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Herald of a Jewish Renaissance

THE ANNULMENT by a rabbinic court of Carl Buber's marriage to Martin's mother allowed him to remarry. At the age of fourteen, Martin would thus leave the home of his grandparents to join his father and stepmother. To soften the transition for his son, Carl purchased in Lemberg a stately townhouse across the square from the regional parliament. As perhaps Carl feared, Martin had difficulty accepting a "substitute" mother, and continued to spend as much time as possible at the home of his grandmother. Before leaving Lemberg in the autumn of 1896 to commence his university studies in Vienna, the eighteen-year-old Buber observed from the balcony of his father's home an anti-Semitic demonstration, indicative of a harsh political reality that awaited him upon moving from a provincial city at the eastern edge of the Austrian-Hungarian empire to the Habsburg metropolis.

At the University of Vienna, Martin would register for

courses in philosophy, psychology, literature, and art history—but it was the city’s vibrant culture, particularly its theater and literature, that especially engaged the freshman’s passionate intellectual interests. Within just a few months of arriving in the city of his birth, he published a series of four essays in Polish in a Warsaw literary journal on Vienna’s avant-garde poets and writers.

This four-part series, “On Viennese Literature,” marked Buber’s literary debut. In these essays, Buber displayed already the extraordinary erudition and multicultural horizons that would characterize his writings over the next seven decades.¹ Though still a teenager, he drew on his wide reading of works in German, Polish, French, and Italian to present and compare four leading poets of the so-called Young Vienna: Hermann Bahr, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Peter Altenberg, and Arthur Schnitzler. “In all of them,” he observed with the confidence of a mature scholar, “is found that delightful, purely Viennese synthesis of lightness, melancholy, and reverie one finds in the waltzes of Strauss, the paintings of Makart, the comedies of Raimund, and the sculpture of Tilgner. In each of these is found the typically Viennese lack of the heroic, revolutionary element. They speak of working to create an individualistic, distinctive Viennese culture, but in reality they merely make the existing culture aware of itself.”²

As represented by these poets, Viennese modernism, Buber argued, ultimately amounted to a superficial, even decadent individualism, devoid of any truly heroic, revolutionary self-expression. This indictment reflects the clear influence of Nietzsche on Buber. As Buber would later report to Ahron Eliasberg, a cousin through marriage whom he met and befriended when they both attended the University of Leipzig for the winter semester 1897–1898, he had two or three years earlier been “a passionate Nietzschean, but now I see him just . . .”³

What Buber meant by this “just” (*nur noch*), he had articu-

lated a few months earlier in an unpublished German essay, pointedly titled “Zarathustra.” Writing in an autobiographical voice, he recounts that at age sixteen he had come across Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. “This book made me a disciple of Nietzsche, a sick disciple” — “sick” because he accepted Nietzsche’s message uncritically.⁴ Accordingly, the essay “Zarathustra” is “the history of an illness, and its recovery and redemption [from it].”⁵ Nietzsche greatly appealed to the young Buber’s discontent with the world he then inhabited: Buber felt “a raging hatred of the entire nauseating atmosphere in which I lived, a wrathful aversion against the official morality, the official education, the conventional smiles, whining, and chatter.”⁶ And Nietzsche’s celebration of Wagner in *The Birth of Tragedy* led Buber to regard the composer as the “apotheosis” of the new anti-bourgeois individual.⁷ In his self-described naïveté, the teenage Buber became a devoted Wagnerian as well. When he later read Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner, he at first felt deeply betrayed by what he perceived as Nietzsche’s undermining of his own worldview. But through reading Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he wrote, he came to understand that Nietzsche’s teachings were not meant to be taken as doctrine, but rather as a poetic demand for a radical skepticism about all systems—including his own thinking: “One of Nietzsche’s principal objectives is . . . the awakening of mistrust of all and everything, of even of his own words, and silence. . . . Not the Superman-fantasy, but the arduous way to truth is Nietzsche’s true, great idealism.”⁸

In a rhetorical gesture of directly addressing Nietzsche, who at the time was still alive, Buber confesses: “This was my illness. I did not believe in you, but rather I believed you” (*nicht glaubte ich an dich, ich glaubte dir*)—that is, he had followed Nietzsche’s teachings as doctrine, but not Nietzsche’s personal example of an unyielding quest for intellectual integrity.⁹

The sixteen-year-old Buber was so taken by his new understanding of Nietzsche that he undertook to render *Thus Spoke*

Zarathustra into Polish, though he soon learned that a prominent Polish poet had already signed a contract to translate it, obliging the young Buber to give up the project. (Years later, a former classmate at the Polish gymnasium in Lemberg recalled that Buber would appear each day in class with a copy of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* in hand.)¹⁰ Although over the years he would modify his view of Nietzsche, Buber remained at bottom an apostle of Zarathustra and his life-affirming journey toward self-mastery, toward freedom from the dictates of arbitrary authority. This impulse would ultimately and decisively inform Buber's unique brand of religious anarchism, informed by his teaching that a life of genuine dialogical encounter with God is not determined by traditionally prescribed ritual practices and theological doctrine.

Buber's reference in his essay "Zarathustra" to his own "raging hatred of the nauseating atmosphere" of his youth, while it may have been the hyperbole of a newly minted Nietzschean, nevertheless expressed his genuine disaffection with what he perceived to be the imperious, rule-driven values of his upbringing.¹¹ An aversion to the ethical and educational ethos of his youth helps explain why, during his initial years as a university student, he maintained a studied disinterest in religious subjects generally, and Judaism specifically. In his essay on Young Vienna, he did not mention, even parenthetically, that two of the four poets he discussed (Altenberg and Schnitzler) were Jewish, and a third, von Hofmannstahl, was of Jewish ancestry. His cousin Ahron Eliasberg observed that Buber, in fact, demonstrated a "typical Jewish anti-Semitism," frequently referring to other Jews derisively as *echt jüdisch* (truly Jewish). Not surprisingly, Zionism had yet to speak to him. Eliasberg, who had a subscription to *Die Welt*—the principal organ of the World Zionist Organization—sought unsuccessfully to interest his cousin in the newly founded movement.¹²

Buber was at the time drawn to Polish nationalism. He actively participated in a secret conference of Polish students living in the Austrian-Hungarian empire, which he addressed to rousing applause.¹³ Indeed, years earlier his attachment to Polish liberal nationalism was already apparent, when he spoke at a friend's bar mitzvah.¹⁴ The *haftarah*, the portion from the Book of Prophets that Buber read during the service, included Micah 5:6: "The remnant of Jacob shall be / In the midst of the many peoples / Like dew from the Lord / Like droplets on grass." Drawing on a poem by the Polish Romantic and patriotic poet Adam Mickiewicz, "Ode to Youth," the fourteen-year-old Buber interpreted this passage as referring to the promise of true "eternal youth," not of the body but of the spirit. Noting that spiritual youth is ultimately sustained by love, the precocious Buber cited Victor Hugo, in French of course: "C'est Dieu qui met l'amour au bout de toute chose, l'amour en qui tout vit, l'amour en qui tout pose. L'amour, c'est la vie" (It was God who put love into everything, everything lives because of love, everything is based on love. Love is life)—meaning love toward all humanity, even one's enemies. At fourteen, his thinking foreshadowed the credo that would shape his mature philosophical and political vision. This humanistic impulse was already clear even in the speech at his own bar mitzvah, held (apparently at the behest of his father) at Lemberg's German-speaking liberal synagogue (Deutsches-Israclitisches Bethaus).¹⁵ Young Martin reflected on the meaning of the *haftarah* he read from the prophet Hosea (2:1–22). Addressing his father and grandparents, Buber focused his reflections on the prophet's appeal for *tzedek*, a core biblical concept that, although usually translated as "justice" or "righteousness," he rendered as "virtue" (*Tugend*). This allowed him to marshal the poem "Die Worte des Glaubens" by the German poet Friedrich Schiller, which includes the lines:

And Virtue—it is no meaningless sound;
 Can be practiced each day if we trouble;
 As much as we tend to go stumbling around,
 Toward paradise, too, can we struggle.
 And what no logician's logic can see,
 The child-like mind sees obviously.¹⁶

While both speeches (at his own and at his friend's bar mitzvahs) make extensive reference to traditional Jewish sources, particularly the Hebrew Bible and *siddur* (prayer book), in the second address he did not hesitate to evoke a teaching from the New Testament. In addressing his friend in Polish, he alluded to a famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13:13, and urged him “to let three words guide you on the path [of eternal youth], words that guide the Polish nation: Hope, Love, and Faith.”¹⁷

The young Buber's wide learning and intellectual acumen soon became legendary, especially in family circles. Word of his scholastic achievements circulated in the family, likely including the report that at his high school matriculation exam in Greek, he was questioned about one of Sophocles' choruses—to which he replied by citing the entire song by heart in Greek.¹⁸ When Ahron Eliasberg first met Buber, he was primed to greet him as a budding genius—and he was not disappointed. Much to his dismay, however, Eliasberg, who like his cousin was raised in the orthodox Jewish tradition, found Buber far less knowledgeable about Judaism than one would have expected of the grandson of Salomon Buber.¹⁹ Eliasberg attributed what he regarded as his cousin's poor “Jewish education” to his “bourgeois” upbringing, by which he apparently meant a neglect of Talmudic study. Although Buber had studied the Talmud with his great-uncle, he seems have suppressed that learning.²⁰ He had, however, acquired and retained a good knowledge of the Hebrew language and Bible, the classical commentaries (likely including midrash), and apparently also the Mishnah.²¹ He was

also said to have known the traditional Hebrew prayer book by heart.²²

Buber was clearly drawn to German and Polish culture. Shortly before his bar mitzvah, he enrolled in the Franz Josef gymnasium in Lemberg. Years later, he would remember this school (named in honor of the Habsburg emperor and at which the language of instruction was Polish) as a microcosm of the Austrian-Hungarian empire—that its multiethnic and cultural tapestry was woven of contradictory strands:

The language of instruction and social intercourse [at the Franz Josef Gymnasium] was Polish, but the atmosphere was that . . . which prevailed or seemed to prevail among the peoples of the Austrian-Hungarian empire: “mutual tolerance without mutual understanding.” The majority of the students were Poles; a small minority were Jews. Individually, they got along well with one another, but as members of cultural groups they knew almost nothing about each other.²³

As an adult, Buber would speak of the difference between living *nebeneinander*—next to one another (tolerantly, but without mutual understanding or genuine respect)—and *miteinander*—together *with* one another (a distinction he would eventually, and particularly, make in his writings on the Zionist-Palestinian conflict). He depicted *miteinander* as a demand—indeed, as an existential and religious commandment: to meet the other as a Thou, as a fellow human being in the deepest and most compelling sense.

When Buber left Lemberg to begin his university studies in Vienna, this vision, which would in time become the hallmark of his philosophy of dialogue, was still just an inchoate intuition. He was eager to embrace the city’s cosmopolitan ethos, which promised to transcend the parochial boundaries that had prevailed in Lemberg, and he distanced himself from Judaism and religious practice. But during his 1898 summer

vacation, which he spent at his father's country estate in eastern Galicia, Buber dashed off a note to Eliasberg, dramatically announcing that he had decided to change course and "agitate for Zionism."²⁴ As he explained, he had come across a recently published pamphlet by Mathias Acher, the pen name of Nathan Birnbaum. Acher's pamphlet, *Jüdische Moderne*, was a tightly argued, thirty-eight-page endorsement of Herzl's envisioned establishment of a Jewish state as a "modern" solution to the Jewish question.²⁵ Echoing Herzl, Acher argued that efforts to combat anti-Semitism through the courts were a "farce, and assimilation a phantom," and that the promise of a just society in the future was merely illusory. The Jewish Question, he held, would endure as long as the Jewish people do not have "a home, and national center" of their own. Such a solution would bring an end to, or at least greatly reduce, the friction between Jews and the respective host societies in which they reside. But what specifically inspired Buber to join the Zionist cause was undoubtedly Acher's argument that adherence to the ancient faith of Israel was not the only way to express solidarity with one's fellow Jews. Although Jewish belonging until that point had been sustained by communal religious practice alone, Zionism provided a revolutionary, secular alternative for maintaining a Jewish national consciousness and solidarity.

Inspired by Birnbaum's pamphlet, Buber soon returned to Leipzig to found, together with his cousin, a local Zionist Jewish Students Association, which elected Buber as its first officer. In this capacity, in March 1899, he attended a German Zionist conference in Cologne; from there, he would head to Zurich to continue his university studies (and meet his future wife). As a parting gift, Eliasberg gave Buber a copy of the recently published, posthumous volume by the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*.²⁶ While still in Cologne, Buber wrote Eliasberg that he had the volume before him and wondered, "When would we [Jews] have such a work

with the title *Jüdische Kulturgeschichte?*²⁷ This was no idle wish, nor was it meant merely as a desirable academic project; rather, it expressed the hope for the creation of a Jewish culture.

As Buber's Zionist vision evolved, it would in fact be guided by Burckhardt's conception of culture, embracing the totality of a people's spiritual life and self-understanding and constituted by the life of the intellect, art, and literature in addition to religion. The far-reaching significance of the Italian Renaissance, then, was the seismic cultural shift from the Middle Ages to the modern period, in which the individual emerges as a self-conscious creative agent (determining his own destiny and inner spiritual life) as well as an agent of cultural creation.

In Burckhardt's most renowned work, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860)—which years later Buber would have translated into Hebrew—he famously depicts this process in terms that were surely resonant for a young man eager to find his place in modern culture, free of the claims of one's primordial affiliations.²⁸ Burckhardt argued that by removing the “veil” of corporate identities—“woven of faith, childlike prejudices and illusion”—the Italian Renaissance had initiated the liberation of the individual and thereby paved the way for passage into the modern world. The term “renaissance” thus came to connote a true “rebirth,” a reawakening of the creative spirit of the individual that had been characteristic of classical antiquity, but was eclipsed during the Middle Ages.

Buber's understanding of renaissance as rebirth was filtered through the writings of Burckhardt's friend and colleague at the University of Basel, Friedrich Nietzsche.²⁹ In an article published in a Berlin Jewish student journal shortly after Nietzsche's death in August 1900, Buber highlighted a conception of rebirth that he would introduce into Zionist discourse. In the article, a quasi-eulogy entitled “A Word about Nietzsche and Life Values,” he claims that Nietzsche's legacy could not be classified under any discipline or vocation.³⁰ Instead, he was

the embodiment of a new vision of what it means to be a human being—an “emissary of life,” a heroic individual who “created” himself and thus surpassed himself.³¹

For Buber, what made this teaching so powerful was that Nietzsche too suffered from the endemic sickness of the age. Hence, what he proclaimed was not his “own being but a longing for [true] being,” glorifying “the will to power and the rebirth of the instinctual life, [which] seems to us [Jews] to be a crystallization of our own tragedy.” The illness of the age was, Buber argued, even more acute among the Jews—hence, their urgent need to heed Nietzsche’s healing message of a rebirth.

But the alignment of Nietzsche’s emphatically individualistic notion of rebirth with that of a national community courted inherent tensions, if not outright contradictions. Buber initially sought to resolve this uneasy alliance through a romantic conception of peoplehood. Conscripting the late eighteenth-century category of a *Volksseele* (the soul of a people), he spoke of a “Jewish renaissance”—a term he introduced in an essay of 1901—that would give expression to the soul of the Jewish people, that is, to its “innermost essence” and distinctive “individuality.”³² Noting that “we live in a period of cultural germination” with an “artistic feeling that is awakened everywhere,” he also argued that national groups are no longer motivated by a basic impulse for self-preservation or by a need to defend themselves against hostile attacks from outside. “These nations do not wish to exercise a desire for territorial possession and expansion, but want to live fully in accord with their individual character, [spurred by] a self-reflection of their national soul. They wish to make conscious the unconscious development of their national psyche. . . . Goethe’s dream of a world literature takes on new forms: Only when each people speaks from its innermost essence is the collective treasure [of humanity] enhanced.”³³

Buber thus identified the desired dialectic between the cre-

ative rebirth of the individual and that of the collective—a dialectic that envisions the common life of humanity, “saturated with beauty and nurtured by the creative spirit of each and every individual and people.”³⁴

Invoking Burckhardt’s monumental work on the Italian Renaissance, Buber went on to caution his fellow Zionists not to construe the call for a Jewish cultural renaissance as “a mere return to old traditions that are sentimentally rooted” in the Jewish people’s folkways. “Such a return would in no way deserve the noble designation ‘renaissance,’ this crown of historical periods.”³⁵ The renaissance to which Zionism refers is born of a “painful” understanding of *galut*, the torment of two thousand years of exile that has allowed the so-called custodians of tradition—the rabbis—to shackle the Jews “with the iron chains” to a “senseless tradition.” Galut has also enslaved the Jews to the ethos of “an unproductive money economy and hollow-eyed homelessness, which destroys a harmonious will to power.” Only by waging an unyielding “struggle against these powers can the Jewish people be reborn.”³⁶

This struggle echoed Buber’s own anguished estrangement from the Judaism of his youth, which we can see in a suggestively autobiographical essay he published two months later: “Festival of Life: A Confession.”³⁷ Addressing the traditional Jewish festivals as a personified “you,” he confesses, “Once I turned from you, like a child from his mother, whom he believes he has outgrown, tired of the monotony and desiring adventures. You were like the poetry of a prayer whose words the child recites in formulaic fashion, casually, unaware of the meaning, and dreaming of play. So I left you.”³⁸ But (continuing the Oedipal metaphor) he acknowledges that he cannot free himself from the maternal warmth of the festivals, and declares, “I love you, festivals of my people, *as a child loves his mother.*”³⁹ Re-embracing the “festivals” of the Jewish religious calendar is essential to the restoration of the “beauty and hap-

piness” of the child’s “kindred family.” Resuming a first person voice, he explains, “I know my family” can regain a wholesome existence only by reaffirming its “peoplehood” (*Volkstum*). “For I know: A people, bereft of a homeland (*Heimat*), if it wishes to remain a people (*Volk*), must replace territorial unity (*heimatliche Einbeit*) with a living bond of a shared and meaningful experience.”⁴⁰

The communal celebration of the traditional Jewish holidays would provide this experience, the concrete lived experience (*Erleben*) of belonging, a bond that “purely intellectual possessions” could never forge.⁴¹ They are to be affirmed as “festivals of life” and not as “rigid monuments of a protective tradition,” and certainly not “because God commanded them.”⁴² Instead, they are sanctioned and “commanded by the people,” giving joyful expression to the life experiences (*Seeleleben*) of the Jewish people past and present, which cumulatively inform and shape its *Volksseele*.⁴³ Significantly, the festivals, as “old forms” that are continually “revived through new contents and values,” intrinsically “anticipate rebirth.”⁴⁴

Continuing in an autobiographical vein, in 1902–1903 Buber published a cycle of three poems elaborating his affirmation of cultural rebirth. The poems are written in the voice of “Elischa ben Abuja, called Acher.” (In the Talmud and subsequent rabbinic tradition, Acher represented a reprobate dissenter, a heretic. Early Zionists like Mathias Acher defiantly referred to themselves as descendants of Acher, rejecting rabbinic tradition in favor of a secular Jewish nationalism.) In these poems, Buber speaks of Acher finding his way back to Jewish practice, but not to a spiritually desiccated religious law. While having discarded the “chains” of rabbinic tradition, Acher has rediscovered the passionate joy of celebrating the ancient rituals of Judaism with his fellow Jews.

In the most developed of the three poems, “Two Dances” (*Zwei Tänze*), Buber depicts Acher and his disciples observing

the beauty of the natural world.⁴⁵ The disciples bemoan that the Jewish people, despite experiencing the allure of nature's splendor, are assumed by non-Jews to be incorrigibly "ugly," incapable of "blossoming in passionate beauty." Acher responds by telling his disciples of two dances. One is by "Greeks, a young, exuberant people"—in which young Hellenic tanned men and lithe women dance together, "the melody of their limbs so peacefully sweet," in their response to nature's splendor. Mother Nature, in response, rejoices in "the beautiful, birdlike happiness of her children." But, Acher continues, "the other dance I saw—oh how long ago"—Buber's own experience clearly bleeds through Acher's voice at this point—"as a boy, but it seems that it is but today." Acher then recalls his childhood experience, when "young Jews danced" during the holiday of Simchat Torah, when the Torah scrolls would be removed from the Ark and each one held by a different person who would dance joyously with the scroll around the sanctuary. But young Acher "lay at the edge of the forest, dreaming of far-off lands / For, already then I hated the Law / Like ropes on the staves of a cage." Then suddenly he saw the procession in a new light. "They begin to dance, moving in a circle. . . . They are brothers bound by life and of like mind. . . . Eye meets eye / Soul meets soul: They love each other." They "rejoice *not* in the Law" but as "sons of the Storm," in fraternal ecstasy. "And in the fervor of their heart slumbers / The new world, a world that one day will be renewed." One of Acher's disciples then protests, "The dance is dead." No, replies Acher, "It lives in us. . . . It lives in our souls." He heralds the rebirth of Jewry—Jews now dancing to a new tune, one no longer determined by the rhythm of the Law but by the exuberant beat of their Volksseele.

In the effort to revitalize Jewish existence and rebirth, Buber assigned a pivotal role to the "Jewish woman." In a lecture entitled "The Zion of the Jewish Woman," which he de-

livered in Vienna before an audience of teenage Jewish girls, he held that “national renewal can in its innermost essence originate only with the Jewish woman.”⁴⁶ Toward that end, she will once again have to “be a mother.”⁴⁷ In the long years of Israel’s exile, especially in the ghetto, he said, it was the Jewish woman who had created and maintained “a close family culture” to replace “the lost young green of the homeland.”⁴⁸ In the face of the tribulations of exile and the ghetto, she had “encouraged the men to hold fast to their faith.”⁴⁹ But with the emancipation of the Jews and their attendant *embourgeoisement*, the Jewish woman soon proved to be the weakest link. With a frenzied adoption of the narcissistic, egotistic, and materialistic values of modern society, he claimed, she had contributed to “the loss of the Jewish home, fidelity, and love as well.”⁵⁰ Her children sought to sublimate their resulting “feeling of abandonment” into an ostentatious display of material well-being.⁵¹ Betrayed by the Jewish woman and the withdrawal of the nurturing warmth she had provided the home, “the Jewish male” is at most only able to maintain a semblance of traditional observance with a “pedantic and empty passivity.” Hence, he loses “more and more his high-minded zeal and lives primarily in his work.”⁵²

One cannot but hear autobiographical murmurs in this troubling, damning indictment of the modern Jewish female, and see Buber’s vision of “the Zion of the Jewish woman” as a lingering longing for what he regarded as the fundamental missing piece of his childhood. Inspired by the Zionist project, the Jewish woman, Buber wistfully proclaimed, “above all, will again be a mother.”⁵³ She “will once more turn the home and family life into what it was—a center of Jewish existence, a place of recovery, a source of ever-new strength. . . . In her children she will foster, through careful physical care, through the harmonious unfolding of their strength, the necessary personal courage that the Jew needs so badly. . . . She will stifle neurosis,

the central illness of the modern Jew.”⁵⁴ Above all, the Jewish woman will heal the psychic wounds of modernity by infusing once again into the substance of Jewish life the balm of love. For, indeed, “the Zion of the Jewish woman is: love.”⁵⁵

For Buber, then, Zionism was, first and foremost, a spiritual fulcrum by which to overcome the personal—indeed, existential—condition of the modern Jew, and not (as it was for Herzl) a political ideology.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Herzl would appoint him in August 1901 to serve as editor-in-chief of *Die Welt*, the weekly publication of the World Zionist Organization whose principal mandate was to promote the political agenda of “establishing for the Jewish people a publicly and legally assured home in Palestine.”⁵⁷ Herzl was clearly taken by Buber’s charismatic personality and oratorical skills, which he had witnessed firsthand when Buber served as the chair of the so-called Agitation Committee of the Third Zionist Congress held in August 1899 in Basel, Switzerland. In an impassioned speech before the committee, the twenty-one-year-old Buber had argued that the movement should direct its “agitation” or propaganda not toward non-Jewish political opinion, but rather “inwardly,” to one’s fellow Jews.

To the rousing applause of the audience, he spoke of the pressing need to revitalize the spiritual and cultural life of the Jewish people. “We wish to be effective through life. We wish to create songbooks, literature, a youth library, because our youth is our life and our future.” Although Herzl did not view the revitalization of Judaism as a secular culture as the most pressing issue facing the Jewish people, he apparently recognized that Buber had the rhetorical skill and poetic flair to speak to a younger generation. Moreover, Buber concluded his remarks with words that surely reassured Herzl that his young colleague ultimately shared his own political vision: “The time will come when, on our own soil, from our own homes, the flag of national freedom will fly in our land and will once more

convey to our children the eternally new message [of the Jewish people].”⁵⁸

The power that Buber’s oratory exercised on a generation of youth in the thrall of neo-Romanticism is floridly described in a memoir by Buber’s future wife. Having met and befriended Buber only a few months earlier at the University of Zurich, Paula accompanied him to Basel to attend the Third Zionist Congress. There, as he addressed the Agitation Committee, she recalled:

I experienced a human voice speaking to me with wonderful force. At times it was as if a child were speaking shyly, hesitantly, tenderly, timidly, not sure it would meet with understanding. And now and then the delicate blush of an unsullied soul spread over this person’s countenance. One moment it was as if my heart stood still, touched by sanctity. And at other moments it was as if he spoke with brazen tongues, as if all the bells in the world were clanging above me. This was no longer an individual human being; with primordial violence the tremendous longing, wishes, and will of a whole people poured over me like a raging torrent.⁵⁹

Paula would not only consecrate her relationship with Buber by bearing him two children, but by also adopting his devotion to Herzl’s movement as a self-declared “philo-Zionist” (and eventually converting to Judaism).

In negotiating with Herzl the conditions under which he would accept the invitation to edit *Die Welt*, Buber insisted on editorial independence (as well as higher fees for writers) so as to attract gifted, young Jews to write for the Zionist weekly. “As I read it,” he explained to Herzl, “*Die Welt* is destined to become the organ and spearhead of the intellectual and cultural movement among Jewish youth. We have many talented young people struggling to make their mark. Most of them do not know where they belong. If we can bring them together, give

them some directed support and guidance, before too long we will be able to surprise Europe with a literary manifesto. This would run parallel to our political growth.”⁶⁰ Herzl warmly endorsed Buber’s editorial vision. Although using the formal word for “you” (*Sie*), Herzl addressed his much younger colleague as “Dear Friend,” and continued: “You have given me great pleasure by accepting my offer, and I shall certainly grant your wishes. . . . What you say about the literary and artistic direction you wish to give *Die Welt* meets with my fullest approval.”⁶¹

Buber formally assumed the duties of editor of *Die Welt* in September 1901. But before then, Herzl requested that he write an editorial in anticipation of the convening of the Fifth Zionist Congress to take place in Basel during the last week of December 1901.⁶² In his editorial, Buber called upon the readers of *Die Welt* to prepare joyously for the event with thoughtful debate. “Although we have experienced much suffering and dastardly deeds on the way, the silent song of our happiness rises to the dark heavens together with the flames of our bonfires.”⁶³ (Curiously, but characteristic of Buber’s encyclopedic reading in the widest range of literature both secular and religious, he is evoking here bonfires associated with the Christian celebration of Saint John’s Eve, heralding the advent of Christmas.) To be sure, “the bonfires are lit on the mountaintops, [but] life itself is lived mostly in the valley,” where the Jewish people dwell. To ensure that their deliberations will be truly the work of the people (*Volksarbeit*), the delegates to the Congress “should listen to the heartbeat of the people, to the secret voices that communicate to him the dark, subterranean will of the people.”⁶⁴

Buber elaborated on what he believed was the *vox populi* in the lead article of the very next issue of *Die Welt*. In his first statement as the editor of the central organ of the Zionist movement, Buber delineated the agenda of the approaching

Congress.⁶⁵ In addition to a continued consideration of “practical” organizational and political questions, he exultantly proclaimed, the Congress will finally give priority to the complex of issues related to the spiritual and intellectual development of the Jewish people. “Why and in which way,” he rhetorically queries, are “the Jewish people in need of *geistige Hebung* [literally, spiritual uplifting]?” To be sure, since the eighteenth century the votaries of the Enlightenment—Jews and non-Jews alike—had advocated Jewry’s spiritual renewal. But what they conceived as an intellectual and spiritual refinement of Jewry had been “excessively oriented to a European civilizational sensibility,” and the Zionist leadership had “naively and unconsciously” accepted this conception of cultural advancement.⁶⁶ It was thus essential to revisit and critically assess the very notion of “*geistige Hebung*,” to determine whether it was more than simply a process measured against European culture and letters, in which Jewish cultural inheritance and disposition play no part.

For Buber, the most important task of the Fifth Zionist Congress was to develop a comprehensive program to reintroduce contemporary Jews to the “Jewish spirit” (*jüdische Geist*) and to Judaism’s own spiritual and cultural resources. Such re-education would be the basis of the renewal of Judaism as a creative *modern* culture. “All this greatness, all this power, all this beauty we wish to render intimately familiar for the [Jewish] people; [and thereby] foster the true use of their strength when they become conscious of it, . . . this we call the education of the people.”⁶⁷ Buber urged the readers of *Die Welt* to participate in an open debate on the direction this program should take.

A lively debate on the pages of *Die Welt* did, indeed, ensue. As he promised Herzl, Buber solicited young writers from throughout the Diaspora, especially central and eastern

Europe, to contribute to this debate—“to speak, to inspire, to promote.” As editor, Buber energetically promoted the vision of a “cultural Zionism” as articulated by the Russian Hebrew writer Ahad Ha’am (the pen name of Asher Ginsberg). In the third issue under his editorship, he published a German translation of Ahad Ha’am’s 1894 Hebrew essay “Imitation and Assimilation.” In this founding text of cultural Zionism, Ahad Ha’am distinguished between the “self-effacing” assimilation that threatens the very existence of the Jewish people, and “imitative” assimilation in which the best of Western humanistic values are creatively adapted to authentic Jewish values.⁶⁸ Much to Buber’s delight, Herzl was exceedingly pleased with the first issues under his editorial stewardship. With the publication of his fourth issue, Herzl wrote him: “*Die Welt* is excellent. I have read both the previous and the current issue with pleasure and pride. The new generation has arrived.”⁶⁹

Yet after four months at the helm of the weekly, Buber suddenly resigned. The reasons for this break seem more interpersonal than ideological. Herzl, as noted, had unhesitatingly supported Buber’s opening the pages of *Die Welt* to the younger generation of Jews as a way of ensuring a wide-ranging discussion of the cultural issues facing the Jewish people. Moreover, Herzl had endorsed a proposal that the Democratic Fraction—an alliance of “young Zionists” (none of whom was older than twenty-five) of which Buber was one of the leaders—had presented to the Fifth Zionist Congress 1902, a proposal that committed the movement to advancing the “cultural amelioration” of the Jewish people through a spiritually invigorating “national education.”⁷⁰ As Buber himself acknowledged, Herzl did so with “an absolutely supportive and pleasant statement” and, indeed, promoted the proposal “with all his influence.”⁷¹ But in supporting the resolution set forth by Buber and his colleagues, Herzl had not only deliberately overlooked that the

Democratic Fraction not only represented the younger generation, but also questioned Herzl's leadership and the "bourgeois" values with which he was associated.

The very name by which Buber and the young Zionists called themselves gave voice to a generational antagonism. "Fraction" (*Fraction*) was initially meant as a pun in German mocking the custom of Herzl and the older members of the Zionist movement to attend the Zionist congresses in tuxedos (*Fracks* in German)—that is, as Buber, ironically noted, "Fractionisten gegen Frackzionisten."⁷² After the Fifth Congress, the name "demokratische Fraction" stuck as the quasi-official name of the group. Despite whatever misgivings Herzl may have had about its irreverent partisans, his support of the Democratic Fraction was consistent with his desire to expand the constituency of the Zionist movement. Toward this end, he also encouraged religious Jews—that is, eastern European orthodox Jews—to join the movement, but in doing so, he unwittingly planted the seeds of an ultimately irresolvable conflict within Zionism. As the Lithuanian orthodox rabbi Yitzhak Reines, leader of the Mizrahi Religious Zionists, claimed at the debate on the aforementioned resolution of the Democratic Fraction: "The cultural question is a disaster for us. [The demand for a secular national] culture will destroy everything. Our audience is entirely Orthodox and will be lost [for the Zionist cause] by this demand for culture."⁷³ Being the diplomat that he was, Herzl sought to maintain a balance between the deeply opposing interests and sensibilities of the religious and cultural Zionists.

It was Max Nordau, vice president of the Fifth Congress and Herzl's closest ally, who would eventually play an important role in Buber's break with Herzl, and who had his own conflict with Buber. At the session of the congress in which the proposal to advance Jewish culture and education was being

discussed, Nordau intervened and exclaimed, "Whatever can be said on this subject is empty rhetoric as long as we lack the basis of a thorough, well-rounded national culture, namely money."⁷⁴ What especially irked Buber and his colleagues was Nordau's accusation that the failure of the "young Zionists" to appreciate the financial constraints of the movement was typical of the "divisive, politically immature mentality of *galut* Jewry."⁷⁵

At a plenary session of the congress devoted to "Jewish art," Buber began by giving voice to the umbrage the Democratic Fraction had taken at what its members regarded as Nordau's supercilious dismissal of their cultural aspirations:

Honored Delegates, Today Dr. Max Nordau spoke to you on the question of the cultural amelioration of the Jewish people in a way that made a most painful impression on my friends and me. And may I point out that my friends and I represent a good portion of the young generation of Zionists. As Zionists, we have shown Max Nordau love and admiration. Precisely for that reason I must here point out that we have been hurt in our deepest sensibilities, to the core of our emotional connection with Zionism, by the way Nordau treated our concerns. Dr. Max Nordau declared that it is frivolous and fanciful to debate the issue of spiritual amelioration here. But he did not take into consideration that these issues concern nothing less than the wonderful budding of a new Jewish national culture.⁷⁶

The stenographer's record of this address indicates that Buber's words evoked "rousing applause" from the delegates and the many guests in attendance. As he continued his more than hour-long address, he was frequently interrupted by applause. Indeed, this address marked Buber's emergence as a major voice in Zionist affairs; he would be no longer merely an eloquent spokesperson for his generation.

Turning to the question of Jewish art, he made a final swipe at Nordau by posing a rhetorical question that touched on the very nature of the Zionist mission:

And finally I ask Dr. Nordau whether he believes that Zionism will affect only our destitute proletariat. Zionism is for all the people. And truly, we need spiritual amelioration especially for those of our classes who are not completely destitute. We need to educate especially the propertied classes, spiritually and morally, before they will be a capable and respected resource for Palestine. (Applause.) And we wish to suggest to you here means of education that will improve large groups of our people, strengthen our movement, and lend new and valuable sources to our national cause. Jewish art is such a means!⁷⁷

That Jewish art was a vibrant reality was palpably illustrated by the exhibition of young Zionist artists, which had been organized (in conjunction with the Congress) by the Galician-born art nouveau painter (and member of the Democratic Fraction) Ephraim Moses Lilien. With poetic enthusiasm, Buber spoke of the exhibition of visual arts as “a great educator.”⁷⁸ In his view, it had inspired the regeneration of the Jewish people whose spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities had been blunted by the long years of galut:

For thousands of years we [Jews] were a barren people. We shared the fate of our land. A fine, horrible desert sand blew over it and blew over us until our sources were buried and soil was covered with a heavy layer that killed all young buds. . . . We were robbed of that from which every people takes again and again joyous, fresh energy—the ability to behold a beautiful landscape and beautiful people. . . . All things . . . whose forms are forged through art’s blessed hands, were something foreign to us and which we encountered with an incorrigible mistrust. . . . Wherever the yearning for beauty

raised itself with tender shy limbs, there it was suppressed with an invisible, merciless hand.⁷⁹

Fortunately, Buber continued, Jewry's political emancipation and entry into Western civilization triggered a process in which (at first) a "blind adaptation" of modern values (that is, assimilation) was giving way to the awakening of a national consciousness that allowed for the rebirth of "Jewish art."⁸⁰

Though the Jews at the time lacked the necessary conditions in which a genuine national art could prosper—namely, its own "soil from which it grows and a sky to strive for"—it was, he said, incumbent upon the Zionist movement to nurture the "artistic seeds" that had begun to sprout buds, as attested to by the exhibition. Pausing to interject a "personal note," Buber observed: "Of all the indescribable riches with which the modern Jewish renaissance movement showered us, nothing moved me so strongly, so magically, as the renaissance of Jewish art."⁸¹ Concluding his talk, Buber outlined a series of projects to promote the Jewish renaissance and the "aesthetic education of the [Jewish] people"—such as "the newly established Jüdischer Verlag," the Jewish publishing house that would serve to foster both Jewish letters and the visual arts. Calling on the congress to support this particular project financially, he declared, "It will depend on your decision whether Jewish art, which has blossomed so wonderfully, so promising, in such a short time, will wilt in a corner like a misunderstood and neglected stepchild or whether the doors will be opened wide so that she may enter into her kingdom—the young, lovely, royal daughter—and sit on her throne, bestowing sunshine and rain on all who behold her face. Confidently, we put our affairs into your hands. (Lively, long-lasting applause and clapping.)"⁸² The recorded proceedings also note that the presiding chair of the session—that is, Theodor Herzl—congratulated the speaker.⁸³

Despite the warm response to his address, Buber's request

for a subvention in support of the Jüdischer Verlag was denied—yet, as he elatedly wrote Paula, he still felt it had been “a magnificent struggle in which our minority faction [of cultural Zionists] has won, although our special motions (including one for financial support of the publishing house) have lost. Now everyone is thinking and talking about us.”⁸⁴ Herzl held that the movement lacked the fiscal resources to underwrite the publications of a Jüdischer Verlag, though he pledged his intellectual support of its other projects.⁸⁵

But as the cultural Zionists resolved to pursue their program without the formal blessing of the Zionist movement, Herzl’s feelings toward Buber perceptibly cooled.⁸⁶ Though the two men at first maintained a cordial, if strained, relationship, an out-and-out break in their collaboration was soon precipitated by Herzl’s angry response to the fact that his former protégé had signed, along with many others, an open letter in the Hebrew press denouncing a piece by Nordau. The offending article, published in *Die Welt*, was Nordau’s impassioned response to a trenchant critique by Ahad Ha’am (the leading advocate of cultural Zionism) of Herzl’s utopian novel *Old-New Land*.⁸⁷ Ahad Ha’am had decried Herzl’s Zionist vision of the future Jewish society to arise in Israel’s ancient homeland as “aping Euro-Christian culture” and as utterly bereft of Jewish content, downplaying the rebirth of Hebrew and Jewish culture.⁸⁸

After the publication of the open letter denouncing Nordau, Herzl’s defender, Herzl (in a personal letter to Buber) withdrew his support for yet another project of Buber’s, a journal he and his colleagues were about to launch called *Jüdischer Almanach*. “After the manner in which you attacked Dr. Nordau,” Herzl explained, “I cannot, without gravely offending him, participate in any literary undertaking headed by you.”⁸⁹ A heated exchange of letters ensued between Buber and Herzl, which soon lost sight of the original issue of Nordau’s essay.

As their correspondence came to a polemical crescendo, Buber accused Herzl of forfeiting the opportunity to “rejuvenate the movement” and court young, creative talent. “You have preferred [instead] to support a dying generation with dying traditions and to surround yourself with mediocrities.”⁹⁰ In his reply, Herzl assumed a paternalistic tone, reaffirming his goodwill toward Buber and his “friends” but concluding by expressing his “hope that your minds will be clear again and that you will recognize the grave errors you have committed, especially against Nordau, and actively repent them.”⁹¹ Buber’s response was immediate and curt: “The final sentence of your letter both alienates and offends me. Of all the feelings we may have, repentance is the least likely, and we are prepared now and at any time to stand up for what we have said and done. It surprises me that in all these discussions you consistently make use of such an impermissible line as to doubt the clarity of your opponent’s mind.”⁹²

The break was now final and irreparable.⁹³ In retrospect, it was perhaps inevitable, despite the desire of both (especially Herzl) to avoid it. Already during the deliberations of the Fifth Congress, tension between Herzl’s political agenda and patriarchal leadership and Buber’s Democratic Fraction had begun to surface.⁹⁴ Shortly after the congress, Buber recorded his simmering disaffection with Herzl, whom he had until then venerated, in a poem. Entitled “Der Jünger” (The disciple), the poem concludes with this stanza: “The master spoke: ‘From much wandering / I took the golden might of the one truth: / If you can be your own, never be another’s.’ / And silently the boy walked into the night.”⁹⁵ (The quoted words would have been widely recognized by Buber’s generation to be from Paracelsus, the staunchly independent-minded Renaissance savant of the sixteenth century.)

For a while after his break with Herzl—a person whom, as he confessed in another poem, he had hoped to love—

Buber continued to work on various projects sponsored by the Democratic Fraction, especially within the framework of the Jüdischer Verlag, the publishing house that he had founded together with Chaim Weizmann and others just prior to the Fifth Zionist Congress.⁹⁶ Under the imprint of the Jüdischer Verlag, Buber published, among other works, a highly acclaimed book on Jewish artists in 1903.⁹⁷ But, as he wrote to Weizmann some six months after he had ended his relationship with Herzl, his priorities had slowly shifted, and now he wanted to devote his creative energies to his own literary work. Appealing to his friend to understand his decision, he explained: “I have convinced myself recently that I might well accomplish something in the realm of quiet, serious, concentrated literary work. I would have to give that up completely [were I to continue my activities on behalf of Zionism], and I feel that would be a sin against myself.”⁹⁸ Gradually Buber withdrew from all Zionist affairs, and by 1905 he had ceased to be involved in the movement altogether.

Some twelve years later, Buber had occasion to reflect on his years as a young Zionist activist: “The first impetus toward my liberation [that is, from the adolescent ambivalence toward the Judaism of my youth] came from Zionism. I can here only intimate what it meant to me: the restoration of the connection, the renewed taking root in the community.” But he eventually realized that “national loyalty alone does not change the Jew; he may remain as impoverished spiritually—if not quite as unsupported—with it as without. For some people, however, national loyalty is not sufficient unto itself, but a soaring upward. It is not a harbor, but a passage to the open sea. For such people it can lead to transformation, and so it happened to me.”⁹⁹ Indeed, upon withdrawing from Zionist politics, Buber would himself set sail onto open seas, where he would soon gain recognition beyond Zionist circles.