Journal of Textual Reasoning 16:1 (May 2025)
ISSN: 1939-7518

BOOK REVIEW

BETTINA BERGO
Université de Montréal

Elliot Wolfson. *Nocturnal Seeing: Hopelessness of Hope and Philosophical Gnosis in Susan Taubes, Gillian Rose, and Edith Wyschogrod.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024. 392 pp.

This is an erudite and, more importantly, an insightful book-act. *Nocturnal Seeing* features a Wolfson seemingly different from the accomplished scholar of Kabbalah and from the Merleau-Pontian reader of phenomenology *with* Kabbalah (e.g., *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream*, 2011). Wolfson has already published *The Philosophical Pathos of Susan Taubes* (2023), on the unsuspected depths of this reader-interlocutor of Heidegger.[1] Devoting his initial chapter to her frank exploration of Hei-

[1] See Elliot Wolfson, *The Philosophical Pathos of Susan Taubes: Between Nihilism and Hope* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023). Although Susan Taubes was best known, to English-speaking readers, for her novel *Divorcing*, published in 1969, the year of her drowning in East Hampton—and despite a dissertation devoted to Simone Weil and directed by Paul Tillich, the exceptional dialogue she inaugurated was with Heidegger, whom she read with utter clarity of insight, as a contemporary gnostic. See, notably, Wolfson's chapter three, "Gnosis and the Covert Theology of Antitheology: Heidegger, Apocalypticism, and Gnosticism," 128–185.

degger's thought is therefore not surprising. It entails a distillation of extensive, empathic discussion drawn from his 2023 study. More surprising is his exploration of the Adornian philosopher Gillian Rose. Readers will remember her *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Past* (1992), essays often critical of "postmodern philosophy" and their recourse to what she called "holy middles," a response to the divided legacy of reason after Kant's practical antinomies.[2] Finally, Wolfson turns to the work of his teacher, Edith Wyschogrod, before offering ultimate reflections on melancholic redemption.

Three 'women philosophers,' then, and perhaps three voices of Wolfson himself. Our author adds, "The bond that ties together the diverse and multifaceted worldviews promulgated by Taubes, Rose, and Wyschogrod is the mutual recognition of the need to enunciate a philosophical response to the calamities of the twentieth century" (p. 2). This carries the dual challenge of translating without reducing, conversing without conciliating. From Taubes's honors thesis research and 1950–1952 correspondence with her then-husband, Jacob,[3] the task is taking up an unusual dialogue with Heidegger via letters to Jacob Taubes, with Wolfson acknowledging, sometimes questioning, Susan Taubes's unshrinking epistolary arguments.

By revisiting each thinker, who might otherwise pass into the penumbra of 'minor' commentators, Wolfson takes on another task as well. For Taubes, Rose, and Wyschogrod allow—or impel—him to engage, sometimes simultaneously, with Heidegger and Kabbalah, Hegel, Derrida, and Levinas. This orchestrated approach can be dizzying, firstly because addressing Taubes's criticisms with a consciously ambiguous defense of Heidegger opens Wolfson's own text to themes from Buddhist nihilism to Gnosticism (a central theme in the first and third chapters) to Kabbalism—proceeding through the Book of Splendor.

---

[2] See, for example, Rose, "Ethics and Halacha" in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 25–32, esp. 26–28, and *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 3, 11–13, 247–277.

[3] Susan Taubes, *Die Korrespondenz mit Jacob Taubes, 1950–1951*, ed. Christian Pareigis (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2011, in English with German annotations).

As we learned from Wolfson's 2023 study *The Philosophical Pathos of Susan Taubes*, the first chapter engages the pragmatic and material objections raised by Susan Taubes to the Gnosticism, and indeed crypto-sentimentalism, in Heidegger (pp. 22–23ff.).[4] Coming at a time when Heidegger's project was not extensively discussed in the English-speaking world, these objections prove prophetic. They extend to Heidegger's *existentialia*, to "thrownness," to the formal conception of Being as mortal time, and to his eschatology. Wolfson beautifully examines Taubes's defense of a "broken world" against philosophical constructions of rationalist sublimation and historic reconciliation; he ponders a conception of revelation beyond intuition and light. Readers of Levinas may find such nocturnal vision familiar. There are moments, nevertheless, when Wolfson's entry into the conversation—that is, when he engages his own discussion of Heidegger—appears to leave Taubes behind.[5] We are now, after all, at two generational removes from her extended struggle with the thinker of Marburg.

Such is the dilemma, I think, confronting one who has studied Heidegger for thirty years, and who approaches him less agonistically, and also as less of an apprentice, than the twenty-four- year-old Susan

---

4 Responding to the play of concealment-unveiling, and of being-in-truth with errancy, Taubes wrote, in a poem entitled "Post Apocalypse," "After the spell [of gnostic sentimentality] has been broken how shall we not break/ every other thing?" To which Wolfson adds, "To be healed, the brokenness must be broken, but the breaking of brokenness can come about only by appropriating the perfection of the imperfection that is part and parcel of the imperfection of the perfection of existence" (31).

5 A clear example is his discussion of temporality in Kabbalah, which is grounded in his strong statement about Heidegger: "I would go so far as to say that the temporal underpinning of the hermeneutical conception of the oral tradition espoused by the rabbis and expanded by the kabbalists accords with Heidegger's view that a text cannot be heard anew unless it is translated, and it cannot be translated unless it is interpreted, and it cannot be interpreted unless there is a return to the past that is concealed and therefore has not yet arrived," in Wolfson, "Jewish Time and the Eclipse of Historical Destiny," *The Duplicity of Philosophy's Shadow: Heidegger, Nazism, and the Jewish Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 101. Wolfson's many aims through his studies of Heidegger expand his task, and his interpretation, beyond the scope of Susan Taubes's work, without foreclosing her arguments.

Taubes, in epistolary dialogue with Jacob, who offered both support and skepticism. Wolfson cites Taubes's 1954 article "The Gnostic Foundations of Heidegger's Nihilism": "Both for Heidegger and for the gnosis, thrownness expresses beyond the manner of the self's entrance into the world, the essential violence of the self's being-in-the-world" (23). Shortly thereafter Wolfson observes, "Susan contested Descartes's grounding the certainty of belief in the quality of perfection by proffering that if there is 'an irrefutable proof of the reality of something by our having an idea of it, it might be the reality of 'wrong,' of imperfection …. [I]f my idea of wrongness 'doesn't correspond to external reality' … then there is something that nevertheless remains wrong in the world'" (35).[6] There *is* nevertheless something wrong in the world, and we wonder how one would not today be a gnostic of some sort. This interrogative theme runs through the book. It is Wolfson's task to ponder gnosticism in its depths and ambiguities.

A related challenge consists of seeking, and if possible, of occupying "the midpoint positioned between hope and hopelessness," and this through three voices (3). In chapter one, Susan Taubes sought such a point in Heidegger's thought, failing which she was encouraged to turn her research toward Simone Weil's mystical atheism. Gillian Rose made the

---

[6] Remarkably, in *The Philosophical Pathos*, Wolfson follows closely Susan's letters to Jacob, noting the anti-theological, sometimes Arendtian, resonances and divergences from an older Gnosticism. A remarkable—for its time, notably—intuition comes in a letter from February 12, 1952, wherein Susan writes, "If the gnostic revolt is absolute it must in order to remain consistent negate the world as world, absolutely without reference to judgment; i.e. negative good as well as evil, meaning as well as absurdity, purpose as well as senselessness; in other words it must negate salvation and eschatology. But then it is no longer 'gnosis.' If the analysis [which includes Heidegger's ontological difference and his *Geworfenheit* of *Da-sein*] is right then the moving principle of the gnosis is a dialectical trick, an evasion, a self-betrayal." See Taubes, *Die Korrespondenz mit Jacob Taubes 1950–1952*, §172, p. 91. Wolfson adds, anticipating remarks he will make about parallels with Hannah Arendt's appraisal of achieving "selfhood" in Heidegger, that Susan "contrasted the 'sentimentality of gnostic (pseudo)-nihilism' and 'Buddhist nihilism'" (Wolfson, 2024, 356, n.72). The comparison proposed with Arendt comes from her "What is *Existenz* Philosophy?" (1946). Arendt focuses less on the sentimentality of Heidegger's 'gnosticism' than on his idealizing the Self (as *Dasein*), which, ignoring anything like authentic intersubjectivity, replays a certain "mischief in German philosophy and literature since Romanticism." See Wolfson, 2023, 147.

'holy middle' her central objection against the postmodern fetishism of transcendent middles, mobilizing dialectics against thinkers like Derrida and Levinas—until she herself seized on a 'middle' both holy and practical, as we will see. Edith Wyschogrod approached the 'middle' within the dynamic movement between sameness and alterity, while criticizing dialectics for its unavowed metaphysical presuppositions. I sensed that Wolfson stands closest to his teacher, Wyschogrod, but that should not blind us to the fact that these *three* lives concern tragic hope. In Taubes's case, her novel *Divorcing* appeared in 1969, in the authorial voice of one who had ceded to hopelessness through suicide in the same year. Add to this two fatal illnesses that nevertheless spawned Rose's memoir, *Love's Work: A Reckoning with Life* (2011), and Wyschogrod's late meditation on embodying philosophy's others.[7]

Of course, the "middle" has little to do with space, much less with traditional conceptions of linear time. For Taubes, hermeneutics illustrates the simultaneity of past, present, and future in a way that echoes Wolfson's observation on the incompletable task of textual interpretation. "The farther one goes in interpretation, the closer one comes at the same time to an absolutely dangerous region where interpretation not only will find its point of return, but where it will disappear as interpretation" (6). Wolfson here allows Taubes to speak in his place, understanding that time makes existential middles unstable. The gnosis Susan suspected in Heidegger's thrownness seems also to have belonged to the entwined ends of her sedimented Hungarian-Jewish past and the unforeseen breaks coming as if from the future. Wolfson characterizes her situation (and more than *her* situation) in this way: "The future repeatedly interrupts the present, but interruption does not signal an unmitigated rupture of the past. The 'timeswerve' of circular linearity dictates that without continuity we could not detect discontinuity [and] the coalescence of the three temporal modes in the interminable termination of the momentary

[7] Gillian Rose, *Love's Work: A Reckoning with Life* (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2011); Edith Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries: Dwelling with Negatives, Embodying Philosophy's Others* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

becoming" (52). Having neither come into being nor liable to evaporate, becoming recalls *la durée* in Bergson, and it casts light on the ambiguity of median positions promising stability.[8] Taubes understood clearly that, if we are thrown into existence, such a gnostic element does not invalidate Heidegger's ontology so much as it calls out to be assumed, carried.

Perhaps to the very end, Susan Taubes wrestled with the disturbing existential lassitude (viz., "interminable termination of the momentary becoming") that pointed toward a melancholic dimension of being out-ahead-of-oneself, something Heidegger never quite plumbed.

As the study unfolds, it brings the "circular linearity" into multiple perspectives. An initial title of this book was *Crossing Time's River*, and we proceed both with and against the current. "Timeswerves" arise with discontinuities in the flow, and *these* may be compared to fugacious middles and interruptions from the future.[9] Wolfson makes this observation while reflecting on a unique kind of phenomenological 'reduction,' toward which Susan Taubes was herself moving (53ff.). Now, because readers of this book may constitute a cohort different from those who read his *Giving Beyond the Gift* (2014), we have to be careful about outstripping the author's arguments that we are treating here, chapter by chapter.

---

[8] "Timeswerves" also resemble Merleau-Ponty's "reversibility" of seeing and being seen, which, as Wolfson develops it in his 2005 *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* ("Prologue"), goes together with "the inherent reflexivity of the perceptual … [itself] a basic feature of time and perception, two poles of Merleau-Ponty's otology of alterity." Both time and a broad, phenomenological conception of "perception" are "entwisted in the tangle of language," such that the future already inhabits, or infeudates, the present and the past, while the latter is ongoingly yet-to-come for "hermeneutic reversibility" (*xv–xxxi* and *passim*). Timeswerves is a characteristic element of Wolfson's ongoing project.

[9] For a remarkable discussion of the "timeswerve," which is "open at both termini [such that] the end cannot be deduced from the beginning nor the beginning from the end," because the *repetition*, motivated by the future, though precisely *of* the past, never simply gives us an identical past, see Wolfson, discussing Jewish apocalyptic sensibility in "Jewish Time and the Eclipse of Historical Destiny," *The Duplicity of Philosophy's Shadow: Heidegger, Nazism, and the Jewish Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 104. Wolfson effectively demonstrates the absurdity of comparing Jews and "Jewishness" with Heidegger's famous "calculation" and *Machenschaft*, with objects and onticity.

Staying for now with chapter one and with Susan Taubes: it is no doubt deliberately the case that Taubes's own hesitations about Heidegger's themes, such as the ontological difference, "thrownness," *Sein zum Tode* (being-toward-death), remain ambiguous. Stated otherwise, it is one Jewish philosopher's response to fundamental ontology, albeit different from Jacob Taubes's appraisal and prescient contribution to English-language scholarship. Recourse to non-Jewish works like *Les philosophes et leur langage* (Yvon Belaval)[10] echoes Susan's suspicion about the gnostic elements in Heidegger's *Dasein* as cast-into-the-world, but adds a mirth that we do not often find in her own analyses. I am tempted to think it deliberate that Wolfson is speaking through Taubes to argue—to take but one example—for the pathos of her recourse to the theme of love "stronger than death"; he is clearly rethinking her commentary on the Song of Songs VIII:6 (Wolfson 2023, 228; Wolfson 2024, 57). This is an example of the complex relationship *between* the three authors examined here, their relationship to Heidegger and Hegel, and above all to Wolfson himself.

Thus, in the Introduction to the book, after announcing what will be the contents of his study; after noting the challenge of gnosticism, and this most pertinently today; after discussing themes of truth and untruth in theopolitical discourse and the question of secular religion, Wolfson passes to the theme of melancholia. There, dialogue with his three philosophers will have led, by sedimentation, to his argument that melancholy reveals that there is no naked truth, no "naked truth divested of any cloak," and there is no face that is not "itself a mask" (11). This early observation, which returns in the final chapter, gestures toward the precarious consolation of philosophy: "On the emotional scale, the life of contemplation warrants a comparable severance from intersocial affairs"; i.e., a state of withdrawal (12). The Introduction thereby sets the tone for

[10] Wolfson cites Susan citing Belaval, who exhorts, for her: "Let's grow up and stop this 'thumb-sucking' there is no mystical shortcut to creating anything of value, whether a house, a poem or a philosophy. Constructing a philosophy or a poem should take more work and should entail more difficulties than building a house" (Wolfson 2024, 55).

the problem of occupying a middle ground between hope and hopelessness.

This subtle dimension would both justify the treatment of the three 'marginal' philosophers *and* disturb it. At other times, the pained mood that flows out of Wolfson's meditation on death and withdrawal disquiets us. Consider the following: "Death, on this score, is not the mystery of the eventual inability to be but rather the aporia of the inevitable ability to be" (13).[11] The suffering that emerges proves unlike that which Taubes criticized in Heidegger, as Wolfson is anything but sentimental. It appears closer to Levinas's indefectible existence to which we find ourselves riveted. Ethically speaking, this is not so much consolation as an intimation of what the latter called dis-interestedness, a 'site' severed from social drives and concerns.

Through the important work of Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (1992), we come closer to the paradoxical stake in Wolfson's extended meditation: the contemporary inevitability of a "middle" that is broken (i.e., a middle precariously situated between beginnings and ends, empty spaces and sites, enthymemes, and above all, between transcendence and immanence). Of these, postmodernism would have made so many 'holy' mediations, both antinomic and resistant to dialectics, whether logical or social. In following Rose, Wolfson observes the irony of the postmodern impulse: the "origin of anxiety" and the "anxiety of origin" turn as if around themselves like a momentary whorl in time's metaphoric river. This would be a recent conception, indebted to the postmodern reflex of

[11] Another way to conceive this is in light of hope, to which we will return. The latter, writes Wolfson, "can be envisioned as the unremitting projection of an elementally calibrated retrospection to foretell what has been in the recollection of what is to come." Phenomenologically, the projection of a retrospection recalls Husserl's mid-career realization that, at work in the chain of retentions flowed-back are protentions, precisely those projections rooted in experience shaded-off, which continue to be active, even if (or perhaps because) they have been fulfilled in the retained past. Understood in terms of what we call imagination or *Phantasie*, "hope" expresses our unwitting, but unceasing, projection of what we believe we have known and experienced, *nolens volens*, like a "recurrence of the same difference that is differently the same," writes Wolfson (Elliot Wolfson, private communication, August 26, 2024.)

deconstructing middles to avoid logics of totalization and integrated systems. Rose laments that, for practical reason and since Kant, the institution of "holy" middles communicate only with dyspraxis and often border on dogmatism.[12] It remains that Rose's critique of thinkers from Derrida to Levinas strikes us today as motivated more by her reaction against the enthusiasm that philosophies of difference elicited in the 1980s than by the logical strategies that she criticizes; viz., in seeking to intimate—through writing—radical transcendence with neither political nor existential mediations. Wolfson ponders Rose's arguments with an eye to Edith Wyschogrod's subsequent defense of postmodernism.

The argument here is complex. It concerns both meaning and history, negative dialectics, and dialetheic seeing, whereby what is revealed is achieved through relationality and reciprocal tensions. I shall not dwell on it in detail here. I never could reconcile myself with the implications of Rose's condemnation of the postmodern project, in part because of her ambivalence concerning mediations from laws to the Law. But this brings Rose into a certain proximity with Susan Taubes's fatal dilemma: "[T]he existential impasse from which Susan could not flee: her only way to remain Jewish was to abandon Judaism" (Wolfson 2023, 21). Existentially speaking, Rose's critical analyses communicated surprisingly with her end-of-life choice to convert to the Church of England. It would be unfair

---

[12] In her chapter "New Jerusalem Old Athens: The Holy Middle," Rose writes—although it is violent to excerpt her in this way: "Before we orient our theology, let us consider this passage … in relation to the city and philosophy. Neither politics nor reason unify or 'totalize': they arise out of … the diversity of peoples who come together under the aporetic law of the city, and who know that their law is different from the law of other cities…. We should be renewing our thinking on the invention and production of … cities, apparently civilized within yet dominating without—not sublimating those equivocations into holy cities. For the modern city intensifies these perennial diremptions in its inner oppositions between morality and legality, society and state, and the outer opposition … between sovereignty and what Rousseau called 'power,' and which we call 'nations and nationalism.'" Against this, postmodern philosophy would have hardened the oppositions, sometimes onticizing them ("which recurs, compacted and edified, in Levinas as 'war'"), and opposing the radical transcendence of the "good" to the everyday. Remarkably, Levinas and Wyschogrod would probably agree about what is necessary to "orienting our theology." See *The Broken Middle*, 286.

to venture that the Church became *her* holy middle, as the choice may have been the result of her long friendship with theologian John Milbank.

However, consider that Rose writes (79): "The 'deconstruction' of metaphysics involves a reconstruction of the history of law, which blinds us to the very tradition which it disowns and repeats … ." An objection flowing out of a certain Jewish thought, in which case postmodernism would be caught in the utopian (Christian) nets of magic mediations. Rose continues, "This destruction of knowledge is justified by its perpetrators as the only way to escape the utopian projections and historicist assumptions of dialectics" (79). Although she is formally close to Wyschogrod here, I am not convinced that this was what motivated "postmodern" inquiries, say, into language (themselves a part of the deconstruction of metaphysics). That the 1970s collaborative project called *les années Vincennes* was a high point of French postmodernism and fired ambitions to finish with metaphysics and rewrite laws, beyond 'revolutions,' was but one moment of postmodernism.

What concerns Wolfson is that there is a strain of practical reason in Rose, running through her gambit of rethinking the middle, which joins Susan Taubes's interrogation of Heidegger. Although this might be experienced as an invitation to reflect, say, on totalization versus perspectivalism and incommensurability in philosophy, it stands here in tension with the task of the writer/thinker. Are we challenged then to elaborate mediations—broken because simply too human—whereby we move from the difference of the other to a conception of a collaborative community? And if so, how best to proceed?

In 1961, Levinas addressed this issue through his figure of the Third party, which was neither logical co-presence (other-third) nor succession (other-into-the-third). As Wolfson puts it, "despite [Rose's] efforts to correct the prejudicial binary of love versus law that had colored centuries of Jewish and Christian polemics, Rose's [end-of-life] baptism commemorated the triumph of love over law so that at the culmination of her life *she reinscribed the very dichotomy she sought to depose*" (86–87, emphasis added). It is as though this were one 'choice'—perhaps the outcome of Rose's aforementioned friendship, but perhaps also one of

desperation—of which Susan Taubes was already aware when she wrote these words: "We must speak to each other and create community secretly inside of the bad totality" (Letter of November 12, 1951, Wolfson 2023, 227). If the lost mediation means creating a secret community, then neither Rose nor Taubes carried it further, since "we are talking into a chaos," concluded Taubes (ibid.). We sense the paradoxical circularity in Wolfson's presentation of Rose's philosophy even before he speaks of her deathbed conversion. His own meditation on both Wyschogrod and on melancholia will provide stronger voices in this discussion in chapters three and four.

Is there then a Jewish philosophy proposed here? Several, I suspect. We have already seen Susan's reflection on an unnavigable apostasy; in her thesis on Weil she carries it further:

> [B]ecause the estrangement from God means estrangement from our own 'non-worldly' self … The only experience of God accessible to us is the awfulness of the absence; the only experience of eternity: the anguish before the nothingness into which our life passes; the only experience of certainty: the anguish that our very anguish is baseless … because the only legitimate basis of our anguish would be that God *is* absent … . (Letter of 17–18 January 1952; Wolfson 2023, 204)

Rose focuses, for her part, on Halacha that "does not posit an end to law within history [etc.]" but also "utterly overlooks the dispute within Judaism over law and ethics" (88). Her observation refers to debates over Jewish law and secular ethics that flowed notably from Aharon Lichtenstein's "Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halacha?" (1975). I am not certain what the evolution of this debate has been.[13] Yet if we accept this 'overlooking,' then there would be a logical

---

[13] Rose discusses the debate in *The Broken Middle*, as well as in her *Judaism and Modernity*, 19–24; 25–32. Characterizing the debate between Lichtenstein and Eugene Borowitz, as between quite surprising positions within orthodoxy and Conservative Judaism, respectively, Rose observes: "Lichtenstein appears to question the legitimation of Halacha *qua* traditional authority, while Borowitz questions the legitimation of Halacha *qua* legal-rational authority. Lichtenstein asks whether Halacha is *equitable* by inquiry into the status of *equity* within Halacha, while Borowitz asks whether Halacha is *egalitarian* by inquiring into the *flexibility*

need for a mediating term, which could not be a third 'domain' linking law and ethics. Perhaps it devolves to the witness able to revisit this debate. But that is no longer in Rose's ambit. Indeed, there remains in her thought a categoric quality that leaves the reader uncertain of the way *she* conceives the law.

What, then, is Rose's work doing for Wolfson? It appears to be the simultaneous acknowledgement of our need for 'middles,' for mediations, with a skeptical view of systems-building *and* transcendence. Either we pursue middles in order to assure the relationship between incompossible terms like radical transcendence and worldly practice, 'humans' and 'God,' or we stand before the paradox that postmodernism sanctified, according to Rose. Wolfson addresses this dilemma in terms of the relationship between the particular and the universal: "When the matter is carefully mulled over … there is no [particular-universal] paradox at all because the unconditional character of God makes the relation to him personal, and therefore particularistic, and yet, the criterion of unconditionality is precisely what all theistic religions share … the ground of the universalistic…[whereby] the universal is engendered by the particular whose inimitability cannot be subsumed by the generality of the universal" (Wolfson 2023, 25).

When woven together with interviews and her late work *Mourning becomes the Law* (1996), Rose's challenge of reconstructing operational "middleness" for practical reason expands toward that of the relationship between material practice (cf. Taubes) and the precarity of philosophies

---

of Halacha. Yet it is Lichtenstein who demonstrates the flexibility of Halacha while Borowitz demands that ethics be as categorical (unconditioned) as Halacha, not a secondary kind of imperative, in 'its own way,' which he attributes to Lichtenstein" (Rose 1993, 21). These questions arise, she argues later, within the context of "the development of the modern state," which has led to the breakdown of ethics and the conceiving of law generally" (Rose 1993, 26). The upshot has been the dilution—or sequestration—of both. "If we view modernity in the light of … the Holocaust and its aftermath, natural law has been replaced by natural rights, just as civil society is separated from the state," which is quite able to threaten both (Rose 1993, 26). Finally and with regard to this still-contemporary "mutation," a comparable separation, argues Rose, arises between philosophy and social theory. There would be no viable mediation for such scissions, although the "holy middles" she criticizes can be approached, I believe, as Wolfson attempts to do in *Nocturnal Seeing*.

born of contemporary melancholy. Wolfson's insights help us here: "Philosophical reflection is consolation for the discontent that can be dissipated … but never permanently surmounted. Rose's vision of aporetic universalism stipulates an ongoing … process toward the reciprocal recognition of the other and the self, fostered by social and political institutions, but," observes Wolfson, "this recognition *only reinforces the possibility of future misrecognition*" (94, emphasis added). To the degree that Rose herself is aware of this, we confront, in effect, a logic of broken middles—the disconcerting situation that she said motivated the postmodern radicalizations.

I will not discuss whether Rose's recourse to Kierkegaard's paradoxes reinforces the challenge of mediations today or not. It is Wolfson who drives the point home, arguing: "Dialetheic logic posits the negation of the negation of negation, a triple negativity that resists resolution of either an interim or an irrevocable nature that would be implied by the double negative" (97). He attributes this to Rose, a claim he derives from his study of her philosophical work in its extended unfolding. Therein he glimpses a path on which Rose could "be called a *true* nihilist," because she opposed nihilism via nihilism, the way Taubes fought gnosticism in Heidegger with a gnosticism flowing out of her existentialized Judaism. I suspect at this point that Rose's work would well converse with Taubes's (and indeed, with Heidegger's). But we should be careful not to read too quickly here, for it remains that the two dimensions out of which Rose works, a practical, ambiguously Jewish conception of law and a critique of one conception of postmodernism, do not yield a unified discourse.

What then is the lesson of Rose's protracted struggle? Ultimately, "the injunction proffered by Rose is to situate oneself between these two poles ['Athens' and 'Jerusalem'] such that any presumed certainty in one's philosophical truth would be undermined by the skeptical appeal to what is contrary to that truth" (102). Here, Judaism stands as the reminder that

we are always impure and caught up in an irresolvable struggle, more like Kafka than anything Kierkegaard, whom Rose cites, had written.[14]

It is this ongoing movement between a search for truth and the play of skepticism that allows Wolfson to turn, not to the question of practical middles, but to that of the writer and the witness. The performative creation of the witness (as writer and poet) actually deploys the paradoxical middle that Rose qualified as unmediatable. She did not appear to believe the claim that the rediscovery or transformation of the "old Jerusalem" into a "new [postmodern] Jerusalem" could revivify "old Athens" (107–108, 110–111). But the answer could not be the creation of a holy middle (maybe not even an always-endangered secular middle). There cannot be a "loveful polity that is beyond nature and freedom" (107), and we have the abiding sense that Wolfson protects the aporias that punctuate Rose's work in order ultimately to join her in claiming that moral communities arise in this hopeful new Jerusalem as false dichotomies. Even the dialectical Christianity Rose describes is no longer a middle of *enactment*, and, if there is a third city "where *we* are," then it will oscillate between rationality and irrationality, inclusion and separation. Perhaps the answer will be found in Edith Wyschogrod's "gathering of the ashes of Auschwitz" (111). With this, we are again invited to observe the stance of the witness. Of course we face the new-old masks of irony and, indeed, of gnosticism. Hence, before proceeding, Wolfson comes to Rose's defense: she will have proposed an anti-gnostic gnosticism, thanks to Adornian social theory and her conviction that the only redemption possible is here in the world—a claim she shares with Susan Taubes.

---

[14] Thus argues Wolfson, but Rose protests, in what proves to be circular relative to Wolfson: "Before we orient our theology, let us reconsider the relation between the city and philosophy. Neither politics nor reason unifies or 'totalizes': they arise out of diremption, out of the diversity of peoples who come together under the aporetic law of the city …. Without 'disowning that edifice,' philosophy steps away to inspect its limitations, especially when the diremptions fixated … have lost their living connections. We should be renewing our thinking on the invention and production of edifices—cities … not sublimating those equivocations into holy cities" (Rose 1993, 50). I sense that, on the side of philosophy rather than social theory (or construction), Wolfson is attempting precisely this.

Having come to the end of chapter two, I wished I could see more such dialogues—such as where Taubes and Rose would stand with regard to Wolfson's own project of the paradoxical middle. I am persuaded that the ambiguities that Rose and Taubes make possible—in light of Heidegger, then in that of Hegel, Kant, and Adorno—are ones whose fecundity Wolfson would have us experience. For I sense that the relationship between Taubes and Rose, and that between both of them and Wolfson, bear further development. The chapter ends with the anti-gnostic gnosis that is a broken middle and that nevertheless qualifies as *other* than simply gnostic. With this comes what appears to be a regulative idea: if today such gnosis "translates politically into the appropriation of the ethical life that we can never experience directly but to which we must constantly strive" (114), thanks precisely to inconsistencies in laws and their implications, then how can we not be tempted by ironic figures like 'postmodern' antinomians?

In closing and before considering Wyschogrod, one of the tasks of Wolfson's witness has become clear. It was never about finding answers, whether ontological or epistemic; it was not even one of asking questions, but of better determining *how* to ask questions today; notably, of how to conceive a moving midpoint between hope and hopelessness. The eddies and whorls of time's river flow on with the current.

I found the chapter on Edith Wyschogrod's work more accessible. The discussion of her reading of Heidegger's 'time' is very fine. From there, the arguments about the heterology of historical narrative, unfolding in the (non-)space of ethics (141) is engaging. The originality and penetration of Wyschogrod's philosophical eye appear more acute than Taubes's 'nocturnal' interrogation of Heidegger. There is a reason for this: Susan Taubes's early suicide at age 41 and the paucity of philosophical work, outside her letters to Jacob and the single novel initially available to us, *Divorcing* (1969). Take, for example, Wyschogrod's demonstration of the presumption, in Hegel, that to negate a negation yields *positivity* (141–142). This critical insight—that 'positivity' may actually *not* flow out of two negations—opens the door to the triple, existential negation that characterizes the logic that Wolfson is exploring. Indeed, and without

working out the mediations that assure us ready passage from section to section, like the *selbst* (same) that repeats in the *Phenomenology* as though it were predictably the same, Wyschogrod's "excluded middle" responds to Rose's "holy middle" critique of postmodernism. We discover that Wyschogrod grasped the resources of postmodern thought with less skeptical-polemical intent than Rose evinced. This is due in part to Wyschogrod's sources, and to her exploration of the Levinasian "null point" of language, effective "at the edge of language" (143), a theme important to Wolfson's own work.

Wyschogrod's research provides us a transition to Levinas's "reduction" of words said (*le dit*) to his embodied "saying" (*le dire*), his own "null site" at the edge of proximity and distance, and his polemic against Heidegger's claim that Being-speaks-through-language. Valuable in this movement are the fragile antennas extended to the figures of distance and silence, alluded to in Wolfson's Introduction. Yet I wonder how the works of three Jewish (women) thinkers stand as extensions of the themes introduced in the initial pages of the work. Is it anachronistic to wonder whether the marginality—which imposed a 'female condition' on these philosophers—impacts the way they conceive of gnosticism, of law and ethics, and the problem of transcendence and time?

With her masterwork, *Spirit in Ashes* (1985),[15] Wyschogrod carries discussion of questions of temporality into the problem of history, toward the theme of the "apophatics of history" (149), and the aporia that is "the past"—mistakenly imagined simply to be past, much the way the future is 'to come' with no particular relation to past or present. The postmodern sensibility is re-pondered here in the mode of thinking a negation that cannot be thought (122, 124). Beyond the (paradoxical) effort to open a "holy middle," Wyschogrod's unthinkable historic negation, including genocide, asks what *remains* of regulative ideas and opens to a revaluation of the work of Derrida and Levinas after Rose's criticism. With them

[15] Edith Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger, and Man-made Mass Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

comes a thinking of transcendence *and* of ethical materiality, which recalls Taubes's concerns vis-à-vis Heidegger.

In the interest of concision, I will not recapitulate the third chapter's arguments. I am attempting to see interconnections, both among the philosophers and within Wyschogrod's own thought here. I am pursuing a red thread, which would help me see the "triangulation" among the philosophers to whom Wolfson refers (1). Perceiving the interweave would allow this reader to grasp the authorships' respective relationships to Wolfson's own vision. He is speaking, after all, through them.

For, despite the epistemic fragmentation of our times, the reflex that gropes for overarching arguments persists. Yet a better reading, it seems to me after completing the final chapter on melancholic redemption, would be to allow oneself to be carried by the voices of the text, where they lead.

Wolfson's late reprise of Adorno's statement, as to "whether after Auschwitz one can go on living" (156), framed in light of Wyschogrod's concept of the "death event," receives a powerful response in the final chapter. If one chooses to live on, one retells a story even as one assumes "the responsibility of being witnesses to teach each and every human being how to die both as an I and a we," a situation quite different from Heidegger's concerns. This is neither romantic nor simplistically nihilist. It crosses time's river against the current, even where the middle flows on. The thematic proximity with his closing discussion of Wyschogrod justifies Wolfson's exploration of Kafka's insight about vast hope(s) … only 'not for us'—not for us, that is, not so much as to hope for hope.[16]

---

[16] As Susan Taubes protested to Jacob, late, in 1952, "I cannot envisage the God of Israel in a 'gnostic Judaism.' I rather see him walking beside the just … bringing his people up to live in the sacred order of the world … whose law is god's law. And as long as the word of god is on the lips of men as long as redemption is experience through the law, the craving for redemption is without ever being stilled partially fulfilled …" *Die Korrespondenz mit Jacob Taubes 1952*, §181, 102–103. To which Wolfson (2023, 175) glosses, "If the only hope is apocalyptic in nature, then, paradoxically, hope is proportionate to hopelessness … and this would result in a gnostic transmutation of the Jewish ideal of redemption." Is such reckoning not the nerve of Adorno's insistence on, and Rose's call for, mediations? And is such gnostic

The final chapter is indeed where I most heard Wolfson's voice, or his voice as interlocutor. The return to Rose, reading melancholic acquiescence through Kierkegaardian irony, is beautiful and engaging. And earlier works of Wolfson himself step onto the stage (e.g., the luminescent darkness in the Book of Splendor).[17] A re-thinking of melancholy joins Wyschogrod's speaking-not, and the junction between her teacher, Levinas, and Wolfson's observation about the melancholy of the *il y a* (being as there-is) is unparalleled, as is Wolfson's unearthing the sway of the presumption (in, yet beyond, Heidegger) that the *ultimate* event must be that of being, of existence (170). Remarkable too that Wolfson found, in Levinas reading Ernst Bloch's ontology, resources for bringing to light a *different* presumption, not unlike that of Wyschogrod interrogating the idea of the positivity engendered by the double negation. To wit:

> Being, in a certain sense, contains more or better or something other than being; for Bloch, this is the completion of the world, its quality as a home. (170)

These are compelling pages; from the dethroning of a conception of "Being" as what we relate to through "comprehension," to the value of an ethical 'space' understood as the "nonintentional simultaneity enunciated in the response," which is *not* a response of comprehension (172). It is remarkable to see how seamlessly Levinasian themes, like "the saying without a said," as the silence of hyperbolic passivity in giving, join Wolfson's insights. Perhaps we should not be surprised at this, this near-Buddhist Judaism. Impressive, in the final chapter, are the many lights cast on Levinas's thought. It is as if we were reading him anew, illuminated by Kafka, Scholem, and through Kabbalah. Scholem's Jerusalem poems project a wonderfully complex image of messianic

---

transmutation one reason why Susan criticized Jacob's hope that "apocalypticism and Gnosis inaugurate a new form of thinking" (176)?

[17] See, inter alia, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), and *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007).

despair-hope. As such, and following the exploration of Levinas, readers are introduced to the thought of *agunah* (a woman abandoned)—in Benjamin, Rose, Scholem, and in Taubes as well, via Bloch. The move to Judith Butler, in the company of Dylan and Cohen, completes the panorama of the tragi-comic. We have the sense that the multivoiced trajectory comes to rest in its Möbius strip of time and night-vision. The "look" of the river depends on how one has immersed oneself.

This is a vast, almost experimental, sometimes ironic work that speaks, in the first three chapters, through the veils of three women thinkers. Because it is not clear, here or elsewhere, *what a woman philosopher* is supposed to be, the veils are both tributes to and transition-points in what is neither a sociological nor psychological argument. The last chapter ties up threads presented in the Introduction, which might otherwise have seemed eccentric when one ponders the chapters on Taubes and Rose alone. And so the citation from Kafka *en exergue* is borne out: "…in that way I make what is to be written unattainable" but nevertheless intensely moving.

As Wolfson clearly eschews authorial activism, he has given us three interpretive skeins for weaving: Jewish tradition, law, and existence, which comingle even as they unfold separately. All the voices are Wolfson's, of course. And that makes the book a faceted *oeuvre*, complex, and yet deliberately performed. If the author were to respond, 'find your own path through my work,' then we might say that it teaches its own deconstruction of the phantasms of philosophy by one who stands in the pathos of distance, ever conscious of the margins of thought.