Endless Flight from Providence: Indifference to Redemption and the Refusal of Theodicy in Susan Taubes*

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> Even the gnostic indictment of history as nightmare and delusion carries a prescribed awakening which, if gnosis is to be gnostic enough, would have to allow it might itself be only a dream. (Nathaniel Mackey)[1]
>
> There are even beings that move within the messianic . . . most often fugitively. (Tiqqun)[2]
>
> We shall be as dreamers. (Psalms 126:1)

In 1955, an essay titled "The Absent God" appeared in *The Journal of Religion*. The author, Susan Taubes—or "Susan Anima Taubes," as she signed her piece—was then a doctoral student at Radcliffe College, working on the question of nihilism under the supervision of Paul Tillich. Born in Budapest to a Jewish family in 1928 and emigrated to America in 1939, granddaughter of a rabbi, daughter of a psychoanalyst, and wife of philosopher of religion Jacob Taubes, Susan Taubes may have chosen the pseudonymous middle name "Anima" to mark symbolically what would remain a central problem across her writings.[3] This problem is the place—or placelessness—of the estranged soul,

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[1] Nathaniel Mackey, *Splay Anthem* (New Directions, 2002), xiii.

[2] Tiqqun, "The Beautiful Hell," trans. Robert Hurley, *Ill Will*, March 4, 2021, https://illwill.com/the-beautiful-hell.

[3] Christina Pareigis suggests a Jungian inspiration for "Anima"; see Pareigis, *Susan Taubes. Eine intellektuelle Biographie* (Wallstein, 2020), 274. In Jung, *anima* refers to the unconscious

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in particular the female soul, in a world order full of suffering and darkness. Taubes's emphasis on the soul's alienness to the world indexes her affinity with Gnosticism, a constant theme in her thought, which, following Hans Jonas, she understands as a heretical trajectory of world estrangement. It indexes, too, her affinity with the French mystic Simone Weil, the subject of the 1955 essay, whom Taubes likewise calls a "Gnostic heretic."[4] What she further shares with Weil is a sense of alienation both from the world and from Judaism, a sense that is often noted in the small but growing corpus of scholarly literature on Taubes—even if, unlike Weil, who turns to Christianity, Taubes never rejects her own Jewishness but grapples with it throughout her life.[5]

"The Absent God" aims to do more than introduce Weil's "theology of divine absence and nonbeing" to an English-speaking audience.[6] In its final pages, the essay moves from exegesis to criticism, condemning what Taubes calls Weil's "religion of suffering" and "negative theodicy." My contention in the present article is that, in her essay on Weil, Taubes begins to develop a singular response to what she describes as "the final shattering of faith in divine providence in the moral catastrophe of the twentieth century."[7] This response is not only philosophical-theological but *literary*—and I reassemble it here based on her Weil essay as well as her novel *Divorcing* and novella *Lament for Julia*, both written in the 1960s. These works reflect Taubes's wrestling with the possibility of inhabiting a world that simply cannot be justified, opening onto questions of more than theoretical significance: What makes a theodical narrative? What remains of this narrative when God is absent and transcendent salvation foreclosed? And if the fundamental operation of theodicy is to embed evil and suffering in a narrative of redemption through which they can be made to serve the divine world order, then how can one narrate the drama of a soul that refuses to reconcile herself with this order or be inscribed into such a narrative?

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feminine part of male psyche. The Jungian dimension of *anima* is compatible with the Gnostic one I am suggesting here, since Jung connects *anima* to the Gnostic Sophia (an important figure for Taubes, too). See Gilles Quispel, "Gnosis and Psychology," in *The Gnostic Jung*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Routledge, 1992), 245.

[4] Susan Anima Taubes, "The Absent God," *Journal of Religion* 35, no. 1 (1955): 12. On Gnosticism, see Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. Die mythologische Gnosis* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1934), a text on which Taubes draws in her early work, and Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Beacon Press, 1958).

[5] On estrangement, both Jewish and universal, in Taubes, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *The Philosophical Pathos of Susan Taubes: Between Nihilism and Hope* (Stanford University Press, 2023). As Sigrid Weigel frames it, Taubes is attracted to ways of thinking that combine "experiences of strangeness and hopes for salvation" ("Between the Philosophy of Religion and Cultural History: Susan Taubes on the Birth of Tragedy and the Negative Theology of Modernity," *Telos* 150 [2010]: 116).

[6] Taubes, "Absent God," 6.

[7] Taubes, "Absent God," 6.

In a letter from 1952, Taubes configures messianic expectation in terms of hope for a "homecoming for humanity," for a state of being in common without estrangement, for a repair of the broken self and world.[8] However, by the 1960s, the paradigm of messianic hope no longer holds for her. Instead, her literary texts in particular suggest a different kind of messianicity, distinct from both traditional messianism and the later Derridean model of "a waiting without a horizon of expectation."[9] According to Taubes, in the absence of a redemption and restoration to come, the only state that approaches the messianic is the one that evades or escapes the world's violence, however briefly. Her works imply that freedom from "the world order as an all-embracing predatory mechanism wherein man is imprisoned"[10] can be approximated only through an endless flight, a fugitivity that refuses to justify this world while rejecting any vision of a "higher" redemption or awakening.[11] Instead, the fugitive soul moves in the dark, within the world's underground, below the binary of redemption and damnation, of goodness and wretchedness. In the best possible world that confines the estranged soul to such darkness, it is unclear whether an escape hatch can be found, a prison break executed. As a result, for Taubes, darkness itself becomes the antagonistic site of questioning the world and flight from the world, a flight that does not, however, lead the soul to a heavenly home: As there is increasingly no escape from the world in modernity, transcendence is reduced to a void at the heart of the world itself, an unmediatable absence. Fragments of the messianic are scattered in darkness and cannot be recollected, and there is no answer to the question of what a good, fulfilled life could even be for those who refuse to be buried under the ruins of the providential world order—the order that routinely dictates the terms of what counts as "good" or "fulfilled." In this world where, as Taubes writes in a 1950 letter, "ways of death or halfdeath" reign, "each goes his own way into the same darkness. And the ways of life where we walk together and that no man can build from and for himself alone are not yet built. Nor is it anywhere written that they must or will be built."[12] This "nor is it anywhere written" underlies the themes and forms of Taubes's writing. Hers is a fugitive, contingent, impossible messianicity that can be inhabited only as a secret shrouded in darkness and that can be expressed only indirectly in genres such as dream or lament.

This article proceeds in three sections, building toward the reading of *Lament for Julia* as an antagonistic response to all theodical narratives, in

[8] Susan Taubes, *Die Korrespondenz mit Jacob Taubes 1952*, ed. Christina Pareigis (Wilhelm Fink, 2014), 65.

[9] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Routledge, 1994), 211.

[10] Taubes, "Absent God," 12.

[11] By "fugitivity" I understand precisely being in flight (*fuga*)—not so much from a home or origin but, in a more Gnostic sense, from the providential world order perceived as prison, so that the fugitive moves in secret from the world.

[12] Susan Taubes, *Die Korrespondenz mit Jacob Taubes 1950–1951*, ed. Christina Pareigis (Wilhelm Fink, 2011), 256.

particular to Augustine's *Confessions*. The first section reconstructs Taubes's 1955 essay, explicating her antagonism to theodicy as a discourse that legitimates the goodness of the divine world order and that implies that the place of suffering is redemptive—and more generally, that the world is a redemptive universal distribution of place overseen by divine providence. For Taubes, the twentieth-century crisis of theodicy exposes the dark ground of suffering on which the world thus understood is premised, and that must serve as the site for questioning and refusing the apparatus of redemption. The second section then reads *Divorcing* as a text grappling with such a refusal and with the aporias of attempted flight from the crumbling world order in the absence of salvific transcendence. Finally, the third section turns to *Lament*, which explicitly configures the fugitive messianic as inhabiting the dark unnarratable underside of the narratives of redemption and damnation. This text makes explicit Taubes's utopia of a fugitive bliss that drifts below the world's reach and remains indifferent to the world. My interest in her literary works thus comes from a conceptual perspective: I view the narratives she constructs as polemical against all theodical models, and as reworking Christian, Gnostic, and Kabbalistic symbolism to unground the traditional notions of salvation, and of beatitude or bliss as eternal repose within divine presence, thereby refracting the impasse of the postwar condition.[13]

ANTAGONISM TO THEODICY (OUT OF THE DARK GROUND OF THE WORLD)

Traditionally, the central task of theodicy is to reconcile one with evil and suffering, and with all of the world's negativity and burdens, by disclosing a divine providential will or law to which evil is in some way subordinated. I would begin by distinguishing between theodical *questioning* and theodical *answering*. Issues such as "Whence evil and suffering? Is there a meaning to them? Why must this world be the (negative) way it is?" persist transhistorically, putting in question the goodness of the world order and its creator-God. Evil threatens the legitimacy of the creator and the world he creates—and theodical answering emerges to neutralize this threat of illegitimacy, to inscribe various kinds of evil into a higher order that would endow the world, and one's being in the world, with an overarching coherence and, ideally, bring one onto a path to salvation. This answering may be more voluntaristic or more rationalistic, but either way it serves the purpose of affirming the divine world order. As such, theodicy is a "positive," not "negative," enterprise.

[13] While Wolfson has offered, in *Philosophical Pathos*, an important reading of Taubes as a Jewish thinker grappling with her tradition, what interests me here is how her thinking and writing work at the same time across traditions. If Taubes draws equally on such texts and authors as the Book of Job, Augustine, *Pistis Sophia*, Martin Heidegger, and Simone Weil, it is because she seeks, as it were, to distill the generic narrative structures of theodicy and anti-theodicy that would resonate transhistorically with the modern condition.

The positivity of theodicy is, however, ambivalent. What does theodical affirmation in fact affirm? Leibniz's term "theodicy," combining *theos* and *dikē*, refers most directly to an affirmation of divine justice: Theodicy justifies or legitimates God as good and just. At the same time, as the Leibnizian doctrine of this being "the best of all possible worlds" attests, theodicy seeks to justify God not as prior to or separate from creation but as the one who creates and governs this world. Theodicy aims to justify both the goodness of God (as the creator and steerer of the world) and the goodness of the world (as divinely created and steered), thus functioning at once as God-legitimating or God-affirming and world-legitimating or world-affirming discourse.

Therefore, the problem of theodicy is not least a problem of mediation: How can one mediate between the negativity of the world and the goodness of God and his established order? Hans Blumenberg, an important participant in the postwar debate around modernity and Gnosticism, considers providence to be a crucial component of theodical discourse.[14] This is arguably because "providence" names precisely the mechanism of mediating between the worldly and the divine. Providence remediates particular beings, including those that seem to transgress or deviate from the divine order, those that are fallen or turned away from God, or those that seem to suffer for no reason, (back) into the divine order as good and just—into the universal divine law and into the narrative of salvation history, of damnation and redemption. Via this remediation, one is supposed to be reconciled with the world-creating and world-governing divine principle.

Already Plato affirms the "law and order" at work throughout the cosmos, ensuring that its every part, no matter how lowly or faulty, "does and suffers what is proper to it."[15] Providence is a mechanism of consolation and control: "for by [the divine law] thou wilt not ever be neglected, neither if thou shouldest dive . . . into the depths . . . nor if thou shouldest soar up to the height of Heaven."[16] The providential world order is the *universal distribution of proper place* overseen by divine justice, so that one always deserves the place one has within it—and if one occupies a bad or lowly place, it is because one has been judged to be bad or lowly. Such thinkers of theodicy as Augustine, Leibniz, or Schelling ascribe similar principles to the world governance of the Christian God. For them, there is likewise no escaping divine judgment: If one turns or wanders away from God, one finds oneself in a condition of darkness and fallenness, and this very condition is one's punishment and must be regarded as a trial and what opens the path to redemption, flowing into the grand redemption narrative that is the world process. As Augustine

[14] See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (MIT Press, 1983), 132. Through providence, the world as divinely created is "related to man" and his existence in the world (ibid., 345).

[15] Plato, *Laws: Books 7–12*, trans. R. G. Bury (Harvard University Press, 1926), 367 (904c), 363 (903b).

[16] Plato, *Laws: Books 7–12*, 369 (905a).

emphasizes, to adopt the true divine point of view is to see everything as being providentially in its proper place and time.[17] In this manner, providence converts negativity and evil into an affirmation of the divine world order.

The post-Auschwitz crisis of theodicy entails a breakdown of providence, of mediation between the world and God. Theodical questioning intensifies to the point of seeming to preclude any theodical answering. The "void of divine absence" of which Taubes speaks[18] implies not just an absence of divine immediacy, since in both the Jewish and the Christian tradition there is already a radical distance between God and the fallen world. It further implies, even more crucially, the absence of the entire divine apparatus of mediation: The evil that one encounters in the world can no longer be remediated via a higher divine will or providence. For Taubes as for Weil, "the meaningless suffering of the concentration camps" in particular becomes the place where this absence is obvious.[19] This place cannot be made part of the providential world order, for that would mean to negate the gratuitousness and uselessness of suffering.[20] However, the providential apparatus constitutively admits of no exception, and so it must either be maintained as all-encompassing or collapse into the void opened by suffering.

For both Taubes and Weil, this collapse plunges the world in darkness, in "ways of death and halfdeath"; the void of divine absence is what the soul now inhabits as the condition of the world. The shattering of the providential edifice is not emancipatory: If anything, its debris pins the soul even more strongly to the here below, precluding any salvific ascent. In Taubes's account, Weil's theology of divine absence inhabits this collapse, refusing to legitimate the world that produces such suffering. Weil rejects the world-legitimating pole of theodicy. The whole distribution of place that is the world having been emptied of meaning, providence becomes indistinguishable from the alien force of external necessity—the force Weil calls "gravity"—that keeps the soul bound to what theodicy affirms as the salvific distribution of proper place but what can no longer be perceived as such by the soul itself. In the world of industrial modernity, gravity reigns unrestrained: Weil views the concentration camp as produced by the same force that governs "the futility of manual labor" at modern factories and "the coercive necessity of

[17] See, e.g., Augustine, *Confessions: Books 1–8*, trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond (Harvard University Press, 2014), 369–71 (8.8). As we will see in the third section, this conversion of everything (including fallenness and wandering in darkness) to the divine source, so that nothing remains without providential oversight and telos, is precisely how Taubes understands the Augustinian theodical model. And while in Augustine temporal life is a "distraction" that "flows back" into God, so that all flight is returned onto the redemptive path, Taubes asserts a fugitivity decoupled from such a path. See Augustine, *Confessions: Books 9–13*, trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond (Harvard University Press, 2016), 255 (11.39).

[18] Taubes, "Absent God," 16.

[19] Taubes, "Absent God," 7.

[20] See also Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (Routledge, 1988), 156–67.

matter" in the modern construction of nature.[21] Any continuing invocation of the good, orderly life, any recourse to a higher providential order, can serve only to cover up the unmediatable void at the heart of the world and to justify the degrading affliction on which the world is premised. In Weil, the concentration camp becomes the symbol of the world as "a field of force where there is a perpetual transmission of evil from man to man."[22] In her Gnostic vision, the fact of the world structurally coincides with the fact of evil, and the modern age but discloses, on an industrial scale, the true character of world history as the overarching trajectory of suffering.

In the revealed godlessness of the world, Weil's mysticism sees the figure of the divine: the God who himself dies at the hands of the world. To retain a sense of theodical answering, to affirm God's goodness without justifying the world he creates, Weil advances a doctrine of divine absence and impotence. She denies resurrection, omnipotence, or eschatological hope. What she finds in Christianity is the revelation of Christ's suffering and death—of a passive, powerless God who renounces his divinity and kenotically empties himself. This is how she configures creation, too: as God's self-sacrifice in the face of what emerges as other than him, that is, the world. In this very otherness, however, the world is "negatively" divine because it makes manifest the void that the soul must endure so as to become one with divine self-renunciation. In the dark depths of affliction, the soul finds the force to resist the law of gravity. "To endure the void, to suffer evil, is our contact with God": In this manner, suffering emerges in Weil as redemptive.[23] She sees in the cross not the symbol of Christian world conquest, but the (non-)place of infinite endurance. The counterforce to gravity, through which the soul endures suffering and loves the void that reveals the absent God, is "grace." This grace does not transport one to what Augustine calls "the homeland of bliss [*beatitudo*]."[24] It unites in love the wretched and crucified of the world, who can retain their souls only by not being subdued by the world even in extreme suffering.

We can now explicate Taubes's critique of Weil's "negative theodicy." For Taubes, Weil refuses to affirm the goodness of the world only to (negatively) legitimate the order of divine goodness. To maintain the affirmation of the creator-God, she reconfigures him, by way of negation, as the impotent, absent divinity who has no agency except self-sacrifice, and whose grace is likewise passive. Creation coincides with God's self-renunciation and is itself a "sin," a "great crime" hanging over God, whom all of us, subject to gravity due to this divine crime, must forgive out of solidarity with his suffering,

[21] Taubes, "Absent God," 7.
[22] Taubes, "Absent God," 9.
[23] Taubes, "Absent God," 9–10.
[24] Augustine, *Confessions: Books 1–8*, 349 (7.26). Compare Taubes, "Absent God," 11: For Weil, "the true union with God is not beatific but crucifying, for we become one with God in void and slavery, one with the crucified God."

consenting to love the void of his absence on which the world is erected.[25] In this manner, God is pardoned and acquitted: a theodical operation. Moreover, one reconciles oneself with evil at a higher level: To accept and pardon the sin of creation is to "consent to the world, consent to necessity and to the suffering of the innocent, because God has consented."[26]

Thereby, however, the non-place of suffering is remediated, via the figure of Christ, into the proper place of redemption. Providence, as the subordination of evil to the divine order, is smuggled in through a theodical backdoor. Weil's insistence that one should not actively seek out suffering but ought to accept and endure the suffering that comes one's way as redemptive is itself providential in character: as though there were ever a proper time and place for, or divine grace in, suffering.[27] As Taubes diagnoses it, a vicious redemptive circle emerges in Weil's thought: Suffering is there due to the fact of the world, the fact that marks God's own suffering and impotence, so that the divine is revealed *in* suffering. Gravity and grace reoccupy the binary of damnation and redemption, turning Weil's theodical construction into a negative redemption narrative that justifies suffering as the privileged locus of redemption and "the sole union with God,"[28] and that thus makes suffering into the necessary condition of redemption.

What Taubes objects to is that, while Weil calls suffering "useless in appearance," she is set on finding "a supernatural *use* for suffering."[29] As we know from Emmanuel Levinas, too, to make evil and suffering appear useful, to make them serve the goodness of divine order, is a central ruse of theodicy.[30] In Taubes's view, Weil fails to inhabit immanently the darkness and affliction that expose the violence and unsustainability of the entire theodical apparatus. "The hells of the afflicted are unredeemable," Taubes asserts—and redeeming what is unredeemable is itself a crime against those who suffer. To tell the oppressed that their suffering is redemptive, "a special sign of the love of God," is to bind them to their place of suffering, to keep them nailed to their cross, to glorify their subjugation.[31] For Taubes, the binary order of gravity and grace *is* the order of the world, which, instead of eliminating suffering and subjugation, divinizes them and thereby reproduces itself.

Taubes insists that the dark ground of the world order, whose darkness is laid bare in the twentieth century, must not be covered up with theodical answering, with "divine" reasons and uses. Instead, one must dwell with the reality of this darkness, inhabiting it as the ground for a theodical questioning

[25] Taubes, "Absent God," 10.
[26] Taubes, "Absent God," 10.
[27] Taubes, "Absent God," 11.
[28] Taubes, "Absent God," 14.
[29] Taubes, "Absent God," 8, 11.
[30] See Levinas, "Useless Suffering."
[31] Taubes, "Absent God," 14–15.

that refuses to legitimate this world or its creator. Taubes interprets the Book of Job in a similar anti-theodical vein: Job "believed to the end that the suffering of a just man is unjust and did not speculate on the supernatural uses of suffering," instead "question[ing] the justice of God" out of the depths of his affliction.[32] This questioning reflects Taubes's own imperative: to dwell antagonistically with(in) the dark ground without theodicizing it, without inscribing it into a theodicy. The "why" of world estrangement, she writes in 1952, "does not ask for an 'answer' but rather for dwelling . . . within the question itself, living the question."[33] In her literary works, this imperative takes the form precisely of refusing and fleeing the imposition of a providential order or redemption narrative. In the absence of beatific ascent, it is only insofar as one refuses the binary of redemption and damnation that one can inhabit, however fleetingly, the non-place of what is antagonistic to the space and time of the world.

GNOSTIC DREAMING: *DIVORCING*

In the Gnostic redemption narrative as Taubes grasps it, knowledge of estrangement brings salvation. In Gnosticism, "man is a stranger in the world," she writes in an essay on Heidegger, also published in *The Journal of Religion*. "Strangeness is moreover a quality of the world; the world is a strange place in which man suffers as a stranger." The Gnostic "drama of the self" reaches its climax in "the self's realization of its self-estrangement" *qua* the beginning of awakening: of remembering one's heavenly home, recollecting one's scattered divine essence, and escaping one's captivity to worldly powers by ascending to the otherworldly God of salvation.[34] In this schema, suffering and estrangement have their redemptive place, just as they do in the "Gnostic heretic" Weil. The nightmare of this world below serves as a kind of proving ground, a force field of falsehood and illusion one must break through. This narrative is also a theodicy that assumes a salvific distribution of place premised on the binary of above and below, redemption and damnation, and that turns suffering, darkness, and error into what is necessary for discerning the light of truth.

By the 1960s, Taubes abandons academic philosophy of religion and turns to literature as a way of grappling narratively with estrangement. One may observe, however, that already her early scholarly publications—on Weil, Heidegger, and tragedy—approach the existential situation of a self in crisis

[32] Taubes, "Absent God," 16. In Susan Taubes, "The Nature of Tragedy," *Review of Metaphysics* 7, no. 2 (1953): 193–206, she likewise approaches Job as one "who, conscious of his innocence, simply questions the justice [of God]." Taubes, "The Nature of Tragedy," 202.

[33] Susan Taubes, *Korrespondenz 1952*, 21.

[34] Susan Anima Taubes, "The Gnostic Foundations of Heidegger's Nihilism," *Journal of Religion* 34, no. 3 (1954): 158–59.

narratively, focusing in particular on the Gnostic narrative model. Taubes's 1960s texts such as *Lament for Julia* and *Divorcing* are a literary continuation of the same approach, her attempts to write a Gnostic narrative for the twentieth-century condition. Compared to the emphasis on collective suffering in her critique of Weil, Taubes's literary works may seem decidedly private in scope: Through the lives of fictional alter egos, they may be taken to narrate her wrestling with her own life course and condition of estrangement. Yet the impression of narrowness is misleading: In these texts, as in Gnosticism, the estranged condition of the soul mirrors the condition of the world, and the drama of the individual allegorizes the universal drama of redemption—or, in this case, the breakdown of the redemptive world order.

Taubes criticizes the "otherworldliness" of "gnosis" already in 1952,[35] not least because she is convinced that one must tarry with the world's brokenness instead of covering it up with invocations of transcendence. In the absence of the salvific divinity holding together the general Gnostic antagonism between God, self, and world, the redemption narrative ceases to cohere, and self and world become equally scattered. Such is the condition of contemporary literary writing for Taubes, "the way books are written when there is no world to write about, or destinies."[36] "World" is to be understood here in the theodical sense of the orderly distribution of place and rank inscribed into the apparatus of redemption—into what in her essay on tragedy, explaining what she means by "theodicy," Taubes calls "the larger design," the providential "divine order" that allows one to make sense of one's destiny and guarantees that the soul's "protest" is met "with divine response," generating "a divine understanding," a conciliatory knowledge.[37]

One finds a similar theodical model in the narrative of *Pistis Sophia*, the Gnostic text to which Taubes refers in *Divorcing*.[38] A big part of *Pistis Sophia* relates the story of Sophia, a female emanation who becomes trapped in the dark chaos of the world below because she mistakes the illusory for the true light.[39] Realizing her error, Sophia refuses to give in to worldly powers, instead keeping her faith (*pistis*) and calling to Jesus—the providential mediator of the transcendent divinity—to raise her out of her affliction. *Pistis Sophia* puts great emphasis on the proper "distribution of places" (*topoi*) and "ranks" (*taxeis*) as part of the vast theo-cosmic apparatus of good and

[35] See Taubes, *Korrespondenz 1952*, 186.

[36] Unpublished note (ca. 1965), quoted in Pareigis, *Susan Taubes*, 340.

[37] Taubes, "Nature of Tragedy," 199.

[38] Susan Taubes, *Divorcing* (Random House, 1969), 74 (henceforth *Divorcing*): "What do you expect on this planet mud? . . . all human bumbling programmed billions light years ago in pseudo-substance as predicted in the Pistis Sophia." On *Pistis Sophia*'s reception as a Gnostic text, see Paul Linjamaa, "The Reception of *Pistis Sophia* and Gnosticism," *Aries* 23, no. 2 (2023): 262–300.

[39] The false light is that of the male power Jaldabaoth. For a summary, possibly familiar to Taubes, of the theo-cosmic arrangement in *Pistis Sophia*, see Francis Legge, *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity*, vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 1915), 146–55.

evil.[40] The dark place of chaos, where Sophia is caught, belongs within this distribution as the proving ground for her faith: In a trial of steadfastness, she has to pray nine times to show herself worthy of salvation. Then Jesus rescues her: "I brought her up from the *Chaos* because she had *repented*, and also because she had *believed* in the light."[41] In the end, Sophia is exalted, transfigured into "a pure light."[42] Her call is thus met with divine response: "The Lord has . . . turned my lament into rejoicing."[43]

For Taubes, even Gnostic texts such as *Pistis Sophia* are too theodical to reflect the twentieth-century condition. By contrast, no God or divine mediator can save the protagonist of *Divorcing*, Sophie Landsmann, from being bound to the dark, unblissful world.[44] The novel is styled as an autobiography, with Sophie's life in many ways mirroring Taubes's: from her rabbinic ancestry and childhood in Budapest, to her flight to the United States with her father, her later life in New York and Paris, and finally the arduous process of divorcing Jacob Taubes, who appears in the novel under the name Ezra Blind. In a phantasmagoric twist on the genre, Sophie seeks to narrate her life from the (non-)position of death: The novel's opening reveals that she has been decapitated by a car when crossing the street. "Now that I'm dead I can write my autobiography at last," she quips in a later scene.[45]

Try as she might, however, Sophie cannot reassemble pieces of herself into an orderly narrative. "Estranged from itself . . . , the self is scattered through the world": This characterization of Gnosticism from Taubes's Heidegger essay applies equally to Sophie's condition.[46] If damnation equals fragmentation, the puzzle of one's life not coming together, then Sophie is surely damned; and unlike in the Gnostic redemption narrative, no anamnesis or repair is possible for her. "Coherent discourse? How do you expect me—? Begin to explain now in my present state of decomposition? . . . Can't expect me to remember everything," she retorts to the demand of providing a "personal" account of herself.[47] Sophie "has no position, she has no plans, she is nowhere."[48] *Divorcing* is a novel of failed recollection, whose title refers just as much to divorcing Ezra or to Sophie's decapitation (as the severing of mind from body, too) as to the alienation and fragmentation that are ever ongoing. In physical death, Sophie is but further dispersed: "my body

[40] *Pistis Sophia*, trans. Violet MacDermot (Brill, 1978), 5; cf. 89: "the places below, the parts of the Chaos." Compare *Koptisch-gnostische Schriften, Bd. I: Die Pistis Sophia. Die beiden Bücher des Jeû. Unbekanntes altgnostisches Werk*, ed. Carl Schmidt (Akademie-Verlag, 1981), 1, which highlights the Greek terms retained in the Coptic text.

[41] *Pistis Sophia*, 197.

[42] *Pistis Sophia*, 309.

[43] *Pistis Sophia*, 327.

[44] While "Sophie" is a reference to Sophia, "Landsmann" is a variation on Taubes's maiden name, Feldmann.

[45] *Divorcing*, 140.

[46] Taubes, "Gnostic Foundations," 159.

[47] *Divorcing*, 74.

[48] *Divorcing*, 40.

growing enormous, its thousands of trillions of cells suddenly set free, spread, speeded . . ."[49] In a quasi-Humean manner, Taubes configures the mind as a bundle of impressions that is no less bound to the time of the world than the body. What else, in this framework, is the passage of time if not the ongoingness of scattering, in life as in death? The novel's opening is, accordingly, followed by a formally disjointed patchwork of chapters and scenes that combines first-person and third-person narration, epistolary passages and pieces of a family saga, realism and absurdism, jumping from scene to scene in a way that blends dream and reality: "Sophie Blind isn't sure whether she is dreaming" is an opening motif that sets the tone for the rest of the text.[50]

The struggle of writing one's autobiography, the novel posits, is not unlike that of saving oneself from the entropy of time by constructing a redemptive life course that would counteract dispersion. "The struggle is in time and against time, that much is certain," Sophie reflects. "The object is not so clear. To set up the start and finish lines. Chart a course. To salvage from the morass of memory and the diffusion of the present—what?"[51] In the paradigmatic Gnostic model, this "what" would be one's innermost divine essence that, through recollection, must be salvaged from time so as to transcend time. Sophie likewise seeks a transcendent telos: She longs for "the true death" *qua* salvific awakening from the fever dream of the world.[52] Yet, the irony of the modern Gnostic condition is that while the world may be a nightmare, a violent illusion, it is an illusion from which there is no awakening or liberation, not even in death. Death fails to serve as a passage to a higher state or an escape from the world.[53] The dead Sophie revisits the same entanglements and circumstances, unable to transcend them, her condition refracting the spectral character of postwar existence. The world's unreality is deeply felt by her, whom Ezra condemns as a "childish woman . . . driven by impossible dreams, lacking all sense of reality"[54]—and nonetheless she remains chained to the world.

Sophie's "impossible dream," her messianic longing, is not for a transcendent salvation, but *to really be*, not to be suspended as though in a limbo or half-death—and for the world to simply let her be, without imposing preordained "providential" roles on her. "She, perhaps, wanted simply to stop dreaming," the novel explains Sophie's decision to marry Ezra: She wants

[49] *Divorcing*, 6.

[50] *Divorcing*, 5. Taubes claimed that the idea for *Divorcing* came to her in a dream, too. See Pareigis, *Susan Taubes*, 361.

[51] *Divorcing*, 28.

[52] *Divorcing*, 75.

[53] As Plotinus writes of the Gnostics, they "claim that they are able to leave the universe behind them when they die." Plotinus, *The Enneads*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson, trans. George Boys-Stones et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 235 (2.9.18.36–37).

[54] *Divorcing*, 32.

something real over and against the world.[55] Like Sophia in *Pistis Sophia*, Sophie takes Ezra's illusory light—his outward brilliance as a thinker—for the light of truth; yet this turns out to be a deception trapping her in darkness. Sophie's estrangement is even deeper than the historical estrangement of the Jewish people, which *Divorcing* describes in strikingly Gnostic terms: "In the spring 1938 Passover at Grandmother's had the quality of a gathering for a massacre. And perhaps this is what being a Jew always meant. It began with slavery in Egypt and a God who led them out to be his chosen people, and then they were always strangers, wandering, remembering in the land of the stranger how God led them out . . . It was always strange stories and waiting for a prophet, but actually for something terrible to happen, a great punishment."[56] The pious notion of massacre as divine punishment is, however, foreign to both Sophie and Taubes herself. There is no divine judgment in persecution, no prophet Elijah or messiah to come, no return to the divine origin or promised land. Sophie, too, is "haunted by the ghosts of Judaism"[57] yet estranged from the whole Jewish redemptive-providential apparatus that mediates between life in the world and the salvific God: "Afterlife, soul, Judgment, God, One People, One Law: never believed a word of it."[58] This apparatus but binds one further to the world.

The redemptive apparatus's spectral presence is what Sophie struggles to exorcize, as symbolized by her repeated attempts to obtain a divorce from Ezra, the apparatus's representative in the novel, or simply to get him to leave her alone, to let her be. A "worldly," well-connected philosopher, Ezra Blind's last name is also symbolic, as he is not only blind to Sophie's torment but keeps her bound to the false reality of a marriage she perceives as erroneous, thus blinding her, too: Sophie Landsmann becomes Sophie Blind.[59] His blindness is further evident in the fact that, despite his flair for antinomian provocation, he takes for granted the redemptive order prescribed by Judaism as though this order were not in crisis. If there is a leitmotif accompanying Ezra's appearances in *Divorcing*, it is his constitutive failure, as

[55] *Divorcing*, 23.

[56] *Divorcing*, 214. The association of the Jewish and the Gnostic condition (of being strangers in a strange land worshipping a strange God) may seem surprising to those coming from today's scholarship, where Gnosticism is mostly understood as an umbrella term for *Christian* heresy. However, for Taubes—as for Jonas and Scholem—Gnosticism is also (though not exclusively) a Jewish phenomenon. Compare Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 33; Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken Books, 1946), 35. One should not, however, reduce Taubes to a "Jewish Gnostic," given her simultaneous polemic against Gnosticism and Judaism. Commenting on the present article, an anonymous reviewer suggested that one could call Taubes's approach "post-Gnostic," and I agree with that suggestion as long as one approaches this "post-" not as periodizing but as marking a critical distance and reworking.

[57] Taubes, *Korrespondenz 1952*, 62.

[58] *Divorcing*, 75.

[59] Blind was also the maiden name of Jacob Taubes's mother, Fanny, a "dedicated Zionist" (Pareigis, *Susan Taubes*, 180) unlike the anti-Zionist Susan Taubes, marking a further layer of her estrangement from Jacob.

a man who is part and parcel of the androcentric world (of Jewish tradition too), to comprehend why Sophie would not accept her proper redemptive place as Jewish wife and mother. "Ezra couldn't understand why she wanted [the divorce]."[60] "Perhaps I really don't understand" (Ezra admits).[61] "Ezra doesn't understand. . . . Will never understand."[62]

Ezra is the chief of the (predominantly male) powers that keep Sophie imprisoned in the world: the chief of the archons, in Gnostic parlance. There are others, too. In a surreal divorce trial scene, where Sophie appears before the court in a coffin, her character is judged by not only her husband but also the collective "rabbis" who declare her a blasphemer and a whore, her father testifying to her insanity, her absentee mother, and the judge who ultimately grants the divorce "since it has not been proven that she is dead."[63] Legal judgment is an illusory substitute for absent divine judgment, and cannot save Sophie from the world of which it is itself a part: In the very next scene, she wakes up next to Ezra again, unable to get rid of him. In drafts not included in the published text, Sophie is further judged by the prominent men she had known, including Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem. Scholem, repulsed by her anti-Zionism, calls her "too alienated from her Jewish sources," while Buber denounces her as a "mystic" and "Gnostic." "I call that heresy," he adds.[64] It is to these judging *I*'s, to all the archons keeping her confined, that Sophie's feverish cry is addressed:

> Gentlemen, why are you so old and ugly? Good grief, if I should need further proof that this whole thing is a fraud, it's your presence. . . . Afterlife, soul, Judgment, God, One People, One Law: never believed a word of it. . . . Greatly regret, infinitely sorry, unspeakably ashamed of stupidities I got enmeshed in by some particle of belief in your lies. Enough. . . . The fact that you invade my privacy, sprout in my dreams . . . [is] proof that this is not the true death here with you. When I'm truly dead, my friends, I won't see you standing around me. I will find a way out, I'll get back my arms and limbs, my head, even my heart, I'll find it whatever you've done with it.[65]

Like Sophia, Sophie repents because she mistook the fraudulent for the true: What is fraudulent here, however, is the supposed apparatus of redemption. Unlike Sophia's, hers is not a pious lamentation or prayer. The emphatic *I will find a way out* is a "cry against the harshness of the world," which in 1952 Taubes had denounced as too "infantile."[66] *Divorcing* no longer rejects childishness in a quasi-Enlightenment manner: It is only insofar as Sophie is a "childish woman" dreaming "impossible dreams" that she

[60] *Divorcing*, 10.
[61] *Divorcing*, 34. And even when he claims to understand ("Sophie, you are a child . . . I understand you"; 40), he is too condescending to really understand.
[62] *Divorcing*, 61.
[63] *Divorcing*, 135.
[64] Unpublished draft, quoted in Pareigis, *Susan Taubes*, 261.
[65] *Divorcing*, 75.
[66] Taubes, *Korrespondenz 1952*, 204.

retains her fugitive resolve to oppose the world, to escape. However, dreams are also treacherous, susceptible to invasion by malevolent powers: In an unpublished fragment from the early 1960s, Taubes depicts a woman who jumps off a cliff pursued by a dream her husband is dreaming.[67] *Pistis Sophia*, too, suggests that the archons intrude on one's very desiring and dreaming, their dilatory maneuvers serving to uphold the not-yet of the world and endlessly defer redemption and recollection.[68] Similarly, in the funeral scene in *Divorcing*, it is made clear that Sophie's death has not brought true judgment ("Judgment? Not yet"[69]). At the end of the novel, as no salvation has been attained, her earlier cry is echoed in the modality of questioning: "Because I'm not awake yet? . . . Not truly awake."[70] The novel forms a Gnostic knot: Life in the world is a dream, it is not real, and the dreamer dreams of what is real, of an awakening from the world; but this prescribed awakening is an impossible dream, too, arising within and *against* the dream of the world.

This knot signals a futility, impotence, even "irrelevance"[71] inherent in Sophie's dreaming, its lack of meaning in worldly terms. Her questioning ("Because I'm not awake yet?"), itself in the form of a not-yet, is powerless to abolish the world, to tear down its prison walls. It does, however, allow one to retain an antagonistic sense of fugitivity and messianicity. If there are traces of the messianic in *Divorcing*, it is not in the transcendent futurity Sophie's cry despairingly invokes. Whereas in *Pistis Sophia*, Sophia escapes to the place of the truth thanks to her faith, for Sophie there is no getting out of the world *despite* her stubborn faith (her "I will find a way out"). As Ingmar Bergman, a postwar master of divine absence and the collapse of redemptive order, writes in the screenplay for *Persona* (1966): "The great shout of our faith and doubt against the darkness and silence is the most terrifying evidence of our forlornness, our terrified unexpressed knowledge"—the knowledge *of* forlornness, the unsalvific gnosis.[72] For Taubes, this gnosis, while not raising one from darkness, can serve as the non-place for questioning the world, and for an endless flight from places of violence following the infinite call of impossible bliss—for a fugitive not-yet, a shadow double beneath the not-yet of the world.

From this perspective, those moments are messianic where, if only for a little while, one is unbound from the distribution of proper place, or where the world is momentarily dissolved before one inevitably finds oneself back in its grasp. In *Divorcing*, such is Sophie's oneness with her lover, Ivan, outside the redemptive paradigm of marriage, in secret from the world. Such

[67] See Pareigis, *Susan Taubes*, 322.
[68] See *Pistis Sophia*, 567. I take the phrase "dilatory manoeuvres" from Legge, *Forerunners and Rivals*, 153.
[69] *Divorcing*, 69.
[70] *Divorcing*, 249.
[71] *Divorcing*, 249.
[72] Ingmar Bergman, *Persona and Shame*, trans. Keith Bradfield (Marion Boyars, 1976), 47.

is also her unity, in death, with the vastness of the ocean, earth, and sky as her body is scattered across the globe, as though approaching more-than-human beatitude obliquely, dreamlike: "It's lovely, lovely. Messages from all over and under the world—larvae at sea bottom, maggots deep in the earth, a flying seed. God."[73] It is, finally, those narrative lacunae where the space-time of the world is ungrounded, as in the scene of Sophie transfixed, immersed at a New York bookstore "in a volume of ballads by [Hungarian poet] Arany Janos, poems she read as a child." Here, "Sophie reads like a child" again, in a paradisal self-oblivion: "She does not understand the power moving her, the movement stronger than emotion or meaning."[74] Sophie's blissful immersion is not unlike the "stilling of the commotion of the flesh, . . . the stilling even of heaven, and the soul itself" described by Augustine—except, instead of "absorb[ing] us" in divine presence,[75] it pries open a utopic non-space not for a salvific ascent but for slipping away from the mediation of the world. "The poem is silent, holding its breath, stepping like a thief or a fugitive," stealing Sophie out of the time of scattering and reuniting her with her childhood self.[76] This fugitive power cannot undo the "real" world, and as Sophie finishes reading, she is startled to find herself in New York again. Still, this power can briefly hold back the imposition of the world, carving out a transient shelter of an impossible bliss, a crack in which, however fleetingly, to hide, to recall something important that had been forgotten, to *simply be*, without estrangement.

TO BE WITHOUT NARRATIVE: *LAMENT FOR JULIA*

Divorcing lays bare the impossibility of finding an escape from the world to a salvific truth beyond the cycle of wakefulness and dream, life and death. The fragmentary a-worldly sites (of poetry, love, planetary oneness), marking the soul's evasion of the world's unblissful enclosure, sound contrapuntally over the course of the novel, never solidifying into a narrative but pointing to the void of the messianic in the world. The novella *Lament for Julia*, written in the early 1960s, even more radically configures the messianic as the divine absence that is utterly unnarratable, yet around which the narrative elliptically revolves. The text's very form does not seek to represent the messianic but *lets it be fugitive*.

Lament's premise plays on the duality of the rational and the prerational parts of the self. Within the novella's protagonist, these two halves end up estranged, unreconciled. There is her bodily self or embodied soul, the living being that she materially is, carrying the name "Julia Klopps." And then there is Julia's mind, the rational self or the I, the active principle and novella's

[73] *Divorcing*, 73.
[74] *Divorcing*, 180.
[75] Augustine, *Confessions: Books 9–13*, 49–51 (9.25).
[76] *Divorcing*, 180.

narrator: Over the course of its five short chapters, *Lament* presents a narrative in which Julia's mind, as distinct from her embodied soul, seeks retrospectively to recall the entire trajectory of her life yet fails at forming a coherent picture of it. Julia herself does not narrate, only the I does, and the text opens as the I laments Julia's disappearance: "She is gone. Julia has left me. For good now, I think. She went silently under the cover of the night. It was the only way she could leave without being followed. I think of her going out into the night, going out like a candle, going down perhaps. I will never know where."[77] The repetition of "I think" sets up the image of a Cartesian *cogito*, the rational principle in contrast to Julia's embodied particularity. This is arguably why Julia is named while the narrator remains unnamed: Rationality, normativity is not particular; the I is at once "mine" and the universal rational capacity that guides me. Moreover, since in this androcentric world rationality and universality are figured as masculine, the narrator's relationship with Julia is gendered: The I is figured as the male demiurgic principle, the self-proclaimed "celestial spark" watching over and seeking to shape the female soul assigned to him as his "bride."[78] "For years," he states, "I have worked on her, trained her for one role, then another."[79] He regards himself as the "creator," "author," "artist," the Pygmalion to Julia the Galatea, the endower of form to Julia's passivity and formlessness.[80] Since she escaped, he laments, "I can no longer lord over her, entangle her in my web, dangle her like a puppet": machinations that Gnosticism ascribes to the demiurge and the archons.[81]

The underlying idea to this splitting of the narrator from Julia is simple: One's rational self is what "demiurgically" arranges one's life into a coherent life course meant to counteract empirical dispersion and to lead toward the good life. The I has a "craving for recognition," for a "place in the order of being."[82] One's I makes plans for one's future and is supposed to steer one to one's recognized place in what Hegel has called "the great work of the world" as the ethical and salvific whole in which one is recognized and reconciled.[83] Thus understood, the I is more than just the mind—it is the

[77] Susan Taubes, *Lament for Julia and Other Stories* (New York Review Books, 2023), 3 (henceforth *Lament*).

[78] *Lament*, 3, 23: an image of the "marriage" of mind and body as the ideal figure of wholeness.

[79] *Lament*, 4.

[80] *Lament*, 5, 9. I take the narrator's male gender to be central to *Lament*. The narrator explicitly refers to himself as masculine (e.g., ibid., 9, 79). And even if as a "celestial spark" he may be originally nonbinary, in his coupling with Julia he functions structurally as her male counterpart, reflecting the association of the rational, forming principle with the masculine, and of passivity and formlessness (Julia's perceived qualities) with the feminine. He is also the demiurge, who is traditionally male. It is crucial that the narrator figures as male because the novella's key theme is the female soul fleeing the world *qua* the androcentric distribution of roles to which the rational self, as upholding this world, wants Julia to conform.

[81] *Lament*, 3.

[82] *Lament*, 63–64. On the narrator's desire for "[Julia's] life attaining a coherence," see ibid., 59.

[83] G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des Geistes. Berlin 1827/28* (Meiner, 1994), 55.

redemptive principle, and the narrator thinks of himself as such: "I was troubled continually for her salvation. . . . I had the care of her soul."[84] The I's providential role is that of the mediator between the soul and the universal or divine order, and the narrator strives to "salvage Julia's life," "to save Julia,"[85] by charting for her a salvific course amid a broken and decentered world that has fallen away from its supposed divine origin.

The novella's Gnostic symbolism of fallenness and divine absence is irreducible to any single schema, cutting across the Christian, the Jewish, and the modern philosophical tradition. Philosophically, the modern subject's condition is, in Taubes's terms, Gnostic insofar as the *cogito* is a structure of groundless negativity and lack, of sheer self-positing, of the I as always already opposed to and alienated from the not-I. As such, the I constitutively has no memory of its own origin: To grasp oneself as "I" is to find oneself estranged from both God and the objective world.[86] "When did I begin?" "How did I come by her?" "What was I without her?" Is he in fact a divine spark? A fallen angel? These questions torment the narrator, who senses himself to be incomplete, broken, and not quite fitting with Julia, either. "If [I am] fallen, that crash has altogether blunted my memory," he bemoans.[87] In the implied model of recollection, to remember one's anteworldly origin is the act from which the path to salvation, to reconstituting the lost wholeness, begins. Finding himself coupled with Julia, the narrator assumes that his mission is to find for her a redemptive place, "to restore her to innocence"—note the messianic operation of restoration or repair—not least because this mission is salvific for himself, aimed at reconciling the I's unblissful alienated state.[88]

However, can a self be repaired in a world that is beyond repair, a redemptive way of being traced amid the unredeemable world? In critical dialogue with Augustine's *Confessions*, the novella constructs a multilayered narrative wherein the posited redemptive-providential model—the narrator's continuous attempt at "preparing her [i.e., Julia] for God," at raising Julia and himself out of the world's "calamity" and "corruption"[89]—is undercut in the absence of the very divine mechanism of mediation that the narrator purports to represent: "Imagine Augustine writing his confessions if God had passed him by. . . . [C]ould that life have made sense of itself along the way in the wilderness? Could the groping in the dark be told before God's gift of faith retroactively redeemed it?"[90] The narrative of *Confessions* implies a theodicy

[84] *Lament*, 4.
[85] *Lament*, 22–23.
[86] "Say my predicament dates from the moment I began thinking in the first person" (*Lament*, 9).
[87] *Lament*, 4–9.
[88] *Lament*, 4.
[89] *Lament*, 4.
[90] *Lament*, 11.

wherein the world's fallenness is subordinated to providence and God offers a divine response to one's tormented self: "I was traveling along the broad path of the world, and you did not abandon me."[91] Augustine's conversion reveals to him that God has made all things good, that evil is nothing real from a divine point of view, that the world process forms a holistic redemption narrative in which everything has a proper place.[92] No such response or revelation is offered to *Lament*'s narrator, who suffers under the burden of the probable meaninglessness of his narrative mission. He is aware that his salvific task is groundless, purely self-imposed ("I have been left without instruction on the matter"), embraced, in an absurd leap of faith, "against the void."[93] The I is a hapless demiurge himself caught in the broken world, clinging onto the vision of a redemptive order that does not hold, and struggling to recollect his time with Julia into the longed-for trajectory of redemption: "In the dark I try to remember Julia."[94]

Julia's childhood is the first thing the narrator reminisces about, and of which he is particularly fond—especially of that "romantic period" when the I and Julia, while already distinct, seemed to constitute a whole, when they "simply eloped" in "a kind of child marriage," escaping to play in the abandoned attic of the parents' house, their (non-)place of shelter from the world, of atemporal "stillness," of the "blissful, oblivious" hours "idled away" together.[95] Things change following Julia's violent expulsion from childhood bliss into the fallen world, as symbolized by her first menstruation and marked by a dream in which the Tree of Life is defiled: "The sky was a swelling. The tree trunk a sore. The apples were blisters. The moon was a boil. Headless dolls hung on a branch, their ivory knees displaying lipstick wounds. What was their crime? Julia danced around the tree with the seven dwarfs. The tree they cried was The Tree of Life. She saw it written on a signpost in red."[96] As Taubes doubtlessly knew, possibly from Scholem's work on Kabbalah, the displacement of the Tree of Life by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—the symbol of separation that, "removed from the joint root with the Tree of Life . . . becomes a 'Tree of Death'"[97]—is a Kabbalistic motif indexing the corruption of the world.

[91] Augustine, *Confessions: Books 1–8*, 253 (6.8).
[92] See Augustine, *Confessions: Books 1–8*, 327–35 (7.16–19).
[93] *Lament*, 14.
[94] *Lament*, 12.
[95] *Lament*, 23–24. "Romantic period" is also Scholem's phrase for the "mystical" stage in the development of a religion, marking "the soul's path . . . [to] the primordial unity" (Scholem, *Major Trends*, 8). Compare below.
[96] *Lament*, 38.
[97] Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (1962; Schocken Books, 1991), 76. The Tree of Death also symbolizes the corruption of the Shekhinah (ibid., 189–90), or female divine presence associated with the moon—a fact that is important if one reads Julia as the exiled Shekhinah, as I do below.

Headless dolls may point in this context to the severing of mind from body, the dividedness ("divorcing") constitutive of postlapsarian existence.

From this point on, the I is decisively split from Julia.[98] At the same time, it is now that his salvific work proper begins: He must decide on the right life course for Julia. "Labor[ing] in the void,"[99] he envisions two main alternative paths for her, each redemptive in its own way, mapping onto the tension, emphasized by many scholars including Scholem and Elliot R. Wolfson, between the Christian and the Jewish notion of what constitutes an ideal salvific life. The first path is becoming a nun, which, however, the narrator rejects. The second—which he chooses—consists in following a woman's preordained telos of becoming wife and mother, in keeping with the sacral task of marriage and procreation in the Jewish tradition, with what the narrator regards as "the sacred order of things."[100]

When Julia marries Peter, a successful engineer, and bears his children, it would seem that the narrator's mission is fulfilled: She has become "the good Julia," a "faithful and solicitous wife."[101] "It was enough to wake up in the morning and to know that her life was mapped out for her to the grave," the narrator recalls, "[and that] we were on the right road" within the theodical order, within "God's good world."[102] The I even temporarily vanishes, reconciled, once the husband takes over ("in a shudder of joy I perished"): perhaps an allusion to the fact that, in the androcentric order the narrator considers redemptive, the husband becomes the wife's rational self.[103] "Age of faith" is what the I retrospectively dubs the first, happy period of Julia's marriage.[104] Her subsequent love affair with Paul, an architecture student, marks for the narrator the beginning of Julia's downfall, her "plunge into a disorder from which there was no recovery," her becoming "the fallen woman," a fugitive from the providential bonds: something that, as the rational demiurge seeking what is normative for her, he cannot comprehend.[105] Love as such, outside the redemptive order, is too disorderly,

[98] *Lament*, 38.

[99] *Lament*, 83.

[100] *Lament*, 81; cf. 114. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 235, and Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (Fordham University Press, 2005), 312: the Jewish notion of marriage as redemptive "serves as a polemic against the Christian affirmation of celibacy as the means to restore humanity to its pristine state." Marriage and celibacy are the two paths Augustine considers in *Confessions*, too.

[101] *Lament*, 76.

[102] *Lament*, 87–89.

[103] *Lament*, 78. As Wolfson puts it, in the Jewish tradition in particular, "the ontological locus of the female is in the male" (*Language, Eros, Being*, 311). Significantly, the I feels not only joy during Julia's marriage: he also senses that, as Julia's self, he remains "in bonds" due to her giving her I over to Peter (*Lament*, 87). The I becomes estranged from Julia's married life, to the point of drinking alone in the shed (ibid., 84). The I thus senses that Julia's marriage is unsalvific for him, too.

[104] *Lament*, 88.

[105] *Lament*, 88, 94. The male demiurge's incomprehension of Julia's desire to escape marriage recalls Ezra's incomprehension in *Divorcing*.

too utopic, for it to have a proper rational place: "And the affair itself, where shall I place it?" the narrator ponders. "It doesn't really fit anywhere."[106]

Peter and Paul's names are symbolic: Peter is the apostle of the Church, and Paul of love and mystery. The stages of Julia's love life may be taken to form, moreover, a parallel to Scholem's analysis of the stages every religious impulse must go through: Her "age of faith" with Peter is what Scholem calls the stage of "institutional religion," while her blissful unity in love with Paul is the next, "mystical" and "romantic period." The latter, however, cannot last in the world: Once the affair is over, Julia is returned to her marriage, now fully emptied of meaning—marking the stage that Scholem would designate as that of "decomposition," hollowing out.[107] This is when the I loses Julia completely.

Seeking in vain to construct a theodical narrative, the I ends up charting a counter-theodical, counter-Augustinian one: a narrative of Julia's damnation, her descent into the dark depths (an image of turning away from God in Augustine, too). In the novella's conclusion, the I again laments Julia's escape, and his recollection of her life course seems to him illusory, nothing real: "Hasn't it all been a mirage, the child tramping through the woods, the girl in silk stockings, the bride? . . . I wander through the old Klopps house, up the winding stairs to the attic back to my first dreams of Julia. . . . I don't know where Julia ends or begins. I don't know where she is. Lost. Out of time. Not in God's timelessness but sunk to the depths of time."[108] This passage presents the counter-theodical narrative as resulting in a double damnation: of Julia and the narrator himself. It becomes clear that, although he pretended to be a celestial spark, Julia alone was his light source. She, not he, was the luminous divine shard amid the night of the world, and his guiding light: "It's dark. I don't find the way. Julia, won't you come and lead me back?"[109] *Lament*'s counter-theodical narrative is Gnostic in the sense that it is a tale of the I as a bungling, though not necessarily malevolent, demiurge, a failed redeemer who stubbornly sticks to what he erroneously takes to be the redemptive world order, trapping himself therein and seeking to trap Julia, too.

Julia, however, flees him and his imposition of a redemption narrative, and he has no idea where she went ("I don't know where she is"; ". . . going down perhaps. I will never know where"). The narrative of damnation is in fact the narrator's, not Julia's, whose figure in the novella is that of fugitive absence, the absent middle: The narrator's recollection circles around Julia as his lost "center" but cannot reach her, cannot reunite with the I's "own" soul.[110] In the end, *Lament* is a story of a prison break told from the perspective of the

[106] *Lament*, 88; see also 96.
[107] See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 7–8, 117.
[108] *Lament*, 125.
[109] *Lament*, 126.
[110] *Lament*, 12.

jailor. Perhaps Julia has escaped via underground tunnels, into the (non-)place beneath the enclosure of the world? Perhaps her flight appears to the narrator as a descent into damnation because, from the standpoint of the redemption/damnation binary to which he is bound, flight from the redemptive order can be imagined only as an expulsion, a Fall? Where in truth is Julia?, the narrator asks yet again, admitting finally that her descent may be a fugitive act of a light being: "Or is Julia in the house, combing Jenny's [i.e., her daughter's] hair in the room flooded with sunlight, only I may not enter? This is Julia's vengeance on me, to bury me alive in her past. I tried to put a hedge around her and fenced myself in. She escaped me."[111]

I would suggest that, beneath the theodical and the counter-theodical layers, beneath the binary of salvation and damnation, one can locate *Lament*'s third, nonnarrative layer, where Julia atemporally dwells as one who is immanently without narrative and "out of time," and where she exilically hides, as under a veil of secrecy, from the I. This is the most deeply antitheodical layer, indexing not just an inversion of the Augustinian narrative structure—a structure that proceeds out of darkness, via conversion to the redemptive order, toward the light of salvation—but a complete refusal of the theodical apparatus on which that structure is premised. This layer can be approached only obliquely, through hints or traces scattered across the text. From these traces, one can discern that, throughout the novella, Julia is configured as the divine messianic fragment fallen into the world yet not of the world. "Before I spoke to her," the narrator senses, "she belonged to God"—she was, one may infer, the Shekhinah, God's bride, female divine presence. "Oh, that blessed state!" the I exclaims.[112] His seeking to unite with her is due to the I's own longing for beatitude or bliss: "Only if I possessed the past without recourse to memory as only God can possess it could I possess Julia."[113]

Meanwhile, Julia not just refuses the I's imposition—she remains imperceptible, without relation to his ostensibly salvific efforts on her behalf, "divinely oblivious" and "supremely indifferent": traditional qualities of the state of bliss as oneness with the divine.[114] As such, in contrast to the alienated

[111] *Lament*, 125.

[112] *Lament*, 4. Compare Scholem, *Major Trends*, 275: "The exile of the Shekhinah is not a metaphor, it is a genuine symbol of the 'broken' state of things." The Shekhinah is also "the symbol of 'eternal womanhood'" and of "the mystical idea of Israel in its bond with God and its bliss, but also in its suffering and its exile" (ibid., 230). Bliss and exile *qua* fugitivity are key motifs in *Lament*, too. See Wolfson, *Philosophical Pathos*, 69, on the autobiographical importance of the figure of the exiled Shekhinah to Taubes.

[113] *Lament*, 32. This is arguably an allusion to Augustine's conception of memory as mediating our recollection of prelapsarian bliss.

[114] *Lament*, 28. Julia also collapses the binary between bliss or "blessedness" and "gross sensuality" that the narrator takes for granted (ibid., 42). On the antagonistic dimension of bliss in general, see Kirill Chepurin, *Bliss Against the World: Schelling, Theodicy, and the Crisis of Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

narrator, Julia immanently requires no redemption or recollection: "I assumed she was with God when away from me. . . . When she returned she seemed to have no recollection of where she had been, only the sense of bliss lingered on," the bliss that remains inaccessible to the I.[115]

Nonrelational like the rose in Angelus Silesius, Julia is "without why" and cares not whether she is seen: "Julia did not care," "she simply acted as if I wasn't there," the narrator complains.[116] Left alone, she "drifts" without telos, "doing nothing," "intent on nothing," "wayward, dreaming," "a disorder," a vagabond in the messianic dreamscape of the soul.[117] She is unconcerned with redemptive futurity, existing in the atemporal *now*, "as if the moment were sufficient unto itself."[118] Looking at her from without, "who would suspect the treasure she carries with her?," the treasure of light.[119] Her simplicity ("Julia is so simple") and passivity ("yielding as the grass"), even her sexual promiscuity that confounds the narrator, point to the concealed messianic state of bliss she immanently inhabits.[120] The I is restricted, bounded, but the soul in its blissful essence is immeasurable ("I don't know where Julia ends or begins"), "boundless like the sea" that lies below the world of day, invoking the oceanic feeling of all-dissolution that Freud opposed to the world-upholding character of the ego.[121] "I feared," the narrator confesses, "that one day Julia might disappear altogether in the color blue"—a divine, heavenly color, the color of bliss and longing, of the prehuman and more-than-human depths of the sea and the skies.[122]

Julia's refusal of the I's providential mission, her immanent fugitivity, signals the illegitimate character of the normative world order that the I strives to impose. The I is himself ultimately aware of the illegitimacy of this world: He desires more than anything to "elope," flee with Julia, to be together in childlike bliss ("I wanted to stay in the child's world"),[123] "to possess Julia as

[115] *Lament*, 28.

[116] *Lament*, 4, 28. Compare Angelus Silesius: "Die Ros ist ohne warum; sie blühet, weil sie blühet. / Sie acht nicht ihrer selbst, fragt nicht, ob man sie siehet." Quoted in Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1997), 55–56. Julia, too, cares not for her "worldly" self (*Selbst*), that is, for the narrator.

[117] *Lament*, 9, 34, 66. Compare Jonathan Garb, "Soul Time in Modern Kabbalah," in *Time and Eternity in Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Brian Ogren (Brill, 2015), 151–61.

[118] *Lament*, 70.

[119] *Lament*, 123. I read this as an allusion to the Treasury of Light from *Pistis Sophia*.

[120] *Lament*, 8. See Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (Schocken Books, 1971), 75: Being unashamed of one's body and sexuality is a paradisal and messianic condition. Compare *Lament*, 106: Julia "simply liked to be naked."

[121] *Lament*, 6. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey et al., vol. 21 (Hogarth Press, 1961), 66–68. That is why the I also fears Julia's infinity: "Oh, it is a fearful thing . . . to give in to Julia all the way, a thing from which I would save myself" (*Lament*, 8). The Shekhinah, too, is a "great sea" (Scholem, *Major Trends*, 220).

[122] *Lament*, 38. Here, Julia's implied bliss merges with Sophie's more-than-human beatitude that we saw in *Divorcing*.

[123] *Lament*, 38.

she might be without me,"[124] to be "annulled in her."[125] Julia's bliss, meanwhile, is a fugitive messianic bliss that drifts in the dark oceanic depths of the real, below the world's reach. She moves within messianic atemporality without relation to the I's attempts at a narrative: "she must have slipped away while I was talking."[126] And if the I cannot stop narrating, cannot bear to be silent, it is because the ego is the organ of world anxiety,[127] which is the anxiety inherent in the world order itself regarding its illegitimacy in the absence of a divine guarantee.

In the figure of Julia, this embodied ellipsis, the novella thus formally makes room for messianic absence, for silence, for that which is unnarratable yet for which the narrative order longs.[128] Julia stands in for immanent nothingness, the ineffable "mystery of all mysteries,"[129] "the abyss which becomes visible in the gaps of existence."[130] However, in the wake of the breakdown of divine order, this nothingness functions not as the traditional mystical site of God's dwelling or "a void where God might enter,"[131] but as the utopic opening through which to escape, an unlocatable below where the scattered remnants of the messianic, the dreamers, can flee and fugitively dwell, inhabiting the boundless depths decoupled equally from damnation and redemption. Julia's bliss is that of not having to articulate oneself in the terms that the world imposes, not having to narrate or position oneself before the world. Her flight is not a salvific ascent to transcendence but fugitivity itself as messianic, to the extent that it has the power to conceal one from the collapsing theodical distribution of place, to open up a non-place of underground bliss, of absolute indifference to the world.

Julia thus figures a collapse, a voiding of the logics of redemption—a voiding that, I would add, in part resists Wolfson's reading of Taubes in his *Philosophical Pathos of Susan Taubes* and *Nocturnal Seeing*, works that have already become seminal in Taubes scholarship. Rooting his reading predominantly in Taubes's writings from the early 1950s, Wolfson ascribes to her the "hypernomian axiom of obeying the law by defying the law" and the dictum that "not being redeemed . . . is the more perfect form of redemption, [namely,] to be redeemed from the need to be redeemed."[132] However, this dictum reinscribes indifference to redemption into a higher, "more perfect"

[124] *Lament*, 5.
[125] *Lament*, 3; cf. 43: "I want to be gone with you, lost with you, absent with you."
[126] *Lament*, 122.
[127] To borrow the term from Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, 143 ("Welt-Angst").
[128] "Her life cannot be told," the narrator complains (*Lament*, 11). Compare Sophie calling herself "elliptical" in *Divorcing*, 74.
[129] *Pistis Sophia*, 19.
[130] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 217.
[131] Anne Carson, *Decreation* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 185. See further, Kyra Sutton, "'That Emptiness Where God Would Be': Anne Carson and the Postsecular," in *Anne Carson and the Unknown: Contemporary Perspectives on Poetic Experimentation*, ed. Helena Van Praet and Christine Wiesenthal (University of Michigan Press, forthcoming).
[132] Wolfson, *Philosophical Pathos*, 59, 18.

redemptive operation, a re-inscription opposed by *Divorcing* and *Lament*.[133] In Wolfson's framing, "hypernomianism" implies that "to get beyond the path, one must perpetually follow the path, for the path includes within itself and anticipates all possible deviations from the path."[134] This (strongly providential) formulation forecloses any real operation of refusal or flight, converting fugitivity into a following of the path of law and tradition, a path presented as all-encompassing, as one to which there is no true antagonism and from which there is no escape. As such, Wolfson's reading itself falls—and reinscribes Taubes—into a theodicy that binds deviation, flight, and wandering in darkness back to the providential workings of the law. The antagonistic fugitivity that fuels texts such as *Lament* is thereby defused, neutralized. One may, of course, attempt to inscribe Julia into the structure of narrative; that is precisely what *Lament*'s narrator does, yet the resulting path disintegrates, trails off into nowhere. To think Julia's immanent nonrelationality is to think not a binding but a *fugitive unbinding*: a decoupling from "the path" and from all binaries, including that of damnation and redemption, through which the world order is upheld.

CONCLUSION

The biblical model of lament, Nancy C. Lee observes, "is one of appealing to God for help, for sustenance, rescue, and inspiration, especially in the face of suffering and injustice."[135] From this perspective, *Lament for Julia* is a lament that is addressed by both the narrator and Taubes to the absent God and that cannot be turned into rejoicing—a lament for unattainable salvation and the constitutive failure of all attempts at a theodicy in an unredeemable world. Taubes's strategy of antagonistically reclaiming downward movement and world flight emerges out of this failure, the failure that is the world's, not the individual's. In her fugitive bliss, Julia may be taken to embody Taubes's own utopia of escape from the world, which Taubes understands to be impossible in the world as it is—the impossibility that finds its tragic conclusion in her suicide by drowning in 1969, a way of leaving eerily prefigured in both *Lament* and *Divorcing*[136] and enacted despite the fact that,

[133] Similarly, Wolfson thus summarizes Taubes's position: "To be healed, brokenness must be broken, but the breaking of brokenness can come about only by appropriating the perfection of the imperfection that is part and parcel of the imperfection of the perfection of existence." This formula, however, subordinates brokenness to the telos of "healing" and thus a redemption narrative. See Elliot R. Wolfson, *Nocturnal Seeing: Hopelessness of Hope and Philosophical Gnosis in Susan Taubes, Gillian Rose, and Edith Wyschogrod* (Stanford University Press, 2024), 31.

[134] Wolfson, *Philosophical Pathos*, 59. Instead of "hypernomian," I would agree with Bielik-Robson that Taubes offers a model of "antenomian" thinking, which dwells with what precedes the imposition of the law. See Agata Bielik-Robson, "'Beatific Horror, Wretched Bliss': The Antenomian Gnosis of Susan Taubes and Clarice Lispector" (unpublished manuscript).

[135] Nancy C. Lee, *Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation* (Fortress Press, 2010), 3.

[136] *Lament*, 122: "Lost Julia's beauty in the water"; *Divorcing*, 139: "I like it here at the bottom of the sea."

in *Divorcing*, Sophie realizes that physical death does not lead to a true escape from the world. Taubes's literary works are contemporaneous with the rise of Black, women's, and other liberation movements, which collectively revolt against the exclusions and violences of modernity, and which themselves may be regarded as sparks of a messianic practice emerging from the dark ground of the world order. However, in her solitary confinement in the world, Taubes never found the kind of underground messianic collectivity of which she dreamt when she wrote that "they who belong to God walk together in the darkest passage."[137] She did not formulate her own vision of such a collectivity except in the early years of her marriage to Jacob, which she originally approached as a sacramental union lived in secret from the world and against the world, and prefiguring a messianic being in common. If, as Christina Pareigis puts it, by the 1960s Taubes becomes a "shadow" of her former, more hopeful self, it is arguably because by this point all her attempts at counterworldly community, and at "awaken[ing] to the dream no longer dreamt as a dream" (to borrow Wolfson's messianic formulation), irreparably fail.[138] The fugitivity that Taubes charts in the three texts I have considered here is neither revolutionary nor apocalyptic: It indexes, in the end, a state of impasse where the prospect of either world redemption or world annihilation is missing and the first imperative is to flee, to decouple oneself from the violent distribution of place that is the world, to escape into the world's dark ground. Yet, to inhabit the dark ground alone is unbearable for anyone who is not pure light, precluding "the ways of life where we walk together and that no man can build from and for himself alone."[139]

[137] Taubes, *Korrespondenz 1950–1951*, 128. On Taubes's grappling with community, see further Rachel Pafe, "Plumbing the Perpetual Loss of Paradise: Susan Taubes and Sacred Suffering," in *Violence, Care, Cure: Self-Perceptions within the Medical Encounter*, ed. Marta-Laura Cenedese and Clio Nicastro (Routledge, 2025), 163–74.

[138] See Pareigis, *Susan Taubes*, 259; Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (Zone Books, 2011), 217.

[139] Taubes, *Korrespondenz 1950–1951*, 256.