

2008

Ad Jacob Taubes

Babette babich
babich@fordham.edu

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Recommended Citation

babich, Babette, "Ad Jacob Taubes" (2008). *Articles and Chapters in Academic Book Collections*. 36.
https://fordham.bepress.com/phil_babich/36

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AD JACOB TAUBES

BABETTE BABICH

This is an editor's personal preface and I am no more than a Jew's Jew, hardly in sense of being a better Jew but a rather worse Jew: a Jew to Jews, as Adorno might have put it. There are some Jews for whom I would not count as Jewish to begin with: of dubious heritage, a *Mischling*. And this too belongs to "being" Jewish. For reasons far from uncommon in a city like New York, born in Chelsea as I was and raised first from Manhattan to Staten Island to Brooklyn to the suburb of Eastern Long Island with conflicting family traditions, vague recollections and lost memories: in a Catholic family, I am, in fact, the *only* Jew because I name myself as such. Apart from the significance of my grandfather's conversations with me as a young child (although one wonders if he was punishing his wife for dying so young by speaking of her Jewishness? Why bring it up, of all the things to say? It's a question. My father who was not baptized until the age of 8, years after his mother died, had unpleasant things to say about Jews), I am not sure I will ever fully understand the reasons for my identification *as* a Jew and in spite of its sometimes isolating personal consequences.

The mix of my background although always an issue was not a major obstacle (if it was also not irrelevant) when I married Bill Strongin, a man who was planning to be a rabbi and was both sophisticated and sensitive. We were married in a Reform temple after a discussion with a rabbi who took these complications in stride and made life — and our marrying — much easier. The marriage itself would not last — not indeed for religious reasons, although I have always been more rather than less agnostic — but because I came to see that I wanted to do graduate work in philosophy. This was a choice for me between Athens and Jerusalem, a choice compatible neither to my mind (nor to his) with his rabbinical ambitions. So, with sorrow (I have never ceased to love and admire him), we parted and my studies took me (despite my initial hostility to the very idea of things German) to accepting a Fulbright scholarship to write my dissertation in Tübingen (1984) and Berlin (1985). Afterwards I went to France (Paris and Tours in 1986) and Belgium (Louvain-la-Neuve and Brussels in 1986-87), and eventually to a professor's life, while Bill himself

went on to rather more prestige (as I saw it) at the Harvard Divinity School, another and better wife, to children and a successful career as a Reconstructionist rabbi. I still keep and I prize the mezzuzah on my door, which my then-husband cracked — so long ago now — to examine and confirm with all the care of his scholar's exigence.

That is the context for what I remember most about growing up Jewish. I could add: mealtimes at a casually yet rigorously conservative Kosher camp an hour north of the city; being chased as a teenager through the streets and back alleys of the lower east side by a sex-mad Hassid (this happens); theological arguments at SUNY Stony Brook with fellow students; proselytizing Lubavitchers who arrived on campus in specially marked vans to save our bodies and souls from the miscegnation to which I was already a lost victim. All this dwarfs in contrast with my encounters with Jacob Taubes (1923-1987), a professor of hermeneutic philosophy whom I met in the mid-eighties, walking into his Dahlem office at the Free University of Berlin, without an introduction, I should add.

Like my ex-husband, Taubes was a rabbi, or saw himself as such, rather and like my own life as a Jew: not practicing in the sense of religious observance or solicitude for a congregation (this, along with scholarship, was my then-husband's idea of being a rabbi and this was exactly not so for Taubes) but a rabbi in an old Viennese tradition which meant rather literally that he was the son of the same. Hence although he qualified for the rabbinate it was also the case that he had studied protestant theology and philosophy, a bit like Faust (and hence all-too-German) and so very persuasively was he steeped in this German tradition that many years later at a party in New York, a woman who remembered him from Columbia would vehemently deny to me that he could have been a rabbi. Still, and in blood and in spirit, Taubes saw himself as a rabbi. A student of Gershom Scholem who would famously disown him, calling him *Verräter* — a traitor — Taubes wrote a doctoral dissertation on eschatology, end things, during World War II and the Holocaust which he had, and this was also characteristic of Taubes, spent in Switzerland while Scholem's other (and, by Taubes's own account, more gifted) students went off to build what would become Israel as we know it today. Not Taubes.

Taubes was not then as well-known as he is now (and he is still only known in certain circles and perhaps because his book on St. Paul antedates the books by Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben, where Taubes own first pages serve as an indispensable palimpsest to Agamben's reading, and oh yes, Carl Schmitt, but there is no space here for more than a titular allusion). It was because of Nietzsche that Taubes came to my attention.

I had thought to translate a two-page essay he had written on Nietzsche and Schopenhauer because it was short and because I had been cultivating the idea that one ought to read Nietzsche and Schopenhauer together rather than lionize Nietzsche at Schopenhauer's expense as scholars tend to do. I did not bother to translate it in the end but meeting Taubes was the revelation: a born Jew with all the tradition I could ever want but who also exemplified the classic (and in Taubes' case although born only in 1923, this meant pre-Nazi) Austro-German tradition. I had never met such a Jew in my American experience and found the combination hard to fathom. Taubes would discuss the theological reflections of Franz Overbeck, the Church historian, Lutheran doctrine and Messianism, adding allusions to St. Paul and Carl Schmitt in conversation. He invoked Jesus with the same apparent regard as he did Abraham and compared Buber to Scholem but also assimilated the names of Benjamin and Adorno to Heidegger. Taubes mixed things up.

I did not know any of that when I wandered into his office, prepared to speak German. I like to speak German and most Germans are kind enough to let me get away with the murderous thing I wreak on their language, if only because my accent is not egregiously American and some have said that I sound German. But Taubes who didn't wait to hear me speak would utter nothing but English upon seeing me, answering my German questions in English, wildly consternated, declaring that I looked "just like" his former wife, Susan Taubes, a brilliant Heidegger scholar who had died young. I, and I was young myself at the time, didn't like the comparison. But, no, no, Norbert Bolz, his then-assistant, assured me: it's true, you do look like her. How would he know? I wondered, he could not have been there, he would have been barely born.

I liked what Taubes went on to say even less. She had, he declared with a strange satisfaction, as if it were somehow to his credit, taken her life, walking into the ocean, as he put it, when he left her to marry Margherita von Brentano, the Kant specialist in the philosophy department at the Free University whom Taubes, never using her first name, always invoked as "von Brentano," (*the* von Brentano as Germans are inclined to say). Taubes liked the "von" in her family name and this too horrified me. The entire experience was uncanny. I found myself speaking to someone who represented a tradition of Jewish scholarship and the tradition of Viennese Jews, the last of a breed for all too present reasons as I stood there in Berlin in 1985 and one who seemed an exact traitor to Judaism — the same epithet his own teacher employed against him and a recurrently quoted denunciation problematic throughout Germany. Even my old Boston

College teacher, Hans-Georg Gadamer reacted with despair when I mentioned Taubes as I visited him at home in Heidelberg, calling him a wastrel — of his talents, his position, everything. Nor had Taubes's German marriage worked out and perhaps not just (though surely mostly) because Taubes was an inveterate womanizer, trumpeting his affairs as if he were counting coup (he would tell me again and again how he had "run off" to Rome with Ingeborg Bachman, identified as "the poet," just in case one had not known this). His wife he reported had an adjoining apartment to his but had, he complained, blocked the door to her apartment with a refrigerator. A refrigerator, I wondered, only a refrigerator? Why not mortar and bricks? Why not move? The illogic of it mattered to me but it was the contiguity that mattered to Taubes. I was bothered because it struck me, although I was only partly right about this, that he had married Margherita von Brentano *because* she represented (in his own vision of her) the high epitome of things German. It was exactly the kind of marriage legislated against by Nazi law and I came to see that Taubes would spend his life continuing to break that same law.

I would remind Taubes of nothing but New York: I resembled nothing German for him, let alone arch-German. For Taubes I looked like Susan, the appropriate spouse for a rabbi, the daughter of a Brooklyn rabbi, the *top* rabbi, said Taubes. He had two children with her and then with a call to Berlin, he left her to her despair and to her death. He said all or most of this when I first met him in a rush of utterly fluent, almost unaccented New York English (a lot of New York English, especially Jewish English, has German echoes I would later realize). As I would come to know, when I joined his seminar that term, it was his German that was inflected, better said: *infected* with the American English he simply absorbed during his years at Columbia in New York.

For the next two years while I was still in Europe, he spent a certain amount of impotent time attempting to persuade me to join his circle of seductions: an offensive effort I ignored because there seemed no reason, on any level, not to. Taubes was not usually ignored: in addition to several long-term women companions, in addition to his von Brentano, his estranged wife, he also had numerous admiring female students, all of whom were German, blond, and most importantly for Taubes (and for them) well-situated in society. But I felt entitled to ignore him, last of his kind though he was. And almost everything about Taubes was like that: ignorable and yet compelling: his talent and his tactlessness; messy and exaggerated in his living style at home, he dressed imprecisely, usually in black, wearing the same clothes over and over again, and spat crumbs and

spewed bits of whatever he was eating whenever and wherever he ate. Years later, it's the only thing I remember about eating with him at Jo Goldberg's in Paris: only pastrami and non-Dickensian flecks of mustard remain in my mind from our conversation then.

All these stories about the spirit of being a Jew came to a moment of clear pain and beauty visiting the old synagogue in Paris with Taubes who forged for me a crucial bridge between the Marais as one sees it today and the force of its hidden history.

It wasn't about the Marais for Taubes who could think of nothing better than the Place des Vosges; he held court in Parisian cafés and bars and like a Jewish Socrates, haunted Shakespeare and Co. for the array of American youth and English speaking tourists he could find there. Taubes took the Marais completely for granted: it was not an object of attraction for him as for so many tourists or at least and once upon a time, for those looking for cheap lodging.

Religion drew Taubes to Paris, he confessed: he came to talk to Derrida about God. Derrida: of course. To hear Taubes talk, already then Derrida was thinking of death. And one morning Taubes took me with him when he went to the synagogue to join the other men, always barely enough for a minyan. (That seemed to be part of it, so much so that I wondered whether there were not a secret coordination to ensure that there were never too many.)

Being a woman, I could do nothing but climb upstairs, detached and distracted, to wait and to watch. From the dark balcony above, I watched Taubes in the grey light of the sanctuary as if I were looking through the history of his life, the history of my life, the history of prayers and men, of exclusions and privileges. His head fell almost immediately to his chest as soon as he found a chair. Taubes was always in the habit of sleeping — as much during his own seminars in Berlin as in synagogue in Paris. Shul is shul he would have joked. And from a distance I could hear the strong sound of his breathing amid the prayers. Next to me was a woman, her head bent and covered, bowing again and again in tender and passionate devotion and her purity burnt my senses and I held my breath in the clear wonder of her. We were alone except for her daughter who ran the length of the balcony in the dimness, head bare, completely carefree, laughing, as children do, while her mother prayed.

And as the man below us slept, I could feel the woman's invisibly complete and perfect piety and I was pained at the innocence of the little girl who had no idea what she could and could not do. The contrast between the dark balcony above and the dull daylight of the sanctuary

below wrenched in my throat and I found my face wet with tears. Surprised because I was not sure whether I was crying for my own lack, for the beauty of her faith or else for the contrast between the worlds of prayer, above and below.

Acknowledgments

These reminiscences were invited by Alan King, before his death, as a contribution to a new edition of his collection, *Growing up Jewish*. Beyond my reflections on Taubes and Nietzsche, on Derrida and Gadamer, this is also in memory of my father's mother who died almost a lifetime before I was born.