

## **Atheism and Jewish mysticism. Furio Jesi's interpretation of Gershom Scholem**

*Tamara Tagliacozzo\**

**Abstract.** Furio Jesi (1941-1980) was a poet, mythologist, archeologist, historian of religion and ideas, and a scholar of the survival of myths in the modern era. Jesi's attentive reading of certain works of the historian of religion Gershom Scholem bore fruit in his writings of the Sixties and Seventies, in both apparent and subterranean ways. Jesi's "atheism" reveals its profound religiosity (or theological seeking) in citing the doctrine of Isaac Luria, received through Scholem's writings (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1941), of a God who retires into the abyss of his Nothingness, contracting himself (withdrawing through *Tzimtzum*) so as to make space for Creation, and thus for a relation between mankind and the world, between one individual and another, and between the individual with a transcendent and absent God. Jesi's essay *Il miracolo secondo ragione* contains numerous citations from *Major Trends* and raises an issue which Jesi felt to be insufficiently investigated by Scholem, that of the link between the Sabbatean and Frankist phenomena and the Enlightenment, as well as that between Enlightenment rationalism and marranism. The antinomianism of the Sabbateans and Frankists (breaking the old law to make way for a new one, just as God withdraws into exile from himself to make way for creation) is at the base of a disturbing interpretation of Mircea Eliade and the ideology of the Iron Guard. Their's idea of taking on itself the guilt for the destruction of the Jew closely would indicate "paradoxical coincidences between the mystical self-portraits of the persecutors and the persecuted" (Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, 2011, p. 74).

**Keywords:** Mysticism, Atheism, Gershom Scholem, Furio Jesi, Enlightenment, Right, Marranism.

**Riassunto.** Furio Jesi (1941-1980), poeta, mitologo, archeologo, storico delle religioni e delle idee e studioso della sopravvivenza dei miti nella modernità, legge alcune opere dello storico delle religioni Gershom Scholem con attenzione e il frutto di questo studio si trova, a volte in modo sotterraneo, a volte evidente, nei suoi scritti degli anni '60 e '70. L'"ateismo" di Jesi rivela la sua profonda religiosità (o ricerca teologica) riferendosi alla dottrina di Isaac Luria, recepita attraverso gli scritti di Scholem (*Le grandi correnti della mistica ebraica*, pubblicato in Italia nel 1965, e poi *La Kabbalah e il suo simbolismo*, 1960, edito in Italia nel 1980 e recensito dallo stesso Jesi), di un Dio che si ritira nell'abisso del suo Nulla, contraendosi (ritirandosi attraverso lo *Tzimtzum*) per far spazio alla Creazione, al rapporto dell'uomo con il mondo, dell'uomo con l'uomo, e dell'uomo con un Dio trascendente e assente. Il saggio jesiano *Il miracolo secondo ragione* contiene numerose citazioni da *Le grandi correnti della mistica ebraica* e affronta un tema secondo Jesi non indagato adeguatamente dallo stesso Scholem, quello del legame tra il fenomeno sabbatiano e frankista e l'illuminismo, e poi tra il razionalismo illuministico e il marranism. L'antinomismo dei sabbatiani e dei frankisti (si infrange la vecchia legge per dar luogo alla nuova, così come Dio si ritrae in esilio da sé stesso dando luogo alla creazione) è alla base di un'interpretazione sconcertante di Mircea Eliade e dell'ideologia della Guardia di Ferro. Nell'assumere la colpa della distruzione dell'ebreo su di sé, l'ideologia della Guardia, a cui Eliade è vicino negli anni '40, indicherebbe, secondo Jesi, «paradossali coincidenze fra gli autoritratti mistici dei persecutori e dei perseguitati (*Cultura di destra*, 2011, p. 74)».

**Parole chiave:** Misticismo, ateismo, Gershom Scholem, Furio Jesi, Illuminismo, destra, marranism.

Furio Jesi (1941-1980) was a poet, mythologist, archeologist, historian of religion and ideas, and a scholar of the survival of myths in the modern era. Jesi's attentive reading of certain works of the historian of religion Gershom Scholem bore fruit in his writings of the Sixties and Seventies, in both apparent and subterranean ways.

After having claimed that he possessed and wished to possess "no faith, no conviction or experience of a religious character," (Jesi 2002a, p. 43) he declared instead, in a March, 1980 article in "La Stampa" (announcing Einaudi's publication of its translation of Gershom Scholem's *The Kabbalah and its Symbolism*),

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\* Ph.D., Associate Professor of Moral Philosophy, *Roma Tre University* of Rome, Via Ostiense 236, 00146 Roma, Italy, e-mail <tamara.tagliacozzo@uniroma3.it>.

«The synthesis of this conflict [between rabbinic “orthodox” Judaism and “heretical” Judaism] was, rather, the problem of knowing how to write and knowing how to tell: writing in the sacred language of the Law and of creation [...]; telling as knowledge shared. And, of course, writing and telling as prayer. (...) And the crown of the “greatest specialist”, the crown of the working day, reveals itself as the crown of “Queen Shabbàt”: the crown with which the Sabbath, the day without labor, makes its entrance, opening up to the entire collectivity the same regal space of non-labor/prayer» (Cavalletti & Lucca, 2013, p. 104).

With the term heretical Judaism, Jesi meant Sabbatean and Frankist doctrine and its origins in Lurian Kabbalah, while the “greatest specialist” he had in mind was Scholem. Through narration in tandem with prayer, Jesi envisioned the possibility of escaping from the isolation of the individual (in dream) and belonging to a collectivity, creating a space oriented around labor but not solely functional, that would create a higher identity, bound to cult and awakening in the Heraclitean sense articulated by Buber (see Jesi, 1979, p. XII). At the end of the Seventies (although theorized previously) Jesi would choose to abandon poetic writing, which goes to the source of myth, in order to write essays for the collectivity, by “recounting” myths. Many years earlier Jesi had spoken of himself and his poetic *oeuvre* in a brief handwritten text which he numbered, dated (February 10 1961) and signed:

«Everything I have written is poetry. (...) The strange images, the mysterious events which my poetry contains are those of the secret forces that move the matter of life; they constitute that matter itself. Only those secret forces can enter into a poem, because they are the living matter of *self-destruction*. (...) Now that I have ceased to write and thus no longer have anything to do with magic words, my works can become positive and useful in the great final battle<sup>1</sup> as weapons and firm presences. (...) Furthermore, they no longer constitute any danger, given that I have ceased to write. And still further, they should be understood as weapons, and as such must never be published».<sup>2</sup>

Furio Jesi’s relationship with Judaism immediately appears fundamental in his literary and critical writings, but emerges even more strongly in his personal and family relations. Son of a Jewish father and a Christian mother, Jesi recognizes that he is not “technically” Jewish (Jewishness is conceived as transmitting matrilineally), that is, not according to *Halachà*, the Law of orthodox Judaism. Nevertheless, more than once he says that he is “not Christian”.<sup>3</sup> He raises this subject with Gershom Scholem, the “sacred monster” of studies in the history of religion and Kabbalah, to whom he writes in 1966. Jesi would receive a response from Scholem only after a second letter, which he sent along with a copy of his book *Mitologie intorno all’illuminismo* [Mythologies of Enlightenment]<sup>4</sup>, in 1973:

«Turin, 26 November 1966  
Via Principi d’Acaia, 7

Professor, I take the liberty of addressing you because the study of your works has opened up to me the depths of the Jewish spirit which I—son of a Jew and a Christian, raised in Christian culture—only dimly felt and saw on the dark horizon of my nature and my hopes. I am a historian of religions, specialized in the fields of Egyptian and Greek: the principal object of my work is the survivals of the myths and religious experiences of the ancients in modern cultures. But an impulse which I can only call religious has pushed me to undertake the study of Hebrew, to read in the language of my fathers the texts that have been the source of their spiritual life. And now I can read the Torah and am preparing myself to

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<sup>1</sup> On the theme of battle, see *infra*.

<sup>2</sup> Manuscript of February 10, 1961, cited in A. Cavalletti, *Festa, scrittura, distruzione*, F. Jesi, *Il tempo della festa*, nottetempo, Milano 2013, pp. 22-23.

<sup>3</sup> See F. Jesi, «Il processo degli ebrei di Damasco», in Jesi 2007 [1973], p. 41: “We recognize that for a Christian reader, our expression “the myth of Christ’s blood” will sound disagreeable and blasphemous. For a historian of religions who is not of the Christian faith, however, this is the only possible definition.”

<sup>4</sup> See Jesi F., 1990 [1972]). See in particular *Il miracolo secondo ragione*, ivi, pp. 17-41.

read (for the first time in Hebrew) the Talmudic texts and the Zohar. At this point I noticed that my atheism was becoming more and more a hesitation to give a name to the darkness that I perceive at the depths of being; the refusal of a denomination that seems blasphemous to me. I have studied Jewish mysticism in the scientific works (but not yet in the original texts), and in such study I have been your pupil. I have received illuminations that have healed my spirit, but I have had trouble with all the claims of the mystics about the nature of God. Is it possible to speak of God? This is my question and my problem. I observe only that God is darkness, and I would like to remain silent. The reason for my letter is the following: can you tell me, in your expert pedagogical benevolence, whether my thinking is completely remote from the Jewish religion, or whether there is a place for me in orthodoxy? You will say that this problem must be resolved in my conscience. But my doctrine is so weak that I seek a teacher capable of guiding my thought or my emotion. I have addressed myself to you because you are yourself a historian of religions and speak my language. But I beg you, if you wish not to take on this task, to suggest to me the name of a person who, whether by vocation or intent, would like to instruct me. In Israel, there certainly is. I thank you in advance and I beg you, Professor, to take this as an expression of my most sincere feelings. Furio Jesi».<sup>5</sup>

This letter, to which Scholem does not respond, was found in 2013 in the Scholem Archive by Enrico Lucca and published in a *Dossier Jesi* together with a reply from Scholem dated 1973, after he had received Jesi's *Mitologie* (1972), to which letter Jesi would in turn respond. Andrea Cavalletti, editor with Lucca of this correspondence, comments on Jesi's letter, highlighting the influence of Buber and his dialogical principal in the opposition Jesi posits between remaining silent and "speaking of God" (Cavalletti, 2013, pp. 97-98). In his Introduction to Buber's *I racconti dei Chasidim* [Tales of the Hasidim], speaking of Buber and Rosenzweig's translation of the Bible, Jesi connects narration, storytelling, and belonging to a common cosmos, a collectivity (see Jesi, 1979, p. XII). Thus following in part Buber's admonishment, Jesi will dedicate himself primarily to narrating, to writing essays, to critical analysis, in order to be able to participate in a world held in common, the world delineated in his 1966 essay *Mito e linguaggio della collettività* [Myth and Language of the Collectivity], which explicitly cites Buber's *La via della comunità*, published in 1960 in "Tempo presente" (see Jesi, 1968 [1965], p. 35).

## 1. Atheism and Jewish Mysticism

"The God of the Jews, his unpronounceable and concealed being, appears to Jesi as a possible means to legitimate and provide a motive for his research into religious belief without presupposing a god" (Lucca, 2013, p. 111). Jesi's atheism, in other words, reveals its profound religiosity (or theological seeking) in citing the doctrine of Isaac Luria, received through Scholem's writings (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1941), of a God who retires into the abyss of his Nothingness, contracting himself (withdrawing through *Tzimtzum*) so as to make space for Creation, and thus for a relation between mankind and the world, between one individual and another, and between the individual with a transcendent and absent God. In a letter to Giulio Schiavoni explaining why he is "not a Christian", Jesi makes reference to Luria's doctrine: "But I am not a Christian, and exactly because I reject with sincere repugnance a God who is not "Gott als ganz Anders" to the point of "exiling himself in the depths of his nothingness (this the formula of a Jewish kabbalist from seven hundred years ago)."<sup>6</sup> Jesi seeks a "guide", both spiritual and "religious", in the paradoxical sense opened up by Luria's doctrine (see Lucca, 2013, p. 113): Lucca point out Jesi's search for a spiritual guide "in the direction of a possible recuperation of his Jewish roots" (*ibidem*, p. 116) (in an orthodox context), which finds in the only text by Scholem then available to him a quality that is not merely of

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<sup>5</sup> Furio Jesi letter to Gershom Scholem (1966), in Cavalletti A., Lucca E., eds., 2013, p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Giulio Schiavoni, 26 January 1970, in Schiavoni, 1999.

intellectual interest.”<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of his 1966 letter to Scholem, as in his 1965 letter to Max Brod,<sup>8</sup> he is anxious to communicate his paternal Jewishness, taking pains to tell Scholem that rabbinic number among his ancestors. The need to go deeper into his sense of Jewish belonging, which on multiple occasions he describes in terms “of blood” (his Jewish unconscious), lead him to study Scripture and Talmudic texts in the original (both Hebrew and Aramaic) and to conceive of Hebrew as a language that is both “precious and perilous”.<sup>9</sup>

The subject of marranism,<sup>10</sup> present in *Mitologie* (where both Jewish and Christian marranism is discussed),<sup>11</sup> runs throughout Jesi’s work and life. His father was an enthusiastic fascist but also participant—despite his agnosticism—in Jewish religious and community life. Furio Jesi himself was a “half-Jewish” communist, syndicalist, scholar of right-wing myth and culture, his interest in myth bound to a “moral” need for a liberatory criticism.<sup>12</sup> His critique of political Zionism in favor of a spiritual and cultural Zionism was inspired by Achad Ha-am<sup>13</sup> and Buber’s “Zionism of telling stories” (Jesi, 1979, p. XI; see Schiavoni, 2009, pp. 94-95). All these factors led to a continuous “marranism”, a necessary dissimulation with respect to his own authentic (ideological and/or literary) creed and its rejection.

## 2. Exile

In Jesi’s collection of verse entitled *Esilio* [Exile], brilliantly edited by Giacomo Jori and released by Aragno Editore in 2019, one poem may reflect a meditation on his father, when the poet takes on the role of Ahasver, the archetypal Wandering Jew from Medieval Christian legend, condemned never to die nor to cease wandering. Another poem, *Katabasis*, is explicitly dedicated to his father. In a press release to announce the book’s publication, Jesi explains his use of the term *esilio* [exile], omnipresent throughout his poetry and critical writings, as drawn in particular from the Jewish mysticism of Isaac Luria, which Jesi would have learned about from his reading of Scholem:

«The title of this collection can be linked to the singular development of the concept of “exile” in Jewish religious and cultural tradition. Especially in a mystical context, exile first appeared as a redemptive experience, later becoming ever more catastrophic and apocalyptic, leading finally to the antinomian morality of Sabbetai Zevi (“Blessings on you, o Lord, who allows what is not allowed”). An analogous experience of “exile” in cultural, religious, and moral terms takes place in the language and meter of these poems. The poet’s relation to traditional rhythms and style is not merely one of parody. Rather, he allows himself to utilize the commonplaces of a poetic tradition composed of echoes, shreds, and key words accumulated over the past 150 years (or he invents new ones, either by imitation or “sympathy”) so as to enter into contact with the only morally licit poetry available during “exile”: that is, the poetry in the

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<sup>7</sup> See *ivi*, p. 116, 45 and pp. 56-65.

<sup>8</sup> F. Jesi letter to Max Brod (January 15, 1965), in A. Cavalletti and E. Lucca (eds), 2013, p. 101. Brod had written, and Jesi takes up this idea. in *Germania segreta* (Jesi 2011[1967]), that Kafka’s castle (the obscure God) is not impossible, but merely extremely difficult to reach (*ibidem*).

<sup>9</sup> See the letter to Rex E. de Wit, June 23, 1967, in Belpoliti, Manera (eds), 2010, p. 45: “for research purposes I had to learn to read hieroglyphics and for the demands of “blood” I committed myself to learning Hebrew [. . .] Hebrew is a precious and perilous language.” See Lucca, 2013, p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> For a historical introduction to the subject of marranism, see Roth 2003. See also Di Cesare, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> See F. Jesi, «Il miracolo secondo ragione», in *Mitologie intorno all'illuminismo*, cit., pp. 26-29.

<sup>12</sup> In a letter of August 4, 1970 Jesi writes to Giulio Schiavoni: “I have now learned another technique: that of the *essay* more or less encrypted, which is well-accepted even by serious people who are not exactly papyrologists. [. . .] They accept style, tone, and notes, and they go into action to combat anyone who attributes a value to them. [. . .] [I profess] a ‘programmatic marranism’ [capable of] undermining at the root that which we don’t believe just.” (in Schiavoni, 1999, pp. 167-181, pp. 177-178. Cit. in E. Manera, 2019, p. 11).

<sup>13</sup> Scholem himself (and Benjamin, partially) had great hopes for this spiritual and cultural Zionism in the Thirties, but had seen it defeated in the Brit Schalom movement, with the pogroms of Arabs against Jews in 1929 in Palestine. See Tagliacozzo, 2015, pp. 160-162.

human voice as it recites—according to a determined ritual and in a ritual cadence—certain commonplaces. (...) Exile has no note (of its own) since the author intends to demonstrate the legitimacy of any poetic “precedent” as a repertory of anonymous commonplaces—which may appear here as extremely subjective personal oddities, but which are in reality quite anonymous usages, commonplaces of a *koiné* which (in chronological terms) begins with Ugo Foscolo and comes to an end with Ezra Pound» (Jesi, 2019, pp. 61-62).

“The only morally licit poetry during exile” is that which leads one to recite, according to a ritual cadence (almost a prayer), certain commonplaces<sup>14</sup> of the human spirit so as to find, through this *koiné*, a community. Exile is not only the exile of the Jewish people, but of God himself in the depths of his Nullity, and of the poet and all humanity, which has lost in Modernity its contact not only with God, but with genuine myth.

*Katabasis*, a moving poem in 141 lines, (moving in the sense of *Ergriffenheit* theorized by Jesi in his *Germania segreta*),<sup>15</sup> describes the poet’s descent into hell in search of his father, like Orpheus after his Eurydice. Jesi evokes the figure of his father without reference to his fascist sympathies, focusing instead on the void left within the child by his father’s absence, and the poet’s admiration for his father’s courage (“you knew no fear”, v. 20, in Jesi 2019, p. 49). In *Ahasvero*, Jesi takes up the antisemitic medieval Christian legend of the wandering Jew, condemned to eternal exile for having reviled Christ during the Passion. This figure stands for the poet in exile, “creature between two worlds, too human and too separate from man.” (Lanfranchi 2020, p. 178; see the vv. 33-38, in Jesi 2019, p. 20).

Here returns, like in other poems, the reference to the battle to be fought despite the certainty of defeat, a theme also of Jesi’s novel of vampirism, *L’ultima notte* [The Final Night], published posthumously in 1987 (Jesi 1987a), and his *Spartakus. Simbologia della rivolta* [Spartakus. The Symbolology of Revolt].<sup>16</sup> In a May 4, 1970 letter to Schiavoni, Jesi describes the figure of Ahasver, the wandering Jew:

«One of the poems is called *Ahasvero*, that is, the Wandering Jew, who roams eternally without dying. The theme of unreachable death turns up at the beginning of ‘In dubious battle’ (a citation from Milton), a poem in which motifs of metempsychosis recur under the semblance of various ‘stories’; (...). Such elements of personal mythology correspond exactly (and spontaneously, since the poems were not composed coldly) to the temporal quality of the ‘battle’ or the ‘peregrination’, much longer than a single life, and declare that one has already been participating in the ‘battle’ for so long that one knows what one is talking about. – (...) Those themes of personal mythology serve to circumscribe the only two temporal dimensions of *Exile*: past and present.<sup>17</sup> Quite paradoxically, I could tell you that I do not believe in the existence of the future. More seriously, I will say instead that, if the present is the combat in which man dutifully battles, without allies, against the adversary, the present can be infinitely dilated without arriving at any future. The past itself is a dilated present: the poems allude to the past, not the future, because the deception of believing in a past does not offer any possibilities for salvation coming from outside, in contrast to the deception of believing in a future. – You could tell me at this point that, following such thought, the imperative is not so much that of fighting alone as that of being defeated. I however think

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<sup>14</sup> On ‘commonplaces’, see Cavalletti, 2013b in Jesi, 2013c, pp. 17-8.

<sup>15</sup> See Carbone 2022, pp. 295-316.

<sup>16</sup> Jesi, 2022. See Jesi’s June 26, 1972 letter to Schiavoni: “My work is something similar to conducting a detailed reconnaissance of a field of battle: we are all involved in the battle (and we must know that we are), and the attitude we assume or will assume in the battle far transcends our ability as observers [ . . . ] In substance: the work of reconnaissance (my writings, for example) is fundamentally secondary compared to the combat. And this is done [ . . . ] in the ‘street’ and in the ‘factory’, certainly not by writing about Rilke.” (Letter to Schiavoni dated June 26 1972, in Jesi, 1989 [1972], pp. 330-331.

<sup>17</sup> Here, Jesi comes very close to Walter Benjamin’s conception of messianic temporality, as illustrated by Jesi himself in Jesi 1987b, p. 219; in the entry “Walter Benjamin” (Jesi, 1981, pp. 83-84) and in Jesi, 2013d [1977], in Jesi, 2013c, pp. 92-97. On the theme of the “suspension” of the time of rebellion in Jesi, see Cavalletti, 2013b, in Jesi 2013c, pp. 11-16.

that the battle, as long as it lasts, for the very fact of lasting, constitutes a sort of victory (the ‘theme of glory’ in the poems) for those who have undertaken the battle without succor from anyone (...) The darkest moment would be the one when, battle over, one says to oneself, ‘An hour has passed’».<sup>18</sup>

The time of battle is suspended time, momentaneous, the *Jetztzeit* of rebellion in which the I destroys itself by entering into contact with myth, in an encounter between history and myth. This encounter has a political sense and “corresponds to an act of insurrection (...) as sacrifice and self-destruction of the bourgeois components of the subject, in accessing the new and different time of myth. (...) The writing of *Spartakus* itself becomes the instant of an ‘uninterrupted battle’.” (Cavalletti 2013b, p.16). One might add, in the absence of God.”

### *Between Luria and Sabbatai Zevi*

Jesi read *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*<sup>19</sup> (probably in 1954, or in German in 1957) in particular Isaac Luria and Sabbatai Zevi from the Italian version of 1965 in his essay *Il miracolo secondo ragione* [The Miracle According to Reason].<sup>20</sup> In Scholem’s essay on Luria, we find a citation attributed to a 17<sup>th</sup> century author whose words seem to turn up again in Jesi’s above-cited manuscript of 1961, in which he says that his works are weapons in the final battle:

«My works, now that I have ceased to write and thus no longer have anything to do with magic words, can become positive and useful in the great final battle<sup>21</sup> as weapons and firm presences. (...) Furthermore, they no longer constitute any danger, given that I have ceased to write. And still further, they should be understood as weapons, and as such must never be published».<sup>22</sup>

Thus reads Scholem’s text, not cited by Jesi:

«The author of Kaf Ha-Ketoreth, in particular, took up a very radical position. Employing every device of that mystical precision with which the Kabbalists read the Bible, he infused extraordinary apocalyptic meanings into the words of the Psalms, and held up the Psalter as a textbook of the millennium and the Messianic catastrophe. He furthermore developed an exceedingly bold theory of the Psalms as apocalyptic hymns and of the comfort which these hymns yield to worshippers. The secret function of true hymns was to serve as magical weapons to be wielded in the final struggle, weapons which were endowed with unlimited powers of purification and destruction so that they might annihilate all the forces of evil. Seen in this light, the words of the Psalms stood forth as “sharp swords in Israel’s hand and deadly weapons,” and the Psalter itself was envisaged in the double capacity of a book of war songs and an arsenal of weapons for the “last war.” Before the final apocalyptic struggle in which these weapons were to be used, the tremendous apocalyptic power latent in the words of the Psalms is to manifest itself in the form of comfort, which is really the glow and secret crackling of the apocalyptic fires in their depths. Comfort is the classical symbol of delay. Even the delay of the final consummation, undesirable as it is, has a healing force. Comfort paves the way for the apocalyptic struggle. But when once the absolute power of the divine words erupts from beneath the comforting guise of meditation and promise, “all the forces will be transformed,” as the author puts it in the language of apocalyptic dialectics» (Scholem 1961 [1946, 1954], p. 248).

Jesi’s essay *Il miracolo* contains numerous citations from *Major Trends* and raises an issue which Jesi felt to be insufficiently investigated by Scholem, that of the link between the Sabbatean and Frankist phenomena and the Enlightenment, as well as that between Enlightenment rationalism and

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<sup>18</sup> Letter to Schiavoni (May 4 1970), in Jesi, 1999 [1970], p. 175.

<sup>19</sup> See Scholem 1961[1946, 1954] and the Italian translation in Scholem, 1965.

<sup>20</sup> F. Jesi, “Il miracolo secondo ragione”, in Jesi, 1990 [1972]), pp. 17-41.

<sup>21</sup> On the theme of battle, see *infra*.

<sup>22</sup> Manuscript of February 10, 1961, cited in Cavalletti, 2013b, pp. 22-23.

marranism.<sup>23</sup> Scholem does however speak explicitly of the connection between Lurian doctrine and the Enlightenment in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*,<sup>24</sup> and in *Major Trends*. This doctrine entrusts mankind with the task of redeeming the world and leading the cosmos and God Himself out of exile through good actions and choosing between good and evil in recuperating the divine sparks. This overcoming of the abyss between history and redemption—an abyss according to earlier mysticism—is, according to Scholem, at the origin of the Enlightenment vision of the moral and political progress of humanity:

«Gershom Scholem insists on emphasizing the presumed differences which from the beginning have characterized the preconceptions of the actual Enlightenment and the diverse religious groups we have cited [Sabbateans, Pietists, Anabaptists, Quakers]. For Scholem, it was a matter of a “spirit [of the mystical groups] [...] [that] created an atmosphere in which the rational movement, in spite of its very different origins, was enabled to grow and develop, so that in the end both worked in the same direction” (Scholem, 1961 [1946, 1954], p. 301). It is precisely about the “different sources” of Enlightenment rationalism that we would like to express some doubts. On one hand, we find it important not to forget—at least as an open question—the subterranean relations between Spinozan rationalism (whose name cannot be ignored alongside Descartes and Malebranche as a source of Enlightenment rationalism) and the spiritual experience of marranism» (Jesi, 1990 [1972], p. 20).

Jesi considers it essential to look deeply into the problem of that doubleness of behavior that stands out clearly in Marranism and Sabbateanism, but also in the doctrines of Rousseau (in the *Profession de foi du vicaire Savoyard*) and Kant:

«On the other hand, or rather with the scope of integrating this first point, we consider it essential, to a proper evaluation both of the sources of Enlightenment rationalism and the contribution of Judaic mystical heresy to the genesis and affirmation of the Enlightenment, to deeply explore the problem of that doubleness (we don't mean to suggest *duplicity* in a pejorative sense) in the behavior that stands out clearly in marranism and Sabbateanism, as well as in the doctrines of two protagonists of the Enlightenment, Rousseau and Kant. In Rousseau's *Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard*, the analogy with marranism is quite evident, even if no less problematic.

The *vicaire savoyard* believes neither in the Gospel nor in Christ, nor in the divinity of Christ itself, and yet—in the instant in which such convictions mature—he celebrates the mass with greater veneration, concerned not to omit a single word (...) (W)e believe we can recognize in the *profession de foi* the testimony of that fundamental antinomy manifest in innumerable other Rousseauian claims (...). Observing assiduously the ritual prescribed by the organization of a faith in which one does not believe, a perfect simulation of belief. The marranos often did precisely this. The deepest and truest marranism as an autonomous spiritual experience (rather than as a pure and simple consequence of a violent imposition) is that of the apostate Jews who perfectly simulated having accepted the Christian faith, not that of the marranos who, reciting Christian prayers, inserted concealed words that gave witness to their still-intact Judaism. (...) The one and the other, perfectly deliberate dissimulators, were constrained to marranism. But it is also true that the imposition from outside brought to maturity in some—perhaps not so few as imagined—a moral and religious experience that anticipated the mystical heresies of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. For them, imposed Christianity became providential» (Jesi, 1990 [1972], pp. 20-21).

For Jesi, the deepest marranism is not contradicted by Rousseau, even though his thought cannot be said to exhaust itself in it:

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<sup>23</sup> “But despite the illuminating research of S. Hurwitz and G. Scholem, no history of Judaism truly confronts the problem of the actual relations between the mystical heresy of Sabbateanism and Frankism and Enlightenment rationalism.” (Jesi, 199 [19720], p. 18).

<sup>24</sup> See “The Messianic Idea in Kabbalism”, in Scholem, 1995 [1971] pp. 37-48.

«“The uncertainty in which we find ourselves [in which it is presumptuous to profess a religion different from the one a person is born into]” is a correct equivalent of the Judaic condition of exile, which at first appeared redemptive [in Luria’s doctrine, in which God retreats into his nothingness to provide space for Creation, and who exiles himself from himself, and then in the Sabbateanism that followed and transformed his theories] and then revealed itself to be ever more catastrophic and apocalyptic. “The uncertainty we find ourselves in” corresponds to that state of obscurity declared even by the moderate pessimists of exile.

It is the condition that precedes and announces the “final battle”: a state of disturbance and symmetrical subversion of values [“Praise to Thee, o Lord, who permittest the forbidden”]<sup>25</sup> in which the experience of darkness becomes a matrix of weaponry against evil. But with these words we have come to Sabbateanism. “To profess without believing the religion in which one is born” is equivalent for the marranos to accept Christian religion without believing, but out of necessity to survive. The analogy becomes even more binding, referencing the Sabbateans, in particular the crypto-Sabbateans (inaccurately called “moderate Sabbateans”) who continued most rigorously to profess orthodox Judaism, while secretly supporting Sabbateanism. Within the setting of the masters of spirituality and religion, the *vicaire savoyard* finds singular parallels, for example, in Italian crypto-Sabbatean rabbis such as Benjamino Cohen of Reggio and Abramo Rovigo of Modena» (Jesi, 1990 [1972], pp. 21-22).

According to Jesi, there is no difference between Rousseau’s *vicaire savoyard* and the apparently moderate crypto-marranism of those who continue to profess themselves devout with regard to Jewish practices, but who in fact enact the prodigy of living “in the continuous paradox of devout fulfilment of the law and belief in the impending approach of a new era in which such fulfilment will become meaningless.”<sup>26</sup> This dissimulation originated in freedom of thought, one of the fundamental pillars of the Enlightenment:

«On one hand, such a phenomenon became radicalized on the basis of its premises in Jacob Frank’s nihilist doctrine, but on the other it originated that Judaic Enlightenment that can be characterized by Moses Mendelsshon. From a phenomenon which is the darker the more apparently obvious it became, from antinomianism and the experience of those who respected the Law despite believing its devaluation to be nigh, there seems to have spurted forth one of the fundamental elements of the Enlightenment, freedom of thought. // From the perspective of such freedom as a connecting link (we still know not how) between antinomianism, marranism, and Enlightenment, the claims of Kant in his *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* could be said to coincide with the Enlightenment metamorphosis of marranism.” “Reason for as long and as much as you like, but obey” (...). It is significant to find at the end of Kant’s *Answer* a note by Kant himself who mentions a contemporaneous and analogous response by Moses Mendelsshon. It is still more significant to discover the spiritual authority of Mendelsshon and Kant in the commentary on the *Haggadòth* by the Sabbatean and Frankist Jonas Wehle, alongside that of Luria and Sabbatai Zevi» (Jesi 1990 [1972], p. 23, citing Scholem, 1961 [1946, 1954], p. 304).

But the experience that joins Sabbateanism, Frankism, and Hasidism is not only the “‘spontaneity of feeling’ identified by Scholem,”<sup>27</sup> but “the progressive revelation of the experience of the universe as totality and globality, it is—here perhaps is its most secret nucleus—the discovery of the absence of deep solidarity between this globality and God, who has retired into the “abysses of His nothingness.” (Jesi, 1990 [1972], p. 24). Whoever carries out miracles and is powerful in exile does so out of human, not divine, strength, while God has retreated into the abyss and exile of His nothingness. Not only the Jewish people are in exile, but all humanity, and the cosmos, and God himself:

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<sup>25</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, p. 18. Here Jesi cites Scholem 1965, p. 426. See Scholem, 1961 [1946, 1954], p. 319.

<sup>26</sup> Scholem 1961 [1946, 1954], p. 313; quoted in Jesi 1990 [1972], p. 22, from the Italian edition (Scholem, 1965, p. 419).

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, p. 24. Citing Scholem, 1961 [1946, 1954], p. 338.

«The great *tzaddiqim* performed miracles; this exercise of power of theirs was on one hand a recognition of the globality of their experience of the universe, which they wholly penetrated in a single instant, and on the other a tragic experience of the fracture between the universe and God; of the condition of exile. (...) Whoever is powerful in exile contributes to emphasizing the tragic essence of exile: exile is that much more tragic, because as long as it lasts miracles can take place. To be absolutely frank, it is the tragedy of the religious man who recognizes himself capable of executing miracles without the aid of God» (Jesi 1990 [1972], p. 24).

In mankind's distance from God and in God's distance, in the suffering provoked by the epiphany of power in exile is found, Jesi claims, the profound root of the relation between the Enlightenment and the experiences of the Judaic and Christian mystical groups. The exit of mankind from the minor age of Kantian discourse is analogous to the "difficulty of the *tzaddiqim* to perform miracles." (Jesi 1990 [1972], p. 24). Enlightenment thinkers encounter the globality of humankind, the Hasidim encounter the globality of the universe: both are far from God, who has withdrawn, according to Luria's doctrine of *tzimtum*, in order to allow space for creation. The Enlightenment thinkers, however, felt optimistic and confident, hoping for the hypothetical salvation of mankind, while for the Judaic mystics it was harder to hope for the salvation of everything that was not humankind but "tree, stone, meteorite" (Jesi 1990 [1972], p. 26):

«This cosmic pessimism which is, for the most radical Jewish mystics, the inevitable consequence of the awareness of exile, transforms any exercise of power, any performance of miracles, into an *ever harsher testimony of contrition and dismay*» (Jesi 1990 [1972], p. 26).

According to Jesi, this leads Mendelsshon to see mankind's progress as a simple equilibrium between moments of greater and lesser morality, adding up to zero (the doctrine of abderitism), conserving the same degree of morality across all ages.

#### *"Right-wing Culture: Mircea Eliade and the Iron Guard*

In Jesi's *Cultura di destra* [Right-wing Culture] it is disturbing to read his discussion of Mircea Eliade, who in the 1940s had expressed support for the Romanian Iron Guard, antisemitic collaborators with Nazism. Analyzing not Eliade's post-war research but his earlier period of alignment with the Iron Guard, Jesi analyzes Eliade's usage of Hebrew mysticism:

«The antisemitic Eliade constructed his entire *Treatise [on the History of Religions, 1954]* as an architecture that simultaneously conceals and exhibits, as its very center, a "secret message" which is peculiarly Judaic. This is the doctrine by which Kabbalah, in particular that of Isaac Luria (1534-1572), responds to the question of creation out of nothingness. Eliade says, "Myths and the 'religions' (...) are the result of the void left due to the withdrawal of God from the world." The Lurian Kabbalah declares that "God was compelled to make room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself, [...] from which he withdrew."<sup>28</sup> // Withdrawing "from himself into himself", God created a primordial space out of which creation emanated. In his *Trattato di storia delle religioni* [Treatise on the History of Religions, 1954], Eliade presents a withdrawal of God in terms of the history and psychology of religions, but in a diary notation he stresses that beyond this formulation a "secret message" is to be understood. Not by chance he speaks of "theology" resulting from his mode of "deciphering" and "interpreting" the history of religion, and not by chance does he use the word "God" when he mentions "self-withdrawal", only to correct himself a moment later: "God—more precisely, the supreme being."

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<sup>28</sup> Jesi, 2011, pp. 71-72. Citation of Scholem, 1961, p. 261.

What does all this mean? Eliade, albeit the “trivial Eliade” as defined by Kerényi, cannot be considered unaware, out of ignorance, of this doctrine from Hebrew mysticism; neither can one doubt that in a diary centered on the notion of his own exile he might mention the withdrawal of God as the “secret message” of this *Treatise*, without knowing that, within Hebrew culture, “an attempt was made to interpret this withdrawal of God into his own Being in terms of Exile, of banishing Himself from His totality into profound seclusion. Regarded this way, the idea of *Tsimtsum* [contraction, withdrawal] is the deepest symbol of Exile that could be thought”»<sup>29</sup>

The Jew appeared to Eliade, familiar with Lurian mysticism, as powerful and capable of performing miracles in the absence of God, a God self-exiled into his Nothingness. The potency of the Jew aroused fear in Eliade and in the Iron Guard: it was necessary to kill the Jew in order to found a new order, as though the Jew were analogous to the foundation stone (see Jesi 2011, pp. 77-78), the victim to be sacrificed in order to actuate and stabilize a new construction. Jesi refers to the sacrifice of the builder Mastro Manole (see Jesi 2011, pp. 67-68), who in Romanian folk legend sacrifices his wife for his architectural vision, walling her up, still alive, into his building:

«It remains to be seen whether the “secret message” of the *Treatise* and its coincidence with the “secret message” of the Kabbalah are the result of an absolutely new idea on the part of an Eliade in post-war exile, or rather the continuation of Eliade’s ideology aligned with the Iron Guard, which grieved the death of Codreanu. In the latter case there would be a disturbing—as we have said—coincidence between the mythological and theological apparatus of an antisemitic group and a doctrine peculiar to the tradition of Jewish mysticism, “[a thought] (...) of the highest importance in the history of later [that is, post-Lurian] Kabbalistic thought”»<sup>30</sup>

After examining Eliade’s *Treatise*, Jesi turns to a discussion of Scholem’s theories on Luria and the Sabbatean heresy, with references and citations from *Major Trends*, stressing the “extremely sensitive consciousness of life actually lived between the poles of exile and redemption” (...) [which are a prelude] to the final step to messianism.”<sup>31</sup> The antinomianism of the Sabbateans and Frankists (breaking the old law to make way for a new one, just as God withdraws into exile from himself to make way for creation) is at the base of a disturbing interpretation of the ideology of the Iron Guard and its idea of taking on itself the guilt for the destruction of the Jew, which closely resembles “paradoxical coincidences between the mystical self-portraits of the persecutors and the persecuted (Jesi, 2011, p. 74):”

«Where God is in exile within Himself, where only sub-divine forms—the archangel [Michael]—are accessible, the just must be culpable and must kill [and be killed]. (...) This entire framework confers unusual tonalities on the antisemitism of the Iron Guard and Mircea Eliade. Beyond the image of the Jew as usurer, as capitalist, and as extraneous to Romanian stock, there arises that of the Jew as a designated ritual victim. Since the martyrs must be guilty, since the guilt *par excellence* [that is, the highest testimony] must be killing, and murder is a ritual to accelerate the coming of the new kingdom through the infraction of the law, the one to be killed above all must be the Jew, because the Jews were the chosen people, the human group sacredly bound to that God who is God, but who has now withdrawn into Himself. If Christianity is the advent of a new kingdom after that of the Old Testament, the acceleration of this advent, its achievement, consists in the culpable but testamentary killing, as sacrificial victims, of those who were *par excellence* the people of the ancient kingdom» (Jesi, 2011, pp. 76-77).

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem. Citation of Scholem, 1961, p. 261.

<sup>30</sup> Ivi, p. 72. The last citation is from Scholem, 1961, p. 261.

<sup>31</sup> See ivi, pp. 72-73, citation from Scholem, 1961, pp. 287-288.

In the ideology and mythology of the Iron Guard, the killing of the Jew, analogous to the Christian as God's chosen in the ancient kingdom, is a religious act, necessary for redemption, a sin thereafter to be expiated.

From this periphery Jesi proceeds toward the core of the European right, Nazism. The Iron Guard's fear of the primordial power of Jewish spirituality was shared by Hitler, who accused the Jews of having provoked the Second World War in a demonic and criminal conspiracy against all humanity, which rendered necessary their destruction (see Jesi, 2011, p. 82). The esoteric paganism of Nazism sees the Jew as spiritually powerful, dangerous, endowed with mysterious and magical qualities coming from the Orient (absent here the Iron Guard's characteristic affinity with Christianity), and must therefore be killed in search of an even more oriental Orient, an "antidote to the "oriental" threat of esoteric Judaism" (Jesi, 2011, p. 90). Nazism fears the Jew, considering him a powerful go-between joining the sensible world to its secret roots:

«But the shift (...) leads (...) to the flowering or re-flowering of a mythological image, unusual in 19<sup>th</sup> century antisemitism, of the *threatening, powerful Jew*, but not exclusively or even not at all on the economic and political plane: rather, the image of the Jew, paradoxical to antisemitism, as a privileged creature, endowed with mysterious, intrinsic qualities, who *for this reason* must be killed» (Jesi, 2011, pp. 80-81).

The accusations formulated by Hitler in his bunker, according to which the Jews had intentionally provoked the war, should be understood, Jesi argues, as a "late interpretation of the so-called 'blood libel', that is, the ancient belief that the Jews practiced human sacrifice: the Second World War would be the ultimate and quantitatively unsurpassed human sacrifice organized in secret by the Jews, and the extermination of the Jews would be the ritualized defensive response on the part of men devoid of magical powers, seeking a way to exterminate the vampires" (Jesi, 2011, p. 90).

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