!

The inscription concluded, notably: “For something eternal listens to it and listens to us, /How we resound out of it, I and Thou.”<sup>21</sup>

Buber’s early representations of Hasidism were primed by a desire to counter the negative views of eastern European Jewry. His interest in the largely maligned religious world of eastern European Jewry as represented by Hasidism was ultimately animated by a resolute commitment to rehabilitate the image of the so-called *Ostjuden*—and thus to secure the dignity of Jewry in general. In a letter in December 1906, he expressly admitted that his anthologies of Hasidic mystical teachings had an apologetic motive. While he was still working on *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, which would be published in 1908, he shared with a close friend his anguish upon learning of a recent pogrom in June 1906 in the Polish city of Bialystok, which had left close to ninety Jews dead and a similar number wounded: “I am now writing a story, which is my answer to Bialystok. It is called *Adonai* [the name of God used when addressed in prayer, hence, an evocation here of the spiritual world of the Jews]. . . . I am now in the midst of the first real work period of my life. You as my friend will understand me: I have a *new answer* to give everything. Only now have I found the form of my answer. . . .

I have grown slowly into my heaven—my life begins. I experience ineffable suffering and ineffable grace.”<sup>22</sup>

Buber viewed the representation of Hasidic spirituality as a calling. Despite its medieval exterior and what he deemed to be the inevitable social and spiritual degradation that had overtaken the movement, he felt that Hasidism continued to embody the inner truth of Judaism, which “knows multiplicity” but “no division of essential being.”<sup>23</sup>

Prior to hearing the call to highlight and proclaim the spiritual message of Hasidism, Buber’s desire to rehabilitate the image of eastern European Jewry had focused on Yiddish. In 1902, he founded in Berlin, together with other Polish Jews (an identity he proudly claimed), the Jüdischer Verlag as the publishing house of the “Jewish renaissance.” The first publication of the Jüdischer Verlag, which proved to be an immensely successful and dynamic venture, was the *Jüdischer Almanach 5663*, issued in the autumn of 1902. The handsomely produced hardbound volume of about two hundred pages included translations of Yiddish and Hebrew poems by Morris Rosenfeld, Hayim Nachman Bialik, Sholem Aleichem, Yehuda, Leib Peretz, Shimen Frug, Sholem Asch, and Avrom Reyzen, and was introduced by an urbane essay on Yiddish literature (“Über Jargon und Jargonliteratur”). Of the sixty illustrations, two-thirds had eastern European themes, the most famous being a reproduction of the *Polnischer Jude* by Hermann Struck, one of the leading artists of the time. This inaugural volume was followed in 1903 by *Jüdische Kuntsler*, a collection of essays on Jewish artists, edited by Buber. In his introduction, he wrote for the first time, albeit parenthetically, of Hasidism as a possible inspirational source for the Jewish Renaissance: “The silently flickering mystical energies [of Judaism], which have found expression in the glowing ardor of the Hasidim, nurture the creativity of the artists of our time.”<sup>24</sup> He also wrote in praise of a

distinctive Jewish musical tradition, which is “preserved in the synagogues of the [eastern European] Ghetto.”<sup>25</sup>

In the following year, the Jüdischer Verlag published Buber’s German translation of a Yiddish “workers’ drama” by David Pinski.<sup>26</sup> In the foreword, he hails the Russian dramatist as an authentic voice of the eastern European “Jewish proletariat.” In his plays and stories, Buber observed, Pinski seeks “to convey nothing but the grim reality [of the Jewish working masses] as he sees and hears it. But in conveying this reality—unadulterated and in all its harshness—he discloses the meaning of the oppressed, enslaved reality of eastern European Jewry. He discloses the prevalence of the most terrible misery.” Buber also emphasized that Pinski’s language is Yiddish—“the popular idiom (*Volkssprache*) of the Jewish masses”—which, though it had been falsely characterized as a “Jargon,” a crude patois, in reality had developed from a dialect into a sophisticated, highly nuanced language. While it is “not as rich” as Hebrew, it is “more supple”; it “is not as abstract but it is warmer than Hebrew”; it might lack the spiritual pathos of Hebrew, but “it is full of incomparably gentle and rough, tender and graded intonations.” In Yiddish, “the Jewish people itself becomes language.”<sup>27</sup>

Buber’s celebration of the culture of eastern European Jewry was an expression of his reaffirmation of his own Jewish identity, which he had consciously allowed to atrophy as he eagerly embraced a European education and culture. The “whirl of the age,” as he later noted, had taken hold of him: “My spirit was in steady and multiple movement, determined by manifold influences, taking ever new shape but without a center. . . . Here I lived—in versatile fullness of spirit, but without Judaism and humanity.”<sup>28</sup> Zionism had first facilitated his reconnection with the Jewish community. He had been “seized” by Herzl’s plea for “Jewish solidarity.” A few weeks after having formally joined the Zionist movement, he wrote Paula, who

was pregnant with their first child, and related that he and his cousin Ahron Eliasberg had gone to a Berlin railroad station to greet a group of Russian Jewish refugees en route to America. He poignantly described to her the “forlornness” of the leaderless refugees who “were treated like animals by the [German immigrant] officials.” Appalled he told Paula how deeply he identified with their desperation and humiliation.

But he soon came to feel that an affirmation of Jewish national solidarity was only a first, albeit necessary step toward the spiritual transformation of the assimilated, forlorn Jew. The appropriation of a Jewish national identity was not to be construed as the longed-for “harbor,” but rather as a setting sail onto “the open sea” in quest of the sources that would inspire one’s transformation as a Jew who is spiritually at home in Judaism. “Thus,” he wrote, “it happened to me.”<sup>29</sup> After “some blind groping,” he realized that he would reach his destination by renewing his knowledge of Judaism—to know it, however, not simply as “the storing up of anthropological, historical, and sociological knowledge” but from within “its creative primal hours.”<sup>30</sup> Thus began his voyage on the sea of Jewish tradition, with the intent of discovering those resources that would furnish him with a spiritual home within Judaism. “On this way,” he reported, “I came to Hasidism.”

Buber, to be sure, set sail with a map and compass in hand; he had a clear sense of what he was looking for. Consistent with his equation of spirituality with mysticism, he sought the “primal creative hours” of Judaism in its mystical traditions; one of the first publications of the Jüdischer Verlag was a 1904 German translation of an essay by Solomon Schechter, “Die Chasidim: Eine Studie über jüdische Mystik.” Turning to Hasidism was surely not accidental; Buber drew on his childhood memories of visiting Hasidic communities with his father, which had left powerful, albeit ambivalent, impressions on him.

As part of his resolution to learn more about Hasidism,

Martin Buber solicited his grandfather's assistance. A renowned scholar of rabbinic texts, Salomon Buber had wide-ranging connections with eastern European scholars of Hasidism and Kabbalah, many of whom he supported by underwriting the cost of publishing their writings. In addition to providing his grandson with Hasidic publications not readily available in Berlin, he seems to have facilitated the support that Martin enjoyed (in preparing his anthologies) from such eminent scholars as Micha Joseph Berdichevsky, Simon Dubnow, and especially Shmuel Horodetzky, who had published studies of Hasidism in Hebrew, Russian, and Yiddish.<sup>31</sup> In the preface of the first edition of *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, Buber acknowledged the assistance he had received from each of these scholars. This edition, published a month before the passing of his grandfather in December 1906, also bore the dedication: "To my grandfather, Salomon Buber, the last of the great scholars of the old-style Haskalah [eastern European Jewish Enlightenment], I dedicate this work on Hasidism with respect and love."

The dedication reflects what one may surmise was a reconciliation. Martin's grandfather had not been particularly approving of his pursuit of a university education, and as someone who was wary of Jewry's turn to nationalism, his grandson's adoption of Zionism did not particularly please him.<sup>32</sup> But upon learning of Martin's intention to engage in a study of Hasidism, he wrote him a brief but ecstatic letter (in Yiddish): "My dear Martin, I have your good letter, which gave me special pleasure. I read it with tears of joy. May it also make for you a great name in the world. . . . This is the hope and wish of your loving grandfather."<sup>33</sup> He added that since he was gravely ill, "it should be *soon* so that I could experience [the public esteem it will bring you]. The time is short."<sup>34</sup> It was undoubtedly especially gratifying for Salomon, shortly before his death, to have the pleasure of seeing his grandson's book on Nachman of Bratzlav in print. (Upon the death of his grandfather, the dedication

of the second edition of the volume was emended to read: “In memory of my grandfather.”) Martin’s grandfather’s exuberant approval of his interest in Hasidism was in striking contrast to his father’s letter to him on his thirtieth birthday, in which he pleaded with him, as we have seen, to “give up this Hasidic and Zohar stuff” and stop “[wasting] so much time and effort [on something] so utterly useless for yourself and the world.”<sup>35</sup>

Unmoved by his father’s admonition, Buber continued his writing on Hasidism, which was part of his wider interest in mysticism generally. As early as 1903, he was in discussions with the Leipzig publisher Eugen Diederichs regarding a proposal to edit an anthology of essays on European mystical traditions. The project eventually evolved into an anthology of mystical testimonies by “fervent individuals from various ages and peoples that I have been collecting over many years,” as Buber wrote to Diederichs.<sup>36</sup> He further explained that the volume would be concerned “much more with the affirmation of life and a positive spirit than with asceticism and a flight from the world,” reflecting “the communication of visionaries—individuals graced with dreams about their innermost life.” Since the volume would “bring together entirely forgotten documents that are of utmost importance for the soul of humanity,” he wrote, he was reluctant to entrust its publication to any publisher other than one as spiritually and aesthetically sensitive as Diederichs.<sup>37</sup> The volume, *Ecstatic Confessions*, was accepted and published by Eugen Diederichs Verlag in 1909. Presenting voices of mystical rapture from various Occidental and Oriental traditions, theistic and pagan, the volume was, as Buber had hoped, exquisitely produced. Enjoying numerous editions, the volume’s enthusiastic reception enhanced the thirty-one-year-old Buber’s stature as a significant voice in German intellectual life.

Despite the fame the volume would later bring him, at the time Buber considered it to have only “a thoroughly episodic”

significance for him.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, he was eager to have the confessions seen in print, if for no other reason than that they represented years of research. In his introduction to *Ecstatic Confessions*, he thus expressed a muffled ambivalence about what he referred to in his correspondence with Diederichs as the life-affirming impulse of the mystic. Driven by a deeply felt need to voice the experience (Erlebnis) of the “primal unity of being,” the mystic perforce enters through language the world of space and time, the world of multiplicity. This is the “monstrous contradiction” inherent in ecstatic confessions: The ecstatic seeks “to tow the timeless into the harbor of time,” but befuddled by the manifest chaos of the world of space and time, takes recourse in the creation of myths of unity, in which the experience of unity “becomes plurality because it wants to gaze and be gazed at, . . . to love and be loved.” Buber then concludes the introduction on a surprisingly skeptical note: “But is not the myth a phantasm? . . . We listen to our inmost selves—and do not know which sea we hear murmuring.”<sup>39</sup>

Less than a year after the publication of *Ecstatic Confessions*, Buber’s ambivalence came to a resolution with an emphatic denial of the fundamental presupposition that mystical experience embraces fragmented, individuated social existence. Attending the First German Conference of Sociologists organized by Max Weber in October 1910, Buber entered into a debate with Ernst Troeltsch in which he protested the Protestant philosopher of religion’s reference to mysticism as a sociological category. Buber insisted that the mystic’s experience is in fact asocial, and should properly be understood as “religious solipsism”:

Mysticism . . . is an absolute realization of [individual] religiosity, achieving both an apprehension of one’s self and an “apperception of God.” In the intense exaltation of the self the mystic establishes a relationship to the content of

his soul, which he perceives as God. . . . [Hence,] it seems to me that mysticism negates community—mysticism does not struggle with any organized community, nor does it set itself up as an alternative community, as a sect would. Rather mysticism negates community, precisely because for it there is only one relation, the relation to God. The process noted by Professor Troeltsch, the coming together of believers . . . does not at all occur in mysticism. The [mystic] remains thoroughly isolated in his belief, for nothing else matters to him than to be alone with God.<sup>40</sup>

He also remarked parenthetically that “mysticism seems to me rather different from religion, which is [indeed] a sociological entity constituted by religiosity.” This critical characterization of ecstatic mysticism reflected an incipient shift in his understanding of religious life, which would also inform his later “dialogical” representation of Hasidic spirituality. His interest in myth and mysticism would indeed ultimately prove episodic; he would decades later apologetically call it his “mystical phase,” which he had to pass through before he “could attain an independent relation with being.”<sup>41</sup>

The axis of Buber’s quest for unity in the world of plurality increasingly shifted from myth to religiosity, which is “manifest in deed.” The transition, however, was slow and incremental. In his early writings on Hasidism, he was still in the thrall of myth and the mythic articulation of the mystical experience. Thus, in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, he exuberantly claimed, “The Jews are a people that has never ceased to produce myth.”<sup>42</sup> Although the custodians of the religion of Israel had sought since time immemorial to keep myth—and mysticism—at bay, they never could quite suppress the mythopoetic imagination, attuned as it is to “the fullness of existence” and the torments of individuation. “It is strange and wonderful,” he wrote, “to observe how in this battle religion ever again wins the apparent victory, myth ever again wins the real one.” Buber cited the



prophets as exemplary representatives of the Judaic voice of myth: “The prophets struggled through the word against the multiplicity of the people’s impulses, but in their visions lives the ecstatic fantasy of the Jews, which makes them poets of myth without their knowing it.”<sup>43</sup>

Buber’s Hasidic anthologies were followed by collections of Chinese, Finnish, and Celtic myths and legends. The editing of the volume *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang-Tse* (Sayings and parables of Zhuangzi) led to an intensive study of Chinese philosophy, particularly Daoism, of which the late fourth-century B.C.E. sage Zhuangzi was a seminal figure.<sup>44</sup> Although he worked with available English translations, Buber translated some of the tales himself with the help of a Chinese scholar then living in Berlin. (When Buber’s children—nine-year-old Rafael and his eight-year-old sister Eva—were told by their mother that a Dr. Wang Jingtao was going to visit in order to work with their father, they scrambled to the window of the apartment facing the street, excitedly waiting for the arrival of their “Oriental” guest, hoping to catch a first glimpse of his ponytail; they were profoundly disappointed that he did not have one.)<sup>45</sup>

Long after his interest in myth had waned, Buber maintained what became a lifelong interest in Chinese philosophy. Both the volume on Zhuangzi and the volume of Chinese ghost and love stories he published a year later went through many printings.<sup>46</sup> In the 1920s, he was active in the China Gesellschaft, founded at the University of Frankfurt by the famed sinologist Richard Wilhelm, to which he delivered several lectures on Chinese philosophy; it was through membership in the society that he met the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung, and deepened his friendship with the novelist Hermann Hesse and the poet (and his future son-in-law) Ludwig Strauss. When he later taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he assigned

his students texts by the Daoist philosopher Laozi, which he translated into Hebrew with the help of a German-Jewish sinologist then living in Tel Aviv.

In the introductory chapter of the volume on Zhuangzi, Buber explained that the Dao (the path to true knowledge of the world) is actually not a matter of knowing, but of being—it is not static, but unfolds through endless change. Unity, first within oneself and then within the world, is sought within that change. Western epistemologies had led humanity astray; in Daoism, true knowledge is found not by thinking (whereby one stands over against the world as an independent observer, and seeks to penetrate its mystery through metaphysical or instrumental reason), but in action—or rather, non-action, a process of becoming. Through this active non-action, one becomes “part of the natural order” of the world, free of the distinction, division, and anguished separation in the Western quest for knowledge of reality, and of the inherently “violent” impulse to impose a conceptual or empirical unity on the natural order. But Buber would soon come to wonder whether the doctrine of non-action might be no more than a spiritual attunement to the world of becoming, not a true process of becoming itself, and inadequate to the task of concretely (and thus actively) fostering the unity within the diversity of the world as we experience it.

Soon after publishing the *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang-Tse*, Buber embarked on the work of clarifying how the task of promoting the essential unity within a world of diversity might be realized. By the late spring of 1912, he was ready to share with friends the drafts of what would be his first full-length monograph, *Daniel. Gespräche von der Verwirklichung* (Daniel: Dialogues on realization). His most attentive reader was Gustav Landauer, with whom he shared numerous versions. Upon revising the manuscript in accordance with his friend’s exten-

sive stylistic and substantive emendations, he submitted the manuscript to Anton Kippenberg, director of Insel Verlag, which was then widely considered the premier literary publishing house in Germany. With palpable joy, he wrote Landauer in September 1912 to inform him that Kippenberg had accepted the volume for publication.<sup>47</sup> In a journal he kept while working on *Daniel*, he drafted an appreciative note: "For Landauer. Among my friends you are the only one for whom *Daniel* was always there. It is thus more than an expression of a feeling when I dedicate the first announcement of its birth to you."<sup>48</sup>

Among the working notes Buber made while writing *Daniel* is a short one possibly hinting at the programmatic thrust of the volume: "Conjoin the biographical with the dialogical."<sup>49</sup> One may reasonably surmise, then, that a variety of autobiographical moments inform the conversations (*Gespräche*) between Daniel and five different interlocutors. The first conversation is between Daniel and a woman (who is identified only as "Die Frau")—whose voice might very well be that of his wife, at least in part—and takes place while strolling in the mountains (something that Martin and Paula often did). The woman, Daniel's partner, is portrayed as a mother and companion. The maternal womb and life force of being, she stirs his passion, binding him to earthy reality, flush with multiple, "formless" possibilities, tensions, and feelings. But Daniel strives to give his life direction, which knows no multiplicity: "Direction is that primary tension of the human soul which impels it from time to time to choose this [way] and no other from the infinitude of possibilities and *to realize it in action*."<sup>50</sup> Daniel's direction is fired by passion, for "direction is only perfect when it is fulfilled with power, the power to live the whole . . . together [they] allow you to penetrate into [the] substance of [life-experience], that is into the unity itself."<sup>51</sup>

In response, the woman wonders whether the experience

of unity is in the end just the “ingenious spin” of intellectual constructs, rather than embedded in “the deep element [of life itself]: the mother’s lap in which we save ourselves from the cruel laws of isolation. . . . Is not all ecstasy a merging into the Other?”<sup>52</sup> Daniel agrees, while reiterating his caveat that ecstasy bereft of direction inevitably ravishes and devours the soul. To avoid this tragic fate, ecstatic experience must take its clue from Orpheus, who descended into Hades—the realm tormented by both multiplicity and the isolation wrought by individuation—attuned to the music of his inner soul, and thereby experienced unity of all being in his own unity. Finally, Daniel and the woman grasp hands, at her suggestion, and he comments that the act of clasping their hands is not driven by compulsion—a pure erotic drive—“but the choice of the other; the direction of the holy spirit, the flowering of the cross of community.”<sup>53</sup> (The reference to the “cross” as a metaphor for religious commitment is not unique here. Throughout his writings, Buber would employ Christian symbols, particularly those associated with Jesus, whom he regarded as a representative of primal Jewish religious sensibilities.)

There are other autobiographical resonances in the remaining four conversations, although few as obvious as this initial palpably romantic dialogue. One particularly poignant moment occurs in the fifth and final conversation, which takes place by the sea. Daniel’s interlocutor, Lukas, tells of a thirty-year-old acquaintance who had drowned at sea, an experience that engendered in Lukas metaphysical reflections on the meaning of life in the face of inevitable death. Daniel responds by relating his own experience with death, a clear reference to Buber’s own life: “Let me tell you an event out of my youth. I was seventeen years old when a man died whom I had loved.” (Indeed, on a visit to his father’s farm, as a boy of seventeen Martin witnessed his uncle Rafael, his father’s brother, fall from a horse to

his death. He would later name his first child after his beloved uncle.) With only oblique reference to the specifics of this terrible event, Daniel continues to tell Lukas:

Death laid itself about my neck like a lasso. . . . Because of my isolation I could take no sleep and because of my disgust with living I could tolerate no nourishment. . . . My family, strengthened by friends and physicians, regarded me fussily and helplessly as a changeling. Only my father met me with a calm collected glance that was so strong that he reached my heart . . . [He] soon came to the special decision through which I was saved: he sent me all alone into a secluded mountain place. I believe that the great time that I lived through there [on the mountain] will return once more in the images of my dying hour.<sup>54</sup>

(The “secluded mountain place” to which Daniel’s father sent him may allude to Martin’s great-uncle’s summer vacation home nestled in the bucolic Carpathian mountains.)<sup>55</sup> Daniel tells Lukas that wandering through mountain and dale, punctuated by woods and lakes, “facing the towering pride of the earth,” he found himself “before the eternal wall” that marked his finitude—that demarcated life from death, yet joined the two realms just the same. Emerging from despair, he “saw nothing isolated any longer. . . . I saw everything as [a] cloudy image in which all separateness dissolved. Light and dark were entangled in each other.”<sup>56</sup> Realizing that he was no longer a separate, isolated being, Daniel also tore down the wall within himself. “From life to death—from the living to the dead there flowed [a] deep union.” He was now united with his beloved friend, despite the finality of death, “because I was united in myself.”<sup>57</sup> Though presented as a mystical awakening, Daniel’s decision to bear within himself the defining tensions of existence and the deep experience of unity anticipates the later existentialist turn in Buber’s thought.

Daniel concludes his dialogue with Lukas, with which Buber brings the book to a close, by noting:

We spoke of death, my friend Lukas; we have all the time spoken of nothing else. You wish to know the holy sea, the unity that bears life and death in right and left hand. You cannot know it otherwise than when you take upon yourself the tension of life and death and live through the life and death of the world as your life and your death.

The distinctive religiosity espoused by Buber in *Daniel* and its “dialogues on realization” are not specifically Jewish, although the title of the book had led some to believe otherwise. The book’s stylistic affinities to Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* suggest that Buber named his book and its principal protagonist Daniel after the biblical contemporary of the Persian seer Zarathustra; otherwise, Buber’s Daniel has nothing to do with the biblical prophet, and those who have assumed any other connection have clearly not read the book. (One amusing example of this misattribution is the scroll accompanying an honorary doctorate Buber would receive in 1958 from the Sorbonne. Signed by some of the most eminent dignitaries of the venerable French university, the scroll lauds among Buber’s distinguished accomplishments his “great Jewish book” *Daniel* as expressing Israel’s prophetic “voice for justice . . . and redemption.”)<sup>58</sup>

Buber’s *Daniel* is at most a prophetic counter-voice to Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. Upon reviewing a draft of the first part of the volume, Landauer remarked in a letter to Buber that, with *Daniel*, “you are achieving what Nietzsche did not achieve in his *Zarathustra*.”<sup>59</sup> Focusing his comparison solely on matters of style and rhetoric, he notes the tension in Nietzsche’s dialogue (characteristic of German didactic writing more generally) between the speaking subject’s unreserved speech and “the speech of the soul,” and credits Buber with overcoming, in *Daniel*, this problematic narrative duality: “I find this great-

ness in this aspect of your book: the passion of the subject in the form of the language, which is shaped so that it is at once entirely the language of the speaker and entirely the speaking subject. In this work about unity in duality you have achieved *what the work is all about.*" Like many of his generation, Buber had clearly been inspired by Nietzsche's effort to create a new poetic language, a language not so much grounded in conceptually coherent argumentation, but instead representing the act of thinking itself in its "rhythmic diversity" and "corporeality of expression."<sup>60</sup> Indeed, in *Daniel*, Buber allowed his thoughts to unfold dialectically and poetically, rather than analytically.

Landauer clearly viewed Buber's eschewal of abstract discourse in favor of an evocative, poetic voice to be more successful than Nietzsche's own effort to do so. In the lead article of a special issue of an avant-garde journal devoted to Buber, Landauer approvingly characterized Buber's thought as "feminine (*frauenhaft*)."<sup>61</sup> With reference to *Daniel*, Landauer noted, Buber "awakens and advocates a specific feminine form of thought without which our exhausted and collapsed culture cannot be renewed and replenished. Only . . . when abstract thought is conjoined and submerged in the depths of feeling, will our thought engender deeds, will a true life emerge from our logical desert. Towards that objective women will help us."<sup>62</sup> As a philosopher attuned to the poetic cadences and emotional ground of life, Landauer proclaimed approvingly, Buber belongs to the spiritual family of the feminine.<sup>62</sup>

The Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke also waxed enthusiastically about *Daniel* in a letter to the publisher of Insel Verlag, who had sent him a complimentary copy of Buber's book.<sup>63</sup> Other readers of *Daniel* were critical; the twenty-year-old Gerhard (Gershom) Scholem wrote in a letter to friends in the Jewish youth movement a scathing critique of what he deemed to be Buber's tediousness and "mystical rhetoric": "The most unimaginable phantasy, the theoretical vacuous twaddle, the most

irrelevant mysticism could have chosen no better residence as the living corpse of a man, who has stumbled over the [purported] importance of his experience. It is *very* tragic.”<sup>64</sup> While this rant reflected his disaffection with Buber (a dynamic that would recur over the course of their decades-long relationship), like many of his generation of Jewish youth, Scholem had initially been inspired by the text of three lectures Buber had delivered in 1911 to Jewish university students in Prague—lectures that portrayed his experience-rooted mysticism as consistent with the deepest sensibilities of the Jewish people.