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Vivian Liska

Stéphane Mosès' Hope

Stéphane Mosès was one of the pioneers of what became German-Jewish Studies. He was the first and unforgettable head of the German department at the Hebrew University and played a major role in the reconstruction of Jewish intellectual life in France after the Shoah. Beyond his major participation in the establishment of such scholarly frameworks, he indelibly contributed to shaping the contours, premises, and above all the defining questions of modern Jewish thought. The title of Mosès' seminal essay on Jewish modernity is itself framed as a question: "Is the thread of tradition broken?" (*Le fil de la tradition est-il rompu?*).¹ This question, which subtends most of his writings, is reformulated with more precision in the essay itself: "Does the Jewish tradition still have any relevance (*une actualité*) in the modern world?" (107)

The interrogative form of the title is as significant as the name of the journal in which the essay first appeared: *Revue des Deux Mondes* (literally, the *Two Worlds Review*). Mosès frontally addresses the interstices and tensions between two worlds: Jewish tradition and European modernity. His close and insightful readings of literary and philosophical texts rarely end in closure. Mosès perceived these open questions inviting infinite interpretations as symptomatic not merely of the impossibility of attaining conclusive answers, but of the fundamental contribution of Jewish tradition to modernist literature and thought. The essay "Is the thread of tradition broken?" is a paradigmatic example of Mosès' art of argumentation, and of his conviction that deep insights can be gained even as the questions he asked remain unresolved. He thereby performs what he describes as both the substance of the Jewish contribution to modernity and the dynamic that keeps this tradition alive.

Mosès draws the title of his essay from Hannah Arendt, a figure Mosès treats with more scepticism and distance than the other German-Jewish thinkers he discusses. In Arendt's

¹ Stéphane Mosès, "Le fil de la tradition est-il rompu?," *Revue des deux mondes* (April 2002): 102-114. Parts of this essay have been translated as "Normative Modernity and Critical Modernity" in Sarah Hammerschlag (ed.) *Modern French Jewish Thought: Writings on Religion and Politics*, Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018, 245-254. Essential passages quoted here have not been translated. The text is therefore quoted from the original French. All the references in the text refer to the French original. The translations are mine.

text, the sentence lacks a question mark; it is an apodictic statement. Viewing the Jewish tradition largely as a quasi-exotic remnant lacking significant ethical or political actuality, Arendt indeed considers that the rupture of tradition has been consummated in modernity, which she thus explores in terms of its potential for “new beginnings.” The question mark Mosès appends to Arendt’s statement can be read as a challenge—both to the certainty of her declaration and to the desirability of her diagnosis. Mosès’ transformation of her affirmation into a question can be read as an expression of apprehension: Is the tradition truly irretrievably lost, or is there hope for its retrieval? And if there is hope, where is it to be found?

In offering a typology of Jewish approaches to modernity, “Le fil de la tradition est-il rompu?” distinguishes between two ways twentieth century thinkers related to the Jewish tradition: “normative” and “critical” modernity. Mosès speaks of a “normative modernity” to describe thinkers such as Herman Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, and Emmanuel Levinas who (in opposition to assimilationist views and against the positivism of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*) preserved the contents, teachings and authority of the ancient Jewish scriptures, and regarded those teachings as truths even as they are reinterpreted and translated into a language appropriate for the modern world. Mosès approves not only of their aim to preserve the tradition but also of their attempt to draw out the universal and eternal validity of the ancient teachings in modern times.

He contrasts their work to the “critical modernity” of writers ranging from Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin to the German-language postwar poet Paul Celan and the French neo-mystical writer Edmond Jabès. For these figures, the contents of the Jewish tradition have lost their validity. All that remains “in a world without God” (106) are mere scattered remnants—“textual fragments, categories of thought, modes of argumentation and sensibility” (106)—that can be retained and recycled to serve the values and ideas of modernity, both universal and Jewishly inflected. Mosès hails authors such as Kafka and Celan despite—or rather because of—their irreverent and often outright blasphemous tendencies. What fascinates Mosès in those thinkers is their attempt to conceptualize the break with tradition precisely by using elements derived from the Jewish tradition.

For most of the essay, Mosès maintains a descriptive, analytical, and neutral typology. He maintains a subtle balance in his distribution of praise and criticism to both groups of thinkers and it is not immediately clear where he situates himself. He correlates each of his “types” with a specific attitude to the interpretation of canonical texts and to various ways of conceiving the role of the interpreter. The essay begins with a strong endorsement of Levinas’

hermeneutic approach: While the ancient Jewish texts, particularly the Bible, invite a multiplicity of interpretations that keep the tradition alive, Mosès writes, this hermeneutic freedom is, for Levinas, “not illimited” (103). However vast the possibilities for ever renewed reading, and however much we’re invited to “over-interpret” (*surinterpréter*) the ancient texts, the authority exerted by tradition draws clear contours around permissible readings. Mosès insists that this authority is, for Levinas, not situated at the level of “topics, theses and even less of dogmas,” (103). Instead, what is transmitted through the generations is a field of questioning. This limited plurality of interpretations ensures the continuity required for a tradition to survive and thrive.

Mosès wholeheartedly supports this view and uses it to introduce his distinction between normative and critical Jewish modernity. Both his description of transmission and his affirmation of the necessity to set limits to the proliferation of interpretation clearly point to his own sympathy for the normative thinkers who decipher the meaning of the ancient Jewish texts and reconfigure them for the modern reader. Mosès identifies this hermeneutic with Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur. Like them, Cohen, Rosenzweig and Levinas insist that the old texts must be translated into the language of modernity even as their content and above all their spirit must remain unchanged. What distinguishes modern from pre-modern approaches to tradition are merely the form, language, and style and, arguably, their reach beyond the Jewish world towards universal validity.

In the essay’s second half, Mosès draws poignant examples from the correspondence between Benjamin and Scholem about Kafka, and from Kafka’s own writings, to describe how representatives of “critical modernity” who no longer believe in the tradition’s continuity and inner coherence recycle its debris to reconceptualize modernity in light of the Jewish tradition in ways that critically subvert both. (This is best grasped in the ways each of these three writers uses messianism: Scholem’s notion “redemption through sin,” Benjamin’s materialist messianism, and Kafka’s quip that “the messiah will come not on the last day but on the day after” are three varieties of thinking redemption that, each in its own way, subvert both orthodox ideas of the messianic and modernity’s belief in progressive, linear history.) Mosès stretches his notion of subversively recycling remnants of the tradition—a characteristic of “critical modernity”—daringly far. He ends his gallery of examples with Celan’s blasphemous poem “Psalm,” which famously calls God “Niemand” (NoOne):

“Praised be thou, NoOne . . .”² More than merely tearing out quotes from Jewish scriptures and reusing them for a modernist critique, Celan’s poem frontally attacks the core of tradition itself.

In the closing paragraph, Mosès enacts the *tour de force* that lends his essay the status of an *incontournable*, a foundational statement that cannot be ignored by anyone addressing Jewish thought in modernity. Until this point, the essay’s typology can be accused of overstating the binary opposition between two approaches to the Jewish tradition in modernity. Here, however, Mosès dialectically embroils the two in a way that not only does justice to both, but allows him to take sides with the one in an argument that essentially serves the agenda of the other:

Normative modernity sees its vocation in the rediscovery of original religious truths, as expressed in the canonical texts of tradition, and in the gesture of their translation into a language adapted to the problems of our time. This reformulation (which is also a repetition) of immutable truths is intended to confirm, but also to reiterate, the rooting of modern man in his tradition. But one wonders whether this fundamentally conservative attitude does not limit the ability of normative modernity to discover in traditional texts the revolutionary meanings they also conceal. Unlike some rabbinical exegesis, which do not hesitate to radically subvert the apparent meaning of the texts they comment on, it offers a lot of continuity but little hope. Perhaps hope lies only for us in the dazzling discovery of the unexpected [*l’inesperé*, literally “the un hoped for”]. Perhaps hope lies only for us in the astounding revelation of the unexpected. Only the sudden revelation of previously unknown potentialities concealed deep in the debris of a broken tradition would allow us to find in the past the sparks of hope that are still buried there.

² Celan, Paul. *Poems*. Transl. Michael Hamburger. New York: Persea, 1980, 156-157. For a reflection on the complexity of this blasphemous attitude in Celan’s poem, see Vivian Liska, “Paul Celan, the Last Psalmist,” in Ilana Pardes, Ophir Münz-Manor (eds.), *Psalms in/on Jerusalem*. Berlin: De Gruyter 2019, 143-153.

In these lines Mosès moves on the crest of the dividing line he has drawn between “normative” and “critical modernity.” His critique of the former—which he calls conservative, sterile and epigonal—is unmistakable. The primary shortcoming of “normative modernist” is not their lack of creativity or innovation, he shows, but their inability to *discover* revolutionary meanings inherent *in* the texts of the tradition. With this move Mosès endows Jewish tradition itself with critical, even subversive powers. He thereby establishes the continuity that “critical modernists” disavow and which is – supreme paradox – *continuous* with their own critical and subversive mode. Although here Mosès openly sides with this second group – represented by Benjamin, Scholem and Kafka – he also implicitly distances himself from their insistence on the definitive rupture of tradition in modernity.

Mosès’ final sentences entangle tradition and modernity, discovery and invention, continuity and break, in intricate ways that harbour his true hope and answer the question posed in his title. This answer does not, however, provide closure. Much in those last lines remains contradictory and unresolved: is he suggesting alternative, but not illimited possibilities of readings the old texts? Or, more radically, does he suggest a tearing out of rare and precious sparks to be found in the debris of tradition? Can (or should) readers of scriptures cross the boundaries of what Levinas would have considered beyond the pale? From Benjamin’s view of quotation as a destruction of its original context to Celan’s heretical Psalm, “critical modernity” suggests not merely new readings but an outright assault on continuity. And yet, Mosès paradoxically finds hope for the survival of tradition in modern times not in the “normative” thinkers who seek its continuity but – with some crucial emendations – in those who deny its internal coherence and read it against the grain. In asking whether there is hope for the survival of the Jewish tradition, and where such hope is to be found, Mosès artfully and anxiously refuses closure of his own question. Like a modern Jewish incarnation of Scheherazade, he trusts that nothing can end as long as he – and we – keep asking.