

Writing the world



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Kitty Millet, *Kabbalah and Literature*. London, New York & Delhi: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. ISBN 978-15-013-5970-5. 272 pp.

This book is not just about Kabbalah – it is Kabbalah. And it is not just about literature – it is literature. It is a piece of modern kabbalistic literature which experiments with the most fundamental insight of *Sefer ha Zohar*, the first kabbalistic treatise of Moses de Leon, that the world was created by the act of writing. Not by the spoken word and not through the emanation of light, but by the first ‘engraving’, the written sign: ‘In the beginning – when the will of the King began to take effect, he engraved signs into the heavenly sphere that surrounded him’ (Scholem & de Leon 1963, 3). While commenting on this fragment, Gershom Scholem claimed that the kabbalistic ‘transforming view’, announcing a break-through in the conception of a new non-Neoplatonic metaphysics, amounts to the intuition that ‘all worlds are nothing more than “names inscribed” on the scroll of God’s essence’ (the original German is even more striking in the use of the scriptural metaphor: ‘Namen, die auf dem *Papier* von Gottes Wesen *aufgezeichnet* werden’) (Biale 1985, 85). No longer a living presence or voice, God retreats and empties himself into primal ‘engraved signs’ or the series of ‘names recorded’ and, in this manner, creates the first

transcendental code: while He writes the world, we live in the world as His literary creation.

This is the kabbalistic metaphysics of writing which Kitty Millet embraces in her daring and innovative book. Following Scholem’s precepts, it ‘frames kabbalah and literature in relation to three concerns: 1) the implications of a link between kabbalah and literature generally; 2) the identification of how literature acts historically in relation to the concept of mimesis; and 3) the impact of Gershom Scholem’s construction of kabbalah as a “metaphysics” in modernity so that the book’s nine chapters map two main trends, Jewish messianism, and letter phenomenology, in their transformation of literary ontology’ (Millet 2024, 3). It is the latter point which is of the utmost importance. Owing to the kabbalistic influence on the modern conception of writing, ‘literature too receives a new dimension, a depth that extends into another world: it no longer reduces to mimetic representations of phenomena’ (ibid.), but penetrates to the very core of creation itself. Literature no longer just depicts the world, but insinuates itself into the process of writing the world: it joins the sacred *creatio continua*, even if now continued by secular means or what Millet, after David Biale, calls a ‘secular kabbalah’, manifesting itself in the works of writers as disparate as Heine, Borges, Kafka, Schulz, Benjamin, Auerbach, Atlan, Celan, Tokarczuk,

and Mulisch' (ibid.). These writers, as different as they may be, have one thing in common: they experiment with a new *ontology of literature* which was made possible by 'the introduction of kabbalistic content' (ibid.).

One of these transformative contents is 'letter phenomenology': Millet's coinage, which connects Scholem's two intuitions – that kabbalistic metaphysics is one of writing or, as we could say today, of coding on the basis of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and that the resulting 'structures of being' are phenomenal entities which derive from the noumenal bedrock of the combination of letters. This linguistic mysticism, the roots of which can be found already in the talmudic master, Rabbi Akiva, and which later on was developed by the kabbalistic school of Abraham Abulafia, produced a whole set of theurgic practices that attempted to go beyond the phenomenal reality into the noumenal process of writing-coding the world. According to Kitty Millet, modern literature conceived as a 'secular kabbalah' treads in the bold footsteps of the theurgic kabbalists, who wanted to join the enterprise of world-making. For modern kabbalah-influenced writers, literary *poiesis* is not just a creation of a mimetic reality which mirrors the phenomenal one, but begins to participate in writing and re-writing reality itself: 'When kabbalistic patterns and processes substitute for mimesis' phenomenal registers, literature exhibits wholly new objects, suggests texts, words, letters, as phenomena without phenomenal footprints in the faculties, and produces *new creation*' (ibid., 10). This new creation, therefore, is not just a work of fiction that imagines wholly new objects and worlds as opposed to the fixed reality. Its break with the mimetic function is not just a flight of fancy. The new creation points rather to the dynamic possibility inherent in the noumenal depths of being, which Abulafia called 'absolute objects' (thus anticipating the Kantian thing in itself): the real world is as written as the fictional one.

In consequence, the boundary between the real and the fictional becomes blurred: 'ontology of literature' becomes ontology *tout court*. 'If creation occurs and continues because of the stimulus of reading and writing, the kabbalistic command to "write one's own Torah" implies that human "works of art" are imbricated in the work of creation too' (ibid., 12).

Having explained her innovative take on 'literary ontology', Millet then implements it in the series of brilliant interpretations of Jacob Frank (himself quite a captivating writer), Olga Tokarczuk (Millet treats her *Books of Jacob* as an example of the kabbalistic literary theurgy), Heinrich Heine, Franz Kafka, Bruno Schulz, Jorge Luis Borges and Harry Mulisch. Each of them writes his or her own Torah, that is, tries to change the course of the world, by moulding it through the invention of new 'absolute objects' that do not imitate anything existing so far: new messianic goals for history and new visions of human freedom which is now reconceived as a power to create reality. Modern literature as the 'secular kabbalah', therefore, takes over the divine role after God's retreat from the world, which the Lurianic kabbalah calls *tsimtsum*: 'if God exists within the letters of Torah, then, when God recedes, the letters extend into the cosmos, writing existence along the way' (ibid., 229). The writers no longer engage in mimetic realism, but become active agents of messianic transformation which helps the world to come closer to its redemptive *tikkun*. ■

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