

## INTRODUCTION

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I am unfortunately a complicated  
and difficult subject.

—Martin Buber

COMMENTING ON her own intellectual biography, Hannah Arendt noted, “I do not believe there is any thought process without personal experience. Every thought is an afterthought, that is, a reflection on some matter or event.”<sup>1</sup> Correlating thought with experience, however, is a fraught endeavor—experiences are multilayered and often contradictory, and some experiences that may have left their imprint on one’s thought are “not truly known” or are “gladly forgotten.”<sup>2</sup> The task of the biographer, then, is to determine which experiences have any bearing on the intellectual and personal development of the principal protagonist of his or her narrative, but to do so while exercising due caution even when reading writ-

ten records, especially those of the subject. A text may have an “implied author” who is not identical with its actual author; the way a text is written and received may project an image of the author that differs from his or her “true” or full personality, or represents only part of it. Moreover, as Saul Bellow candidly acknowledged, given all the revisions and fine-tuning that go into a work, the author often appears substantially different in writing from the way he or she is in “real life.”<sup>3</sup>

All these challenges are certainly faced by any biographer of Martin Buber. Writing did not come easily to him; as he once confessed to an impatient editor of one of his collections of essays in English, “I want you to know for once and all that I am not a literary man. Writing is not my job but my duty, a terribly severe one. When I write I do it under a terrible strain.”<sup>4</sup> He would write numerous drafts and continually revise his works from edition to edition, deleting whole passages and re-writing others. While Buber did not always alert the reader of subsequent editions about his revisions, his biographer can consider them hints at possible biographical shifts and intellectual adjustments.

The biographer, as Janet Malcolm observed in her study of Sylvia Plath, is (and I would add, should be) inevitably haunted by an “epistemological insecurity.”<sup>5</sup> The story a biographer tells is by its very nature interpretive. When assembling facts and evaluating their biographical significance, the biographer often selects those that support the narrative he or she has constructed, in order to provide a coherent story line.

To minimize the inevitable tendentiousness of the narrative I have constructed, I sought to take my clues from Buber himself. The story I tell about his life and thought is shaped by what he relates primarily in his correspondence—the Martin Buber Archive at the National Library of Israel contains over fifty thousand letters between Buber and hundreds of correspondents—as well as in parenthetical autobiographical com-

ments scattered throughout his writings. He also often wrote poetry in response to given events and experiences, of which very little was published.<sup>6</sup> Toward the end of his life, he wrote a short essay of “autobiographical fragments,” which he introduced by noting: “It cannot be a question here of recounting my personal life . . . but solely of rendering an account of some moments that my backward glance lets rise to the surface, moments that have exercised a decisive influence on the nature and direction of my thinking.”<sup>7</sup>

If one were to write his biography, Buber hence insisted, it should be focused on his thought, taking into account those constitutive moments: “My philosophy,” he wrote, “serves an experience, a perceived attitude that it has established to make communicable. I was not permitted to reach out beyond my experiences, and I never wished to do so. I witnessed for experience and appealed to experience. The experience for which I witnessed is, naturally, a limited one. But it is not to be understood as a ‘subjective’ one. . . . I say to him who listens to me: ‘It is your experience.’ . . . I must say it once again: I have no teaching. I only point to something . . . in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the hand and lead him to the window. I open the window and point to what is outside.”<sup>8</sup>

Buber was, accordingly, wary of any biography that tried to probe the psychological sources of his ideas and his writings, thereby reducing them—and him—to a subjective, idiosyncratic, and thus speculative reading. In reply to an American doctoral student who was writing a comparative psychological biography of Buber and Kierkegaard, Buber protested:

I do not like at all to deal with my person as a “subject,” and I do not think myself at all obliged to do so. I am not interested in the world being interested in my person. I want to influence the world, but I do not want it to feel itself influ-

enced by “Me.” I am, if I may say so, commissioned to show men some realities, and I try to do it as adequately as possible. To reflect on why I have been commissioned or why in the course of my life I have become more apt to show what I have to show, and so on, has not only no attraction for me but even no sense. There are men who want to explain themselves to the world; Kierkegaard did; I do not. I do not even want to explain myself to myself.<sup>9</sup>

Buber’s views on this issue were multilayered. He once wrote to Franz Rosenzweig that in order to understand why he had rejected traditional Jewish observance, “I would have had to tell you about the internal and even external history of my own youth.”<sup>10</sup> Still, he would point out, his own struggle with the traditional Judaism in which he was raised resonated with that of his generation of Jews, especially those who also hailed from eastern Europe. Many of his experiences and attitudes should therefore not be considered idiosyncratic or distinctively personal, but representative of those shared by many of his contemporaries—expressions of the complex lived question, born of Jewry’s passage into the modern world, of how to continue to identify as Jews.

The story I have chosen to tell about Buber, then, coheres with Edward Said’s conception of identity as “the animating principle of biography.” The biographer seeks to understand a life in a way that reinforces, consolidates, and clarifies “a core identity, identical not only with itself, but in a sense with the history of a period in which it existed and flourished.”<sup>11</sup> To characterize the identity and the set of questions that exercised Buber throughout his life and determined the course of his intellectual biography, I have drawn on the distinction between what Arthur A. Cohen called “the natural and [the] supernatural Jew.”<sup>12</sup> The “supernatural Jew” is beholden to the timeless religious vocation of the Jewish people as defined by the (divinely revealed) Torah and rabbinic tradition; the “natu-

ral Jew” is subject to the vagaries of history and social circumstance. In traditional Jewish society, the quotidian interests of the natural Jew had been subordinate to Israel’s supernatural calling. But with the Emancipation, the opening of the gates of the ghetto, and access to new social and economic opportunities, the natural Jew gained preeminence—and the attendant struggle against anti-Semitism and for full political equality often led to an eclipse of the supernatural Jew.

As his life and thought evolved, Buber’s overarching concern was to reintegrate the natural and supernatural Jew. While unflinchingly attentive to Jewish struggles for political and social dignity, he insisted that the politics of the natural Jew, particularly as expressed in Zionism, should be guided by the foundational ethical and spiritual principles of the supernatural Jew. He elaborated these principles under the rubric of biblical humanism (and alternatively, Hebrew humanism), portraying them as sustained by a dialectical balance between the particular and the universal. A Jew’s uncompromised fidelity to the Jewish people, Buber held, need not undermine his or her abiding cosmopolitan and transnational commitments, and vice versa. In his essay “Hasidism and Modern Man,” he eloquently affirmed this conviction: “It has often been suggested to me that I should liberate this teaching [of Hasidism] from its ‘confessional limitations,’ as people like to put it, and proclaim it as an unfettered teaching of mankind. Taking such a ‘universal’ path would be for me but arbitrariness. In order to speak to the world what I have heard I am not bound to step into the street. I may remain standing at the door of my ancestral house: here too the word [resonant with universal significance] that is uttered does not go astray.”<sup>13</sup>

The challenge of aligning and balancing particular and universal responsibility marks the trajectory of Buber’s intellectual biography. He continually renegotiated the relationship between them, eschewing all ideologically sealed positions. This

struck Hannah Arendt as an uncommon virtue; upon visiting Buber in his advanced age, she was taken by his openness to different perspectives: “He is genuinely curious—desires to know and understand the world. In his near-eightieth year, he is more lively and receptive than all the opinionated dogmatists and know-it-alls. He has a definite sovereignty that pleases me.”<sup>14</sup> Buber himself once remarked, “To be old is a glorious thing when one has not unlearned what it means to begin.”<sup>15</sup>

Buber believed that he first found in the music of Bach his resolve to resist all-too-easy simplifications. As a twenty-year-old student at the University of Leipzig, he often attended the Bach concerts at the city’s famed Saint Thomas Church. He remarked about these concerts: “It would be fruitless for me to undertake to say, indeed, I cannot even make clear to myself—in what way Bach had influenced my thinking. [But] the ground-tone of my life was obviously modified in some manner and through that my thinking as well.”<sup>16</sup> Listening to Bach’s polyphonic and contrapuntal music, he wrote, “slowly, waveringly, there grew [within me] insight into the problematic reality of human existence and into the fragile possibility of doing justice to it. Bach helped me.”<sup>17</sup> His experience with Bach’s music cast new light on what he came to view as a kind of sophomoric hero worship of the nineteenth-century socialist Ferdinand Lassale, of whose writings Buber had been enamored. He wrote: “I had admired [Lassale’s] spiritual passion and his readiness, in personal as in public life, to stake his existence. What was problematic in his nature went unnoticed; it did not even concern me.”<sup>18</sup>

In this autobiographical confession, I hear a caveat to avoid a hagiographic or simplistic account of Buber’s own life and thought. Buber had his foibles, as all of us have. Scarred by the wounds of a troubled childhood, he was at times narcissistic and self-absorbed, and was often pilloried for what some perceived to be behavior inconsistent with his own demanding principles.

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Anecdotes abound, particularly in the Yishuv (the Zionist community of Mandatory Palestine) and later in the State of Israel, about Buber's failure to be a truly dialogical, "I-Thou" kind of person. To be sure, anecdotes are epistemically ambiguous, for "Peter's opinions of Paul very often tell us more about Peter than about Paul."<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that Buber was not a perfect human being—although he was perfectly human.

Buber was a contested figure. He evoked passionate, often conflicting opinions about his person and thought. The late editor of the Israeli daily *Haaretz* Gershon Schocken recalls taking a walk with the Hebrew novelist and lifelong friend of Buber Shmuel Yosef Agnon, during which they discussed the prevailing controversies in Israel about Buber. "Agnon abruptly stopped, looked, and said: I would like to tell you something. There are people about whom you must once decide whether you love or hate them. I decided to love Buber."<sup>20</sup>

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MARTIN BUBER

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