

## TAKING LIFE OUT OF NATURE: Jewish Messianic Vitalism and the Problem of Denaturalization

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“Living according to Nature” means actually the same as “living according to Life” – how could you do differently?...Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is only a form of what is dead, and a very rare form.

Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 7

I have set before you life and death: choose life.

Deuteronomy 30:19

**T**he aim of my essay will be to focus on the problem of denaturalization as the main conceptual axis which organizes the crucial difference between *Shem* and *Yafet*, the Jewish and the Greek thought. While the Jewish mode of thinking relies on the affirmation of the denaturalizing process that constitutes the very gist of Exodus, the progressive exit of man out of the house of natural bondage—the Greek paradigm, which, paraphrasing Rosenzweig, spreads from “Ionia to Jena, and beyond,” approaches the idea of man’s maladaptation to nature (*phusis*) with suspicion and appears to be driven by a nostalgic, regressive ideal of renaturalization.

Yet, the issue becomes more complex and the differences more dialectically intertwined when we juxtapose these two attitudes toward denaturalization with two, Jewish and Greek, concepts of life and attempt to translate this relation into the idiom of modern vitalism. The case of Nietzsche is particularly interesting here, for his ultimately modern "philosophy of life" is visibly torn between two irreconcilable perspectives: the tragic and the messianic. While the tragic perspective encapsulates life within the natural cycle of life-towards-death, where two powers, of becoming and perishing, check themselves in a perfect balance—the messianic perspective, operating with the promise of "more life," sports an image of a denaturalized life-against-death, which manages to escape the natural equilibrium and create (I emphasize this word: *create*) a new form of living that no longer obeys the laws of nature.

According to the classical definition of Aristotle, *phusis* is a system of all beings that fall under the inexorable rule of cyclical alternation between *genesis* and *phthora*, generation and corruption; the rule which knows no exception. And while the conception of nature and natural laws will be changing during the intellectual history of the West, one general criterion defining the natural mode of existence will always remain: the idea of "natural necessity" which links birth and death in form of an insoluble knot. Whether as pre-Socratic *phusis* or as scholastic *natura*, nature is always defined in the light of this mysterious ambivalence: "What causes birth tends to cause death too."<sup>1</sup>

This necessitarian "secret" of nature is made absolutely clear in Nietzsche's vision of the eternal return of the same. Nietzsche indeed puts his finger on the natural *transcendentale*, when in *Gay Science* he openly opposes the changeable laws of nature and the unchangeable necessities of nature, and says that we must "beware of saying that there are laws in nature. There are only necessities."<sup>2</sup> It is the same fundamental necessity, as opposed to minor laws, which underlies the

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<sup>1</sup> The best speculative account of the history of the concept of *phusis* is given by Pierre Hadot in his book *The Veil of Isis* where he begins with Heraclitus, goes through Schiller and Nietzsche, and ends with Merleau-Ponty. The main subject of the essay is the "secret of nature" which "loves to hide." See Hadot, *Veil*, 1), i.e. the mysterious bond of inner natural necessities which organize every individual "growth" into a system of becoming and perishing. Hadot thus interprets the famous aphorism of Heraclitus – *phusis kruptesthai philei* – as "what is born tends to disappear" or "what is born wants to die." Hadot, *Veil*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 110.

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vision of life as an inexorable *Sein-zum-Tode*, first in German *Lebensphilosophie*, and then in Heidegger, who will explicitly resume the pre-Socratic notion of *phusis* in his metaphor of *die Erde*, the power of Being responsible for ruling the cyclical movement of beings, emerging from and disappearing into the dark abyss of *Seyn*. This natural *transcendentale* always implies cycle, repetition, immanent self-enclosure, and—last but not least - the guiding role of death which, in Anaximandrian formulation, constitutes the “just measure” of every life, and as such runs the timing of its sequence from birth to decay. It doesn’t matter, therefore, if the post-Nietzschean Deleuze declares nature to be a “lawless” realm of the spontaneous hylozoic generation of beings, because Nietzsche himself had already very soberly set the limits for such a dubious emancipatory enterprise, by laying bare the ultimately necessitarian form of all possible immanence; nature may not have well defined laws, but it nonetheless is governed by necessity.<sup>3</sup>

This transcendental concept of *phusis* designates a paradigmatic point of reference for the whole Western philosophical tradition. But it is also a paradigmatic point of reference for the Jewish critique of this tradition, which they rightly perceive as the very gist of *Hokhmah Yevanit*, “the wisdom of the Greeks”: indeed, as Rosenzweig put it, spreading “from Ionia to Jena.” The fateful infatuation of philosophy with nature becomes a frequent target of many polemical interventions of Jewish modern thinkers who tend to perceive nature as a homeostatic isolated system operating with the economic minimum of energy, where all powers keep themselves in mutual check. For Scholem, Taubes, Benjamin, Adorno, and (last but not least) Harold Bloom—nature is simply “boring”: it is a dullest and least inventive form of minimal existence

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<sup>3</sup> The rest of Nietzsche’s anti-theological diatribe from *Gay Science* goes as follows: “... there is no one who commands, no one who obeys, no one who transgresses. Once you know that there are no purposes, you also now that there is no accident; for only against a world of purpose does the word ‘accident’ have a meaning. *Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life.* The living is only a form of what is dead, and a very rare form. *Let us beware of thinking that the world eternally creates new things...* When will all these shadows of god no longer darken us? When will we have completely de-deified nature? When may we begin to naturalize humanity with a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?” (ibid., my emphasis). Needless to say, this *de-deified* nature, deprived of all features of “creatureliness,” becomes immediately once again *divinized* and turned into a necessitarian goddess who rules everything with iron hand of death; this elevation of death to the only “natural necessity” and its instant sacralization is confirmed by Hadot as one of the most ancient religious views of *phusis* which “loves to cover itself with the veil of death.” Hadot, *Veil*, 7.

which merely “piles life upon life” and allows for no true creation, stifled in advance by the principle of balance and compensation.<sup>4</sup> But they do not criticise nature as “enemies of life” or “priestly vengeful spirits,” as Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Deleuze would like to dismiss them. Quite to the contrary, they criticise nature and praise anti-natural revelation not against, but for the sake of life. For all of them, revelation constitutes a welcome denaturalizing shock which breaks the homeostatic balance of the closed natural system and sets living beings on the move—making thus a much more dynamic use of life, closer to the intent of the initial act of creation. They all depart from the passage from Deuteronomy where God, deceptively simply, says: “I have set before you life and death: choose life”.<sup>5</sup> *Choosing life* means here more than just taking the side life in its opposition to death. It means taking life out of the context where life and death lie bound with each other in the secret bond of *phusis*; it means—taking life out of nature.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The hostility to nature as the least inventive system of beings, deprived of true ethical laws and purpose – just “sitting there,” hopelessly and aimlessly—is such a frequent motif in Jewish writings of all ages, from Mishna to Derrida, that it is impossible to give a full account of this position here. I will just illustrate it by two examples of modern Jewish philosophy, especially concerned with the issue of life, namely: Henri Bergson and Hans Jonas. In their philosophy of biology, they both build a clear opposition between two forces of life: the conservative, self-repeating and inertial system of preservation (which tends towards necessities and laws) and the progressive, innovative force of ongoing creation (which is creation proper, i.e. capable of creating truly new forms, not just forms potentially preexisting). But there is no lofty secret hidden in the former which only sustains the circulation of birth and decay; the mystery now travels on the other side, where the proper *creative evolution* takes place. On this understanding, “nature” as a self-preserving system is nothing but a *tautology*, a boring and not at all mysterious self-evidence of being which, in order to be, must preserve itself in a form of repetition. Hans Jonas says: “The foundation of all order in nature, of any nature at all, lies in the laws of conservation. But these have come to govern because it is only self-conserving reality that conserves itself. This tautology explains the lawfulness of nature as it is given to us: nature itself is already a result of selection, a universal result which then posits rules for further, more specific, and local selections”; Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, 168.

<sup>5</sup> Deut, 30:19.

<sup>6</sup> This is precisely why in *Occidental Eschatology* Jacob Taubes can define revelation as most of all a “reminder of creation,” which throws the human subject out of the rails of his natural slumber, and— accordingly—define nature as the state of forgetfulness of the creative and revolutionary principle of the beginnings. The same motif can be found in Erich Gutkind who in his book *Choose Life* nicely summarizes the discursive atmosphere of the group of the German Jewry in between the wars (Landauer, Buber, Bloch, Benjamin) which decided to redefine “philosophically” the main points of the Hebrew Bible, thus steering away from both the Greek conceptuality and the Rabbinic form of Judaism: “The Jewish revolution restores

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## NIETZSCHE'S MODERNITY

I say that Nietzsche's *Lebensphilosophie* is ultimately modern because it draws on all metaphors of life, operative in the Western modernity, by causing them to clash with one another. What makes Nietzsche paradigmatically modern is precisely this muddled mixture of idioms which reveals *modernitas* as an epoch in transition, an era of a constant *self-overcoming* (*Selbstüberwindung*). In Nietzsche, we can thus see in its clearest form the modern infatuation with nature as the newly recovered divinity of the benevolent balance of powers, which Enlightenment restored to her cult against the capricious and imbalanced God of Christian nominalism—but we can also see an impatience with this system of natural self-regulation, which leaves no room for life's truly artistic inventiveness, by condemning it to the eternal return of the same. Nature, Life in general, written capital L, is for Nietzsche a goddess of the sacred life-cycle, presiding over the constant hecatomb and renewal in the abundance of generation—but it is also a limit, an impossibility of a true creation, in which Nietzsche, as an Artist, locates his vision of a life properly individuated and fulfilled.

Nietzsche's overinvested, self-contradictory love of nature wants nature to deliver what she cannot deliver: *creation instead of generation*. Where Nietzsche fails most, it is precisely in his attempt to substitute generative abundance, where life always copies the same, ever recurring paradigm of birth and decay, for creativity, where something truly new appears, discontinuous with the previous set of conditions. Thus, when he makes nature say in *The Zarathustra* - "And this secret did Life herself tell to me. 'Behold,' she said, 'I am *that which must always overcome itself*'<sup>7</sup> - only apparently makes he a room for an artistic "invention of the other." In fact, what Nietzsche implies is a typically tragic praise of the *untergehen*, the self-sacrificial dying in the right time - for the sake of Life's allegedly creative force (*schaffende Kraft*) of spitting out new beings: "I would rather go under than renounce this one thing: and verily, where there is going-

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the growth, man's never ending transcendence of himself. Revolution and transcendence are very much akin. The equation: transcendence-revolution may restore both terms to their fullest efficacy; it is a mutual reevaluation"; Gutkind, *Choose Life*, 74.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 99

under and falling of leaves, behold, there life sacrifices itself – for power!”<sup>8</sup> Yet, this *schaffende Kraft* and its vital power is nothing but a generative waste, the same terrible idle squander which abhorred Schopenhauer, and no rhetorical twist on the Schopenhauerian diagnosis, performed by Nietzsche, can disguise its meaningless futility and horror.

But Nietzsche himself is often more than aware that he is failing in the contest with his teacher, Schopenhauer, especially when he dreams of life's other, more radically creative possibilities: “To live – he asks dramatically in *Beyond Good and Evil* – is not that just endeavoring to be otherwise than *this* Nature?”<sup>9</sup> Even Nietzsche, the greatest self-professed naturalist of all times, grants himself the messianic *Schwärmerei* of taking life out of nature, of breaking the iron cage of natural necessities – not against life as such, but for life's sake, for augmenting its vital powers. Yet, his freely chosen “Greek” idiom does not allow him to see this clearly; its gravitational force tends towards seeing life as necessarily coextensive with nature only (“*Living according to Nature* means actually the same as *living according to Life* – how could you do differently?”, *ibid.*), and, accordingly, towards seeing every effort of denaturalization, i.e. of taking human existence out of nature, as the act of an ascetic renunciation of life. Either one says Yeah to both powers and necessities of nature (“the power of indifference”, *ibid.*), which makes him a vitalist – or one says No to life in its natural form, which immediately makes him an anti-vitalist, a Thanatic “life-denier,” or, in Nietzschen words, the “greatest enemy of life, the ascetic priest.”

It was precisely against this staple double association of life with nature and denaturalization with life-negating askesis that Jewish thinkers made their greatest critical contribution to the late modern thought. Absolutely pioneering in this respect is the work of Walter Benjamin, who openly criticized German followers of Nietzsche, coming under the heading of *Lebensphilosophie* for their misconception of life and its creative powers. Benjamin's critique of Dilthey, constituting one of the leading motifs of *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, as well as his early essay “Critique of Violence,” reproaches him for depicting “the creative force of history” (*die Schaffende Kraft der Geschichte*) as nothing else than

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 7.

“the generative force of nature,” and thus for deepening the Nietzschean confusion which obfuscates this essential distinction. In championing a different, less naturalistic concept of life, Benjamin draws on the Hebrew sources and introduces a notion alternative to that of nature, namely “creatureliness” (*Kreatürlichkeit*) as a category denoting a special condition of a created, not just generated, life. Contrary to the Greek understanding of *phusis* as the self-regulating totality of “becoming and disappearing,” creatureliness is a wider category that allows to speculate about life outside the confines of the restraining totality nature and under a new light of revelation. But it also allows to rethink the position of a denaturalized human being, conceived no longer as an “outcast of nature,” a “life-denying” being diminished in natural vitality, but rather as, in Benjamin’s words, *ein Fürsprecher der Kreatur*, a “spokesman of creation,” representing for the whole of the living a possibility of another – better, freer, blessed - life.<sup>10</sup> A life according not to the principle of natural generation, but a life according to the principle of creation: the double bind of the creaturely existence, destined not just to be created, but also - to create.

Perhaps, the best way to approach this creaturely concept of life, which struggles against the confines of mere *physicality* and tries to emancipate life from the naturalistic biologism, is to refer to one of the more enigmatic but also potentially very fertile passages in Derrida, who in his commentary on Benjamin’s essay “Critique of Violence,” defines it as follows:

This critique of vitalism or biologism... – says Derrida in “Force of Law” a propos Benjamin’s vehement rejection of German *Lebensphilosophie* – here proceeds like the awakening of a Judaic tradition. And it does so in the name of life, of the most living of life, of the value of life that is worth more than life (pure and simple, if such exist and that one could call natural and biological), but that is worth more than life because it is life itself, insofar as life prefers itself. *It is life beyond life, life against life, but always in life and for life.*<sup>11</sup>

This highly dialectical notion of life, struggling against its merely natural manifestation, but always for the sake of its redeemed, intensified form, can

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<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, “Der Erzähler. Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows,” 463.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 289; my emphasis.

become a motto to my reflections here. Using Nietzsche's paradigmatically modern philosophy as the battlefield of two contradictory visions of life, I would like to propose the notion of the *messianic vitalism* which confirms the process of denaturalization as a positive possibility of "life-enhancement" – against the Greek prejudice, which insists on perceiving denaturalization as the "ascetic" moment of life-negation. In doing so, I will focus on the latest follower of the Benjaminian line, Harold Bloom. In *The Book of J*, Bloom's highly original interpretation of the earliest texts of the Hebrew Bible, he also offers an intriguing – Jewish and psychoanalytic at the same time – reading of Nietzsche. In Bloom's critique, Nietzsche comes out as a typically modern thinker: self-contradictory, baffled, reluctant, and altogether unaware, but still an *ally* of the denaturalized creaturely life which lives in the state of deviation – Bloom says: *clinamen* – from everything natural.<sup>12</sup>

### EXODUS FROM TRAGEDY

A more detailed discussion of Nietzsche is inevitable here, mainly for the reason that Bloom, although a self-declared Jewish thinker, has blinded his sight by sticking to Nietzschean arguments for much too long. For a very long time, remaining both a Jew and a vitalist simultaneously appeared to Bloom as impossible as squaring the circle: while reading his middle period works (as *Anxiety of Influence*, *Map of Misreading*, or *Kabbalah and Criticism*) we can see how he palpably struggles to keep both these strains of thought within one theory and how he nonetheless fails every time. It is only later, in the eighties, that Bloom begins to work on the different, "early Hebrew" notion of vitalism that will finally say farewell to the Nietzschean concept of life based solely on natural power – yet, the retrospective projection we propose here is not completely unjustified. Bloom's growing impatience with Nietzsche, which

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<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, both a precursor and an antagonist, figures in all theoretical writings of Harold Bloom, but the most spectacular appropriation of his thought appears in *The Book of J*, where Bloom takes up the Nietzschean notion of "God as an artist" and projects it on the early Hebrew image of divinity. It is also in this book where Bloom offers his interpretation of the Jewish blessing, *l'chaim*, as "the promise of more life"; Bloom, *The Book of J*, 2.

culminates in “Freud and Beyond,” the famous essay from *Ruin the Sacred Truths!*, is mainly due to the *aporias* created by his own antithetical criticism that could not be resolved on the ground of purely Nietzschean vitalism. Thus, although in *The Anxiety of Influence* Bloom continues to use Nietzsche’s distinction of active and passive sin, coined by him in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he already implicitly disagrees with him and perceives “the Semitic sin” as a refined and in consequence far more militant version of the agonistic stance in which man is capable of expressing his “vital powers”. In one of the most controversial fragments of *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche proposes to distinguish the Greek wisdom on life against the Jewish unwisdom on life in the following way:

The legend of Prometheus is indigenous to the entire community of Aryan races and attests to their prevailing talent for profound and tragic vision. In fact, it is not improbable that this myth has the same characteristic importance for the Aryan mind as the myth of the Fall has for the Semitic, and that the two myths are related as brother and sister... Man’s highest good must be bought with a crime and paid by the flood of grief and suffering which the offended divinities visit upon the human race in its noble ambition. An austere notion, this, which by the dignity it confers on crime presents a strange contrast to the Semitic myth of the Fall – a myth that exhibits curiosity, deception, suggestibility, concupiscence, in short a whole series of principally feminine frailties, as the root of all evil. What distinguishes the Aryan conception is an exalted notion of active sin as the properly Promethean virtue... The Aryan nations assign to crime the male, the Semites to sin the female gender; and it is quite consistent with these nations that the original act of *hubris* should be attributed to a man, original sin to a woman.<sup>13</sup>

Putting aside all the sexist and anti-Semitic innuendos, this passage tells us about two kinds of primal sin that begin the human odyssey. The Greek version of disobedience differs from the Jewish one in its tragic clarity: gods were cheated, gods want their revenge, and humans have to suffer either way, with or without the stolen fire. Whereas the Hebrew “passive sin” is “reactive” in creating a halo of mysterious, no longer conscious anxiety: the contradicted

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<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 63-4.

God, far from being the transparent agent of Greek tragedy, becomes internalized as a figure of a pressing moral commandment. Greek manliness, therefore, consists in brave fidelity to Prometheus: given the chance to repeat his sin, Aryans would have done it again and would bravely accept the fateful necessity of punishment. While Semitic cowardice lies in the repentance which their passive, weak sin had created: if only they could, Jews would have piously revoked their trespass, but would also plead, in a feminine way, for the alleviation of the punishing verdict.

This is hardly an alliance for Harold Bloom. Everything Bloom tells us in *The Book of J*, which constitutes his highly original reading of the earliest texts of the Hebrew Bible, blandly contradicts Nietzsche's flippant dismissal of the non-Aryan, female passivity of "Jewish sin." In Bloom's account (which closely mirrors the traditional midrashic approach, very far removed from the Paulian-Augustinian insinuation into this biblical story an original sin of mankind) it isn't even a *sin*: first, it is a childish misbehavior of defiance, which slowly and gradually matures into an agonistic attitude that finally surpasses everything the Greek *hubris* ever produced. Such mature agonistic attitude is best represented by the figure of Jacob, Bloom's favorite Hebrew hero. Jacob's determination to cheat his own natural fate, which destined him to be only the second son, forms an image of a high-willed pride preparing itself to crush the forces of destiny, and thus to *get out* of the tragic condition, this Greek predicament of ultimate restriction, which builds a sublime halo around nature's bare necessities. The Greek active sin may therefore consist in triggering the tragic course, in which the singular outburst of life clashes with its inevitable limitation, yet the Hebrew sin aims at something else: it may consent to diminish the eruption of vitality by a sense of guilt and anxiety, created by the supernatural superego, but always in order *to cross a limit*, and to "pass forth." The Greek sin inaugurates the tragic scene where the same drama is played over and over again: the unrepressed life meets its inevitable doom in the blind, all-leveling verdict of *Ananke*. Whenever it says Yes to life, it is always in the same, repeatable form: birth, hubris, retaliation of fate; hence the Greek, "manly" *Ja-Sagen* lies in its power of endurance, in accepting the tragic predicament of life which inevitably closes itself in the naturalistic circle of *genesis* and *phthora*, becoming and corruption. Whereas the Jewish sin internalizes punishment, saying No to life in its immediate natural

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form, and thus changes the idea of life itself, by producing a whole new sphere of denaturalized possibilities Nietzsche himself - although later, in *The Genealogy of Morals* - calls very aptly “an abundance of tender Yeses”:

One already understands me: this ascetic priest, this apparent enemy of life, this denier - precisely he belongs to the altogether great conserving and Yes-creating forces of life... The No he says to life, his No, brings to light, as if by magic, an *abundance of tender Yeses*; yes indeed, even when he wounds himself, this master of destruction, of self-destruction - *it is henceforth the wound itself that compels him to live.*<sup>14</sup>

### VITALITY OF TENDER YESES

“The wound that compels him to live” is, as Nietzsche rather helplessly attests, the most “striking effect,” which, instead of issuing in one decisive No thrown against the whole world of the living, produces the halo of mysterious “tender Yeses.” It is a trauma, which breaks the cycle of natural existence, but it is not purely destructive or deadening; to the contrary, its repressiveness directed against natural form of life brings a paradoxical intensification of life which only then becomes truly “compelling”: both exciting and imperative. This notion of enlivening and revelatory trauma (see again Taubes on the traumatic aspects of

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<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 120-21; my emphasis. This salient difference between *Shem* and *Yaphet* has been well analyzed by Michael Walzer in *Exodus and Revolution* where he compares the notion of bondage in Hebrew and Greek thought. Greek mentality is tragic in a sense that it sees no escape from the bondage of fate and the only liberating feeling comes with kathartic recognition of this ultimate truth. Hebrews, on the other hand, created a paradigm of liberation which leads out of the house of bondage and thus forms a basic narrative of all revolutionary upheavals: “God’s promise - says Walzer - generates a sense of possibility: *the world is not all Egypt*. Without that sense of possibility, oppression would be experienced as an inescapable condition, a matter of personal or collective bad luck, a stroke of fate... Anger and hope, not resignation, are the appropriate responses to the Egyptian house of bondage.” Walzer contrasts the story of Exodus with Eurypides’ *Women of Troy* which “describes a ‘going out’ that leads to slavery rather than to freedom”: “Eurypides - he says - makes no moral judgment; at least, he makes no judgment of the slavery into which the women are led. The feeling that he means to evoke is pity, not anger or indignation”; Walzer, “Exodus and Revolution,” 83-84; my emphasis.

Jewish revelation!) requires a substantial revision of Nietzsche's notion of vitalism, but also a serious modification of Freud's necessitarian economy of drives: the two sources Bloom wrestles with but still "props himself up on" in *The Anxiety of Influence*. If we are to believe that *askesis* and vitalism, negation and affirmation, may go hand in hand in order to create a new, denaturalized notion of life – the life called by Derrida *life beyond life, life against life, but always in life and for life*, strongly associated by him with the Judaic tradition – we have to cross beyond Nietzsche and Freud or, at least, submit them to powerful non-dogmatic misreadings.

For *unlike* Nietzsche, who divides powers into active and reactive and calls only the former life-enhancing, Bloom does not hesitate to see more life where Nietzsche would see merely passivity of decadence. With a sole exception, however, and this exception is very significant for Bloom's implicit revision. In *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche cannot but reluctantly admire the resoluteness with which the Hebrew priests turned the active power onto itself in order to *create*, as true artists indeed, consciousness and conscience:

Whatever else has been done to damage the powerful and great of this earth – writes Nietzsche – seems trivial compared with what the Jews had done, that priestly people who succeeded in avenging themselves on their enemies and oppressors by radically inverting all their values, that is, by an act of the most spiritual vengeance. This was the strategy entirely appropriate to a priestly people in whom vindictiveness had gone most deeply underground... It [the ascetic ideal] signifies, let us have a courage to face it, a will to nothingness, a revulsion from life, a rebellion against the principal conditions of living. And yet, despite everything, it is and remains a *will*.<sup>15</sup>

Bloom's revision begins with dialectical completion of Nietzsche's ambivalent and aporetic fascination with this strange kind of will which, "despite everything"

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<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 299. And although *The Genealogy of Morals* is peppered with unkind remarks about Jewish rancor which managed to overthrow the natural hierarchy of beauty and health, it is done in a "noble" spirit, i.e. with what the sublime Greeks used to call "agonistic respect" for a major enemy. In the conclusion of his essay Nietzsche says: "The Old Testament is another story. I have the highest respect for that book. I find in it great men, a heroic landscape, and one the rarest things on earth, the naivete of a strong heart. What is more, I find a *people*" (ibid., 281).

he believes about health, power, and beauty, stubbornly remains what it is: forceful, high-willed, and in its distinctive wish to create “something truly new” (ibid.) boldly oblivious to natural constraints of health and sickness. Nietzsche’s genealogical rhetoric is unstable and clearly demands such completion: stuck with his dogmatic naturalism, Nietzsche cannot find categories that would descriptively follow his inexplicable attraction to this weird, non-natural kind of will that refuses to say Yes to the circular logic of *phusis*, “the principal conditions of living.” It should be nothing but “sick” and “morbid,” yet, at the same time, it somehow strangely *transcends* the naturalistic opposition of sickness and health:

But what about the sources of man’s morbidity? – asks Nietzsche in one of the most hesitant passages in *Genealogy*. – For certainly man is sicker, less secure, less stable, less firmly anchored than any other animal; he is the *sick* animal. But has he not also been more daring, more defiant, more inventive than all other animals together? – man, the great experimenter on himself, eternally unsatisfied, vying with gods, the beasts, and with nature for final supremacy; man, unconquered to this day, still unrealized, so agitated by his own teeming energy that his future digs like spurs into the flesh of every present moment...<sup>16</sup>

In Bloom’s interpretation, Freud’s notion of the superego derives precisely from the same indeterminacy between the active and the reactive, the same ambivalence of sickness and health, life and death, when perceived from the naturalistic point of view which we try to abandon here. On the surface it might seem that it simply uses life against life in order to reach a self-cancelling effect; yet, in fact, the superego uses life in order to achieve a *different kind of life*, not the one associated with the id’s spontaneous yet general *demands*, but the one enriched by the higher idea of *will*, teeming with future-oriented, proleptic energy and its infinite, singularized *desire*. This is why Bloom in *The Book of J* bases his “psychology of Yahweh” and his relentless vitalism not on the Nietzschean id but on the early Freudian paradigm of superego: “And it is precisely here, in one of the greatest ironies, Freud is J’s descendant and is

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<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 257.

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haunted by J's Yahweh in the figure of Superego... the personality of Yahweh is one with the daemonic intensity of the Superego."<sup>17</sup>

This is precisely the gist of this *different* kind of vitalism that is offered by Bloom's misprision of the Book of J. Renouncing one's spontaneous needs for the sake of higher will is not exactly the Nietzschean version of crippling morality in which one abandons one's desires for the sake of obedience to norms. Superego appears here not as a Thanatic exercise of reactivity and ascetic mortification, but as a manifestation of life that has traveled – or, in Jacob's way, "passed forth" – far beyond the barbarian vitality of the Nietzschean blond beasts. Vitality, therefore, may also lie in the power of repression, just as Jacob's high-willed vitality lies in his lameness which signifies the cost of "mere life" – and the vitality of his descendants lies in the way they work hard to model the chaotic realm of their natural wants (*yezer* being the Hebrew equivalent of the yet untransformed id), as symbolized by the loss of their foreskins, the curtailment of the primitive phallic power. It would seem, therefore, that once we shift from Nietzsche and his fascination with barbarian, naturalistic liveliness to early Hebrew vitalism with its "new version of the id," the paradox of a denaturalized life, which troubled Bloom's writings in the beginning, can be, at least partly, resolved. The simple Yes of the Nietzschean *Ja-Sagen* to the "physical" cycle of birth and death, shot through the prohibition to participate in the repetitive "ring of being," does not produce an equally simple negating effect; rather, it dialectically dissolves into a subtler halo of "tender Yeses." It is, therefore, not life itself, which gets negated, but only its natural, ring-like, hopelessly cyclical manifestation that binds its energy in a deadening compulsive repetition of *phusis*, the very model of the Freudian *Wiederholungszwang*. It is not life itself which is "damned" or "wicked", but merely this mechanical form of the eternal return of the same that constitutes the rhythm of nature.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bloom, *The Book of J*, 305-306.

<sup>18</sup> This is precisely why Karl Löwith, in his *Meaning in History*, insists on an alternative translation of Psalm 12, 9 which contains the word "ring"; instead of rendering it as "On every side the wicked roam" (as in JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh) he proposes "The wicked move around in a circle" in order to emphasize the "futility and indignity" of such movement. It is

And this abundance of tender affirmations is precisely the goal of Bloom's antithetical vitalism, drawn "out of the sources of Hebraism."<sup>19</sup> Bloom deliberately collates two ideals Nietzsche himself kept apart – the ascetic and the antithetical, knowing well that this separation is the very source of Nietzsche's insoluble antinomies. In the following fragment from *Kabbalah and Criticism*, which looks deceptively as a simple borrowing from Nietzsche, Bloom bridges this gap in one, seemingly innocuous maneuver:

The ascetic ideal had kept man from nihilism, saving the will but at the expense of guilt, a guilt involving hatred of common humanity (with all natural pleasure). For the ascetic ideal is an interpretation, one that in turn inspires a change in the process of willing. This change signifies 'a will to nothingness, a revulsion from life,' *yet still a purposefulness. Life thus uses asceticism in a struggle against death.* Nietzsche, magnificently contrapuntal, attains a triumph in antithetical thought by declaring that to be ascetic is thus to be life-affirming.<sup>20</sup>

What Bloom calls here Nietzsche's magnificent contrapuntality, allowing him to jump in one rhetorical move from the ascetic to the antithetical ideal, is, in fact, nothing more than Nietzsche's major contradiction he himself could not resolve, getting stuck, rather unproductively, with the traditional vitalistic notion of life as "natural life" (with all its natural, instinctual pleasures). The idea that "life uses asceticism in a struggle against death" and that "to be ascetic is to be life-affirming" is Bloom's (or, simply Jewish), but not Nietzsche's who, despite his inconsequential admiration for Hebrew priests, would always tend to maintain that asceticism is the struggle of death against life, even to the detriment of his

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also important here that the Hebrew word for *teva*, "nature" shares the same root as the word "ring" - *taba'at*.

<sup>19</sup> If not exactly the later, Talmudic Judaism, which might have some problems with such concept of unbridled vitality; *vide* Levinas! Yet, the fascinating topic of the relation between these two strains of Jewish thought – messianic vitalism, which invests in the "blessing of more life," and ethical Judaism, which concentrates on the teaching of the Law – goes beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say, that I don't find this relation as antagonistic as it may seem *prima facie*; messianic vitalism, as I try to show it here, does not reject Law; it merely does not use it as an ascetic device, but rather as a "ruse of life" which in the end turns out to be "life-affirming."

<sup>20</sup> Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism*, 51-52; my emphasis.

own theory. But *when askesis becomes antithesis*, the image of life torn between natural instincts and the artificial superegoic demands, suddenly gains clarity: what initially, i.e. in the Greek eyes, appeared as an oppression of natural life by the constraints of morals, turns into a Jewish vision of liberation of life from the oppressive bondage of nature. It is precisely this radical *Gestaltswitch* of perspectives that allows Bloom to transform Nietzsche's incoherent notion of the ascetic ideal into an antithetical life-affirming vehicle of restless "passing forth," which produces "the wish to be elsewhere" – rather in the desert than in the fake fullness of *phusis* – the *exodic* desire of displacement. From the point of view of this liberated "more life," which initiated a "change in the process of willing," the natural existence, which lacks this sort of vitalistic inventiveness, seems nothing more than just a contemptible "mere life," unworthy of any nostalgic glorification.

### THE AGON WITH THE VITAL ORDER: REVISION OF FREUD

But this revision of Nietzsche cannot be complete without a thorough misreading of Freud. Since in his interpretation of the Book of J, Bloom relies heavily on Freudian notions (like superego), he must also twist Freud's metapsychology, so it fits better his revisionistic attempt to conceptualize the Jewish version of vitalism.

It is thus clear from the start that the concept of "more life" Bloom has in mind differs fundamentally from what Freud in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* calls "the vital order," i.e. the most basic natural system of the instincts of self-preservation; it appears much closer to the originally indeterminate and anarchic energy of libido, which cannot be contained within a well-defined, homeostatic system of needs and gratifications.<sup>21</sup> From Freud's speculation in *Three Essays* follows that libido, i.e. human sexuality, precisely because of its indeterminacy, is always in danger of falling under the rule of the better organized vital order – but, at the same time, it can also use its original indefiniteness to free itself from the latter's mechanical functionality. Human

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<sup>21</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

sexual drive may thus be inchoate, premature and deficient when compared to well-determined self-preservatory instincts – yet, this can also be seen as its advantage.

The story told by Freud in *Three Essays* goes as follows. In the first stage of development, libido has to learn from the better formed self-preservatory instincts and *lean on* (*anaclisis*, *Anlehnung*) on their vital functions, like feeding or defecating, to use their objects for autoerotic purposes. Soon, however, this seemingly subservient “propping” turns into “wrestling,” and *anaclisis* takes on the form of *agon*. In one of his best pieces, “Wrestling Sigmund” from *Breaking of the Vessels*, Bloom boldly juxtaposes the story of wrestling Jacob from the biblical writer J with Freud’s account of the beginning of human sexuality, thus giving a peculiar agonistic twist to the Freudian notion of *Anlehnung*. The picture that emerges out of the ingenious interference of two images – Jacob wrestling with the Angel of Death and human infant sucking maternal breast – presents human sexuality as a drive that fights with the vital order in refusing to be imprisoned by its mere natural functionality, the inexorable homeostasis of *phusis*. Using our concepts, we could say that here life fights against life, or, to be more precise, that human sexuality, forming the daring figure of “more life,” opposes the system of self-preservation, which forms a humble figure of “mere life.” It may thus seem that “wrestling a divine angel is rather a contrast to sucking one’s mother breast, and achieving the name Israel is pretty unrelated to the inauguration of the sexual drive,”<sup>22</sup> yet, Bloom insists, these two narratives tell the same story:

*All human sexuality is tropological, whereas we all of us desperately need and long for it to be literal... As Laplanche says, expounding Freud: ‘Sexuality in its entirety is in the slight deviation, the clinamen from the function.’ Or as I would phrase it, our sexuality is in its very origins a misprision, a strong misreading, on the infant’s part, of the vital order... I call Freud... ‘Wrestling Sigmund,’ because again he is a poet of Sublime agon, here an agon between sexuality and the vital order. Our sexuality is like Jacob, and the vital order is like that among the Elohim with whom our wily and heroic ancestor wrestled, until he had won the great name of Israel. Sexuality and Jacob triumph, but at the terrible expense of a crippling. All our lives long we search in vain, unknowingly, for the lost object, when even that object was a*

<sup>22</sup> Bloom, *The Breaking of the Vessels*, 69-70.

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*clinamen* away from the true aim. And yet we search incessantly, do experience satisfactions, however marginal, and win our real if limited triumph over the vital order. Like Jacob, we keep passing Peniel, limping on our hips.<sup>23</sup>

Bloom offers here a Jewish version of sublimation which differs considerably from the teachings of "divine Plato" (as Freud calls him in the introduction to *Three Essays*). Instead of a winged Eros that flies above its abandoned, material objects to become unencumbered and purely spiritual, we get an image of an impaired, limping hero who managed to detach himself from the lethal embrace with the vital order and thus restlessly "passes forth," though severely damaged in his natural vitality. Instead of a Spirit which rises above matter in a triumphant ascension towards the supranatural sun, we see an anxious quester, walking through a horizontal desert away from the Egypt of nature, but always "limping," always endangered by the fall into the snares of the "vital order."

In this version of sublimating antithesis, nature is not so easily abandoned. The Exodus from nature, from the seduction of "propping" (*Anlehnung*) on the certainties of the vital order, is a hard won victory that agrees with the fundamental dissatisfaction of the sexual drive: in not being able to find its true object (which, in fact, does not exist), it transforms everything natural into something figurative, i.e. something else that it actually is, an eternally vague object of desire (it is thus also a moment of the birth of language). *Anaclisis*, therefore, is a critical phase both of the greatest danger and the greatest chance: it is an agon which may be either won or lost. It may either bow down the

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<sup>23</sup> In *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* Laplanche distinguishes very clearly between *drive* and *function*: "*function, need, and instinct* characterize generally the vital register of self-preservation in opposition to the sexual register"; Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 16. "Thus the sexual object is not identical to the object of the function, but is displaced in relation to it; they are in a relation of essential *contiguity* which leads us to slide almost indifferently from one to the other, from the milk to the breast as its symbol" (ibid., 20). And further: "Sexuality in its entirety is in the slight deviation, the *clinamen* from the function. It is in the *clinamen* insofar as the latter results in an autoerotic internalization" (ibid., 22). The drive "mimics, displaces, and *denatures the instinct*" (ibid., 22; my emphasis). This is why, in the end, "The whole of sexuality, or at least the whole of infantile sexuality, *ends up by becoming perversion*" (ibid., 23; my emphasis). "Now sexuality, in its entirety, in the human infant, lies in a movement which *deflects* the instinct, *metaphorizes* its aim, *displaces* and *internalizes* its object, and concentrates its source on what is ultimately a minimal zone, the erotogenic zone" (ibid., 23; my emphasis).

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sexual drive and turn it into a quasi-natural force imitating animal instincts, condemned to their naturalistic model of homeostasis and “health” (“to move around in a circle”) – or, to the contrary, surrender the vital order to libido and allow vital instincts to be “troped” beyond its boringly “healthy” and literal mere functionality into the realm of more tender and more transgressive Yeses. The drive may thus either fall into embrace with nature, or, due to the superegoic repression, give up on its early fixations, renounce all (dis)satisfactions offered by natural objects, and expand into a figurative force, creating a desire for meaning in the domain where previously there was nothing but pure, senseless functionality.

This agonistic Eros, therefore, is not just an instinct of life as opposed to the instinct of death, closed within the repetitive circle of *phusis*, but a power of figuration wrestling both with life and death as a cycle of mere functions. It is no longer sexuality forced to conform with the natural need of self-preservation, but an *Erros*, eros and error combined: an energy of primordial *libido* that regains its original “erring” indeterminacy, which now serves not as its default but as its main asset and advantage. For, once it detaches itself from the vital order, it immediately begins to *err*: it crosses the limits of the functional system of *phusis* and wanders out from the Egypt of nature into the desert of open possibilities. *Erros* refuses to be closed within boredom of natural life, which just “piles life upon life,” unable by itself to produce a one grain of meaning, but, unlike in the more traditional, Greek influenced teaching on sublimation and askesis, it does not reject life altogether. Quite to the contrary, instead of negating life, it regains its original anarchic libidinal form and, by liberating it from the confines of natural repetition, transforms life into an exciting “quest romance” of continuous “crossing” and “passing forth” that began with the most paradigmatic of all *Shem* heroes, Jacob at Penuel.

*Erros*, therefore, is precisely what Derrida calls “the most living in life itself” that cannot be confused with the natural, “physical” and functional, appearance of “mere life.” It denounces *phusis* as a primordial site of the living, by exposing it as life’s fallen, secondary manifestation, from which life as such can be saved: rescued from the creaturely fall, where it is forced to repeat the functional and necessitarian path of “mere life,” and elevated to the messianic and creative level of “more life.” And if I am right in my interpretation of Bloom’s messianic

vitalism, this redemption can only be anticipated in the denaturalized vitality of human being, who, as such, becomes the true *Fürsprecher der Kreatur*: the bearer of hope for all creaturely existence, who "chooses life" by taking it out from the natural ambivalence of "life-and-death."

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