

3

On the Open Seas

All journeys have secret destinations
of which the traveler is unaware.
—Martin Buber

BUBER'S VOYAGE on the open seas had begun years earlier, at the very start of his university studies. Immediately upon unpacking his bags, the eighteen-year-old set out to explore the cultural and intellectual landscape of "this original home of mine, now foreign. . . . The city of my earliest childhood taught me daily, although still in unclear language, that I had to accept the world and let myself be accepted by it; it was indeed ready to be accepted."¹ In time, Buber would find that he needed to develop his own distinctive approach to the world awaiting his acceptance—an approach that would develop incrementally over the next decades, ultimately crystallizing in

an engaged response to everyday reality and those within it, or what he would call “the life of dialogue.”

As a young university student, with a singular exuberance primed by an eagerness to move beyond what he regarded as the parochial limitations of the intellectually and socially sheltered world of his youth in Lemberg, Buber delved into the competing intellectual movements, doctrines, and ideologies reflected in the vibrant cultural life of fin-de-siècle central Europe—from the poetry of Young Vienna to neo-Romanticism, from the anti-bourgeois ethic of the youth movement to utopian socialism, from mysticism and myth to depth psychology. He embraced a wide range of ideas and intellectual trends, especially in theater and the arts, that engaged his lively intellect—and drew him away from the university. As he wrote to Paula, he found academic scholarship “something stiff,” a “drudgery.”² Explaining to Paula, who had just given birth to their first child, why he found it impossible to write a doctoral dissertation that would open the path to a career as a university professor, he coined the term *Stundenmenschen* for individuals who spent hours upon hours pondering scholarly minutiae.³ A year later, after the birth of their second child, he pleaded with her to understand why he continued to postpone writing his dissertation:

Above all, it has become painfully evident to me that I must pull myself together with all my strength, and that I must in the next few months, or rather weeks, accomplish something. Otherwise I will lose the last remnant of my artistic initiative. . . . You know that I have no sprawling talent; I must keep a taut rein. . . . You must understand, dearest, that this is a matter of life and death. What is at stake is simply my art: if I let myself go, I will go to seed—that is definite. Then I can go on shaping myself as a university lecturer and as a respectable bourgeois individual in general. But it will be all over with the creation of something vital.⁴

With resolute determination, Buber thus joined his generation's resistance to what his revered Nietzsche derisively called *Bildungsphilister*—educated philistines—who dominated the universities and who propagated in his view a perversion of learning, draining it of the passionate cadences of life as it is lived and experienced.⁵

Buber thus saw himself as a member of the nonacademic literati, the class of educated individuals who lived on the margins of academia and whom the sociologist Karl Mannheim aptly called “free-floating intellectuals.” Educated at the university, they continued to follow its scholarly debates and developments while maintaining a scornful distance from it. Years later Buber would reluctantly don the scholarly robes of a professor, yet proudly maintain that he remained an outsider to the university. As he explained to a friend, “I have never striven for an academic career.”⁶

As defiant outsiders, Buber and his fellow literati allowed themselves to cross the boundaries of academic disciplines, boldly risking the accusation of being dilettantes. Looking down on standard scholarly forms of publication, they preferred the essay, a form of expression that allowed for what Richard Rorty describes as “the discovery of new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking.”⁷ Essays allowed for rhetorical experimentation and innovation, and an eclectic weaving of themes, disciplines, and types of discourse. They also often dealt with genres of literature and thought that were not yet recognized or valued by the academy, including folklore, myth, and mysticism—expressions of human experience to which Buber would devote his initial writings and through which he would eventually gain his reputation beyond Jewish circles.

Despite his ambivalence toward the academy and its regnant modes of scholarship, Buber continued his university studies.

Actual tuition costs at central European universities were minimal, and as long as he studied, he enjoyed the financial support of his grandparents and father for all his other living expenses. His chief problem was how to manage with their stipend while supporting a wife and two children—of whose existence he had yet to inform them. In the winter semester of 1899–1900, he attended classes in Berlin and registered for courses with two professors who would have a seminal influence on him, shaping his philosophical horizons: Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Simmel.

Dilthey, whom Buber would refer to until the very end of his life as “my teacher,” is best known for establishing a firm epistemological and methodological distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities.⁸ He described the natural sciences as dealing with empirical phenomena that are subject to the physical laws of cause and effect, and thus given to “explanation,” while the humanities focus on the expressions of *Geist*, the life of the mind and spirit—inner experiences that are to be “understood,” not explained. To understand why a child cries, one does not seek to explain the cause of a child’s sobbing by analyzing the chemical composition of her tears or the physiological process of ocular tearing; rather one seeks to understand the inner “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) that is prompting the emotional state of crying. Understanding (*Verstehen*) the lived experience of others, and the expressions that embody it, requires an imaginative entry into the other’s experience (*Nacherleben*).

Understanding is thus an act of empathetic interpretation, but interpretation (through understanding) of that experience is not merely subjective; access to the inner experience of others is primarily through its expression in language, gestures, or artistic production. One understands the inner experience of others through these culturally recognized structures that give expression to that experience. The interpretive de-

coding of another's experience, then—such as the crying of one who is hurt, physically or psychologically—has the dialectical effect of acknowledging the subjective uniqueness of the experience of that person while also allowing it to be recognized, through familiar structures, as familiar—as an experience the interpreter can recognize as one they have had or can imagine having.⁹

In his twilight years, Buber would recall that Dilthey “was an especially important teacher; I am greatly indebted to him in particular with regard to historical understanding.”¹⁰ The premise of historical understanding is that others are not mere extensions of oneself; hence one gains understanding of others through approaching others as they approach us, that is, from the outside—interpreting their “objectified” expressions of life-experience (speech, writing, art)—through analogous personal experiences. We can discern here in Dilthey’s approach to historical understanding the seeds of Buber’s later philosophy of dialogue, whereby the Otherness of the Other—what he would call “the Thou”—is acknowledged and endowed with an autonomous cognitive and existential dignity. Of more immediate significance for Buber’s intellectual development, he learned from Dilthey’s “art of interpretation” how to read texts as the apprehension of the lived experience to which they give expression.¹¹

Perhaps of equal significance for Buber’s more immediate intellectual development was Dilthey’s understanding of religion as not confined to institutional practices and theological doctrines. Dilthey sought to uncover the innermost nature of religious life, believing that religious consciousness is not merely an inner spiritual state; it posits a given view of reality. As he put it in a diary entry: “This means looking for religion not so much in its institutional practices and its theological doctrines as in the recesses of human experience” in order to recover the “religious-philosophical worldview that is buried

under the ruins of our theology and philosophy.”¹² Dilthey’s related deep distaste for metaphysical speculation in either philosophy or religion also resonated with Buber.

In the last weeks of his life in the late summer and autumn of 1911, Dilthey began to write an essay on “The Problem of Religion,” which was to serve as an introduction to a new edition of his biography of the Protestant theologian and father of modern hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher. In this never-completed essay, he summarized his view that human beings are fundamentally spiritual in nature. Religion, he argued, is not properly understood as speculations about “ultimate reality” or “God.” Rather, it attests to the universality of religious feelings, expressed not only in prayer and ritual practices but also “in art, worldly activities, poetry, science, [and] philosophy” — feelings that are primed by fundamental intuitions about the underlying coherence and meaning of the world.¹³ Mystical feelings and experiences and their mythic representations, then, are not to be interpreted as primarily reflecting esoteric communion with God. Such experiences, he emphasized, “defend the joy of life, justify the objectives of life in worldly activity and turn against the fear of the gods, against the fear of punishment in the afterlife as well as against ill-considered means of appeasing [the gods] through sacrifice, ceremonies, [and] sacraments.”¹⁴ This conception of religion and mysticism would inspire Buber’s approach to the study of religion, and specifically of Hasidism. At the time of Dilthey’s death on October 1, 1911, Buber and his wife happened to be on vacation not far from where Dilthey had been staying, and he immediately went to offer Dilthey’s widow, Katharina, his condolences, as well as his help in the funeral preparations and subsequently in organizing her late husband’s papers.¹⁵ In a letter written two months after Dilthey’s death, Katharina asked Buber to review the inventory of her late husband’s papers to fill in any gaps he might

find.¹⁶ She also shared with him the uncompleted draft of “The Problem of Religion.”

Buber’s intellectual debt to Simmel was perhaps even greater than it was to Dilthey; indeed, he credited Simmel for teaching him “how to think.”¹⁷ Buber and Simmel developed a personal and professional relationship, which had not been the case between Buber and Dilthey. Indeed, Buber became one of Simmel’s closest students and a member of his inner circle. He was even invited to participate in Simmel’s weekly *Privatissimum*, a private seminar hosted by Simmel and his wife, Gertrud, at their home in Berlin’s stately Westend. The seminar was restricted to no more than twelve participants, mostly postdoctoral students; in this regard, Buber (who had yet to earn a doctorate) was an exception. This select cadre in Simmel’s seminar was occasionally joined by special guests such as the sociologist Max Weber and his wife, Marianne; the poet Rainer Maria Rilke; and the philosopher Edmund Husserl (who upon meeting Buber for the first time is reported to have exclaimed, “Buber?! I thought he was a legend”).

Women were also prominent participants in these weekly seminars. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, women, who were otherwise excluded from intellectual life in central Europe, conducted salons in which they were equal partners with men in the life of the mind. It was only toward the end of the nineteenth century that they were, with the permission of the lecturer or professor, welcome to audit university classes—and not until the winter semester of 1908–1909 were women allowed to enroll in Prussian universities. Simmel was among the very first to encourage women to attend his lectures, and they did so in great numbers.¹⁸ (In this respect, he was undoubtedly under the sway of his wife, Gertrud, an artist of some renown and powerful intellectual presence in her own right, who after her husband’s death in 1918 would remain close to Buber.)¹⁹ In

evoking the unique, captivating spirit of the Simmels' seminar, Margarete Susman, the German-Jewish poet and critic, related that the "weekly *Jours* . . . were organized entirely in the spirit of the couple's culture. They were a sociological work in miniature, the product of a society that aimed to cultivate individuality in the extreme. Conversation took shape there such that no one could impose his idiosyncrasies, problems, or needs; it was a form that, liberated from all weightiness, floated in an atmosphere of spirituality, affection, and tact."²⁰ The participants would gather first in the living room for tea, then proceed to sit around a large dining table, often sharing in the preparation of a communal soup. The conversation that would follow focused on select philosophical topics as well as on issues in art history, which would, in time, become one of Buber's passionate interests.

Susman first met Buber at the seminar, his "delicate, slight" build creating the impression for her that he "was not a human being, but pure spirit."²¹ Judah L. Magnes, an American rabbi who in 1900 attended one of Simmel's lectures as a visiting graduate student at the University of Berlin (and who years later would work closely with Buber to promote Arab-Jewish coexistence), also noted the aura of the young Buber. "After everyone had taken their seats, from a side-entrance in marched [Buber] leading a group of young men and women, who took seats in the first row apparently reserved for them." Baffled by the sight of this young man, sporting a black beard and walking with "slow but determined steps at the head of this group like a *Tzaddik* [with] his hasidim," Magnes turned to the student next to him, "a blond Aryan," and asked who it was. His neighbor replied, "This Jew has founded a new religious sect."²²

Buber's seemingly privileged position within Simmel's coterie served to introduce him to some of Germany's intellectual elite—he would, for instance, maintain a friendly re-

lationship with Max Weber for years to come. Above all, as a self-styled academic maverick, Simmel himself appealed to Buber's own intellectual inclinations. Both Simmel's intellectual style, which oscillated between scholarly disquisitions and essays (feuilletons) addressed to the educated lay public, and his interdisciplinary bent, which ranged from philosophy to art history and the fledgling discipline of sociology, placed him at the margins of the university—exactly where the young Buber found himself.²³

It was particularly his interest in sociology that cast Simmel as an academic outsider. Since at the time sociology tended to focus on the social structure and cultural codes of modern urban society, it was widely viewed as giving undue attention to what many members of the academy viewed as the manifestations of bourgeois materialism and crass ambition. To its critics, sociology—also known in German as *Gesellschaftslehre* (that is, the theory of urban society)—represented “an illusionless affirmation of contemporary reality,” even though it was often critical of many aspects of contemporary society. This opposition to sociology was compounded by the fact that urban “civilization”—*Zivilization* as opposed to *Kultur*—was popularly associated with Jews. Indicatively, Simmel also focused on such unconventional topics as coquetry, rumors, secrets, fashion, and the philosophy of money in order to unravel the dynamic of modern urban life, especially as it affected interpersonal relations. It was precisely this micro-sociological perspective, centered on the interactions between individuals within the modern context, that commanded Buber's fascination. In the fall of 1905, he approached the publishing house Rütten & Loenig of Frankfurt am Main with a proposal to have Simmel edit a series of monographs on the social psychology of life in the city, to be appropriately entitled *Die Gesellschaft* (Society). With the publisher's approval, Buber extended the

invitation to Simmel, who graciously declined, but pledged to support the project “behind the scenes.”²⁴ Buber would take it upon himself to edit the series.

His introduction to the series bears the unmistakable imprint of his esteemed teacher (as well as traces of Dilthey’s hermeneutics of lived experience, *Erlebnis*):

This collection of monographs, *Die Gesellschaft*, addresses itself to the problem of the inter-human (*das Zwischenmenschliche*). . . . When two or more individuals live with one another, they stand to one another in a relation of interaction, in a relation of reciprocal effect. Every relation of interaction between two or more individuals may be designated as an association or a society (*Gesellschaft*). . . . What one could comprehend in his own sphere of existence, without having to postulate the existence of another intentional individual, is simply the human or individual. The notion of *das Zwischenmenschliche*, on the other hand, assumes the existence of diverse, distinctly constituted intentional human beings, who live with and affect one another.²⁵

In a statement that Buber made some sixty years later, the introduction takes on added significance. Asked to summarize his life’s work, Buber, who was otherwise generally wary of categorical labels, reluctantly described his teachings as “die Ontologie des Zwischenmenschlichen” (the ontology of the inter-human).²⁶ It is particularly striking that he encapsulates his own work in this way, since the term *das Zwischenmenschliche* is a neologism that Buber himself had coined to capture the essence of Simmel’s conception of society as the matrix of interactions between individuals.

Editing *Die Gesellschaft* propelled the twenty-eight-year-old Buber onto the center stage of European culture. From 1906 to 1912, he published forty volumes of *Die Gesellschaft*, each written by a prominent author; among them were the

Swedish feminist Ellen Key, who wrote on the women's movement; Eduard Bernstein, the founder of evolutionary socialism, who addressed the question of the political viability of the mass worker's "strike"; the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, who penned a volume on "customs"; and the Russian-German writer Lou Andreas-Salomé, whose friendships with Nietzsche, Rilke, and Freud intrigued an entire continent, and who contributed a volume on eroticism.

Simmel himself—surely in Buber's eyes the guiding spirit of the series—provided a volume on religion in 1906. In it, he analyzed the dialectical relationship between religion (an objective, social, and historical phenomenon) and religiosity, a subjective "attitude of the soul" that not only informs institutional religion, but also can express itself through cultural pursuits such as art and science. Most significantly for Buber's own evolving thoughts on religion, Simmel (not surprisingly) deemed religiosity a form of faith that is first and foremost manifest in the relationship of trust between individuals, on the basis of which the idea of God crystallizes as "the absolute object of human faith." For Simmel, the idea of God (which integrates the diverse, even opposing elements of experience into an ultimate unity) is in the realm of religion.²⁷ In his early efforts to identify the spiritual core of Judaism, independent of its traditional normative structures, Buber would adopt Simmel's distinction between "religion" and "religiosity," echoes of which would resonate in his later conception of the I-Thou relationship as one of trust, sustained by the Eternal Thou.

In addition to Simmel, there was one other individual whose participation in *Die Gesellschaft* was especially important to Buber: Gustav Landauer. Shortly after he came to Berlin in the autumn of 1899 to study with Dilthey and Simmel, Buber met Landauer, who would soon become his intellectual and political alter ego. A polymath who developed a unique blend of mystical anthropology and ethical anarchism, Landauer first

met Buber in the *Neue Gemeinschaft*, an anarchist commune he cofounded in 1900 together with the brothers Heinrich and Julius Hart in the Berlin suburb of Schachtensee. Located in a twenty-nine-room villa (and former sanatorium), the commune quickly became a center for bohemian writers and artists.

Although they were active members of the *Neue Gemeinschaft*, neither Buber nor Landauer actually lived in the commune; they resided with their respective families elsewhere in Berlin. The two would become fast and lifelong friends. On the face of it, their friendship undoubtedly struck observers as improbable, and not only because Buber was barely five-feet, two inches tall, and Landauer was an imposing six-feet, five inches. Having formally withdrawn from the Jewish community at the age of twenty-two, Landauer was markedly indifferent to Judaism; indeed, in his writings he expressed a pronounced affinity with the Christian mystical tradition and with Buddhism. Further, his political loyalties were to anarchist socialism, a cause for which he was arrested several times and twice incarcerated. Also, while Buber enjoyed a measure of material security, Landauer was a bohemian intellectual who lived from hand to mouth.

Nonetheless, the two immediately bonded. Their friendship extended to their respective families. Landauer took a special liking to Buber's children, and would often stretch out on their beds, telling them bedtime stories; they were, however, far more fascinated by his immense torso with his legs dangling off the edge of the bed, "seemingly kilometers in the distance."²⁸ Buber and Paula, too, would frequently visit Landauer and his wife, Hedwig Lachmann, a poet and accomplished translator (from English, French, and Hungarian to German). Landauer met her at a poetry reading in 1899—more or less at the time he became friends with Buber—and moved in with her, even though he was married. Even before he had divorced his first wife, a seamstress, he and Hedwig had a daughter; four years

later in 1906, Hedwig (now his wife) gave birth to their second daughter, Brigitte, who would become the mother of the award-winning Hollywood film director and Oscar laureate Mike Nichols. Landauer was wont to call Hedwig affectionately “my Jewess,” for as the daughter of an orthodox *chazan* (cantor) and a passionate collector of traditional Jewish liturgical music, she introduced her husband to traditional Jewish culture, about which, despite his Jewish parentage, he knew virtually nothing. Her warm, unapologetic Judaism undoubtedly played a role in drawing him close to Buber.

Landauer, for his part, with his mystical conception of community, helped refine Buber’s nascent interest in mysticism, and especially his own understanding of community. Instead of the divisive social structure of modern urban society (*Gesellschaft*), Landauer argued that a universal, unitive community (*Gemeinschaft*) of being—of human beings and things—should be affirmed and sought at the deepest level of consciousness: “The community we long for and need, we will find only if we sever ourselves from individuated existence; thus we will at last find, in the innermost core of our hidden being, the most ancient and most universal community: the human race and the cosmos.”²⁹ He held that the cognitive and spiritual anguish of modern society is rooted in the tendency to view the world comprehended by our five senses, especially sight—including our fellow human beings—as a multiplicity of individuated objects, with each of us seeing ourselves as an isolated being. But paradoxically, by withdrawing into the deepest reaches of the self—what Landauer called “the innermost core of our being”—we can discover the essential spiritual unity of all beings, leading to the reestablishment of *Gemeinschaft*.

As Buber wrote with specific reference to Landauer, the mundane rhythms of everyday modern urban civilization that toss one into a web of “conflict and doubt” are wondrously interrupted by the mystical *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*—the deeply felt

experience of the unity of the self with the world: "In quiet, lonely hours all our endeavors seem meaningless. There appears no bridge from our being to the great Thou [*dem grossen Du*]—the Thou we felt was reaching out to us through the infinite darkness. Then suddenly came this *Erlebnis*—and like a mysterious nuptial festival we are freed from all restraints and we find the ineffable meaning of life."³⁰ These sacred moments—with their embryonic intimations of the later Buber's eternal Thou (*ewiger Du*) sustaining I-Thou relations—endow all of life with new meaning and direction: "A few of us want to live the ideal. . . . According to the ideal, we will live [in the concrete reality of the everyday] the meaning of the universe (*Weltall*), the endless unity of becoming."³¹

Buber also endorsed Landauer's anarchism, expressing an antagonism to normative religious structures: "Only when the jubilant rhythm of life has conquered regulation, only when the eternally flowing, eternally self-transforming inner-law of life replaces dead convention—only then can one be considered free from the coercion of vacuities and untruth. Only then could humankind be said to have found truth. The *Neue Gemeinschaft* fervently seeks to pave the way to this truth."³²

But Landauer himself soon came to see in the mystical affirmation of community an uncritical optimism, and would break with the *Neue Gemeinschaft*. In a volume published in 1903, *Skepsis und Mystik*, he presents a long critique of a monograph by Julius Hart. What troubles him is Hart's tendency to facetiously dismiss all polarities—no matter how existentially painful or unjust the reality reflected in them—as illusions of the perceiving mind. Landauer sarcastically remarks: "The magical word with which Julius Hart dismisses all spiritual and physical pain is 'transformation.' . . . Should a lion devour a lamb, neither the lamb nor men have the right to complain about it: the life of the lamb had simply been transformed into the life of the lion. . . . Accordingly, when a capitalist exploits his workers, human flesh

has simply been transformed into furniture.’”³³ For Landauer, genuine social transformation necessarily entailed political action, but the *Neue Gemeinschaft* never transcended the level of intellectual experiment. The closest it ever came to realizing community, one observer noted, was its monthly bacchanalian festivals that lasted into the early hours of the morning.³⁴

More than two decades after the demise of this experiment in 1904, Buber wrote in his introduction to Landauer’s posthumously published correspondence that the *Neue Gemeinschaft* had taught Landauer “how community does not [simply] rise.”³⁵ It would take Buber himself considerably longer to learn this lesson.