Admiration and Disgust: The Ambivalent Re-Canonization of the Zohar in the Modern Period

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I

Sefer ha-Zohar, a collection of Kabbalistic writings from the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century which, as is known, were attributed to Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, enjoyed a canonical status within Jewish culture during the early modern period. From the end of the 15th century on, Sefer ha-Zohar was accepted as the main source of authority in the field of Kabbalah as well as being regarded a central authority on questions of custom and halakhah. This was initially the case among circles of Sephardic Jewry and their descendents; subsequently it has become accepted as such among other Jewish communities throughout the world. Whereas during the 16th and 17th centuries the Zohar enjoyed a limited circulation only, primarily among the intellectual elite within the various Jewish communities, from the end of the 17th and throughout the course of the 18th century, the Zohar was far more widely circulated, its influence being felt in broad sectors of the Jewish public.1

But during this same period, along with the reception of the Zohar as a canonical text, criticism of its attribution to Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai and its authoritative, sanctified status were voiced. Such criticism - including that of R. Elijah del Medigo at the end of the 15th

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century and of R. Judah Aryeh (Leon) of Modena at the beginning of the 17th century - not widely accepted at the time, did not damage the Zohar's stature. The criticism leveled by R. Jacob Emden, in his book *Mitpähṭat Sefarim* (1768), had a greater impact. Emden questioned the antiquity and authority of the Zohar within the context of his struggle against its popularization and also against the remnants of Sabbatians, among whom Sefer ha-Zohar enjoyed significant status.²

With the rise of the Enlightenment movement, towards the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, censure of the Kabbalah in general and of the Zohar in particular became more outspoken. The second generation of Maskilim ['Enlightened' Jews] in Germany were extremely harsh in their critique of the Zohar and the Kabbalah, the polemic against which played a central role in the activity of Eastern Europe Maskilim throughout the 19th century. The Enlightenment criticism of the Kabbalah and the Zohar exerted a decisive influence on the nature of Jewish culture in the modern period. The Kabbalah lost its central place and the Zohar ceased to enjoy an authoritative and sanctified status among most of the circles which in one way or another adopted the values of the European Enlightenment. By contrast, among the more traditional circles, who rejected the values of the Enlightenment and struggled against the Haskalah movement, the Zohar continued to maintain its authoritative and sacrosanct standing.³

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² For the history of criticism of the Zohar up to the period of the Haskalah, see: I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, pp. 30-38; On the criticism of the distribution of the Zohar to extensive circles in the 18th century and the involvement of Sabbatian circles therein and attempts to limit the involvement of Zohar to the rabbinic elite, see Huss, 'Sabbatianism and the History', pp. 69-71.

³ On Zohar criticism during the Enlightenment period, see Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, pp. 43-50. One should note that in traditional circles as well, both Hasidic and Mitnagdic, there is a decline in the involvement in Kabbalah and the Zohar in the 19th century. On restrictions on the study of Kabbalah among Lithuanian circles in the 19th century and the gradual decline in study thereof, see A. Nadler, *The Faith of the Mitnagdim; Rabbinic Response to Hasidic Rapture*, Baltimore and London 1997, p. 35; R. Schochet, 'Lithuanian Kabbalah as an Independent Trend within the History of Kabbalah' [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 10 (2004), pp. 202-203. In certain Hasidic circles as well a distinct withdrawal from the study of Kabbalah can be observed. Regarding the tradition that the Baal Shem Tov prohibited the study of Kabbalistic works (due to the fear of a corporeal understanding of the Godhead), see R. Menahem Mendel b. Dov Baer Schneersohn (author of Ṣemūh Ṣeḏeq), *Derekh Mitzvotekha*, New York 1970, fol. 115b; cf.
Parallel to traditional groups who preserved the Zohar in its canonical status, there began to emerge among the enlightened circles within European Jewry certain cultural agents who rejected the wholesale dismissal of the Kabbalah and Zohar and called for a renewed evaluation thereof. These thinkers, acting from a Romantic, neo-Romantic or nationalist perspective, primarily emphasized the historical, philosophical and literary values of the Kabbalah and of Sefer ha-Zohar. Their attempts to assign a central place to the Zohar in modern Jewish culture were only partially successful. The limited nature of this success derived primarily from the fact that those engaged in the renewed canonization of the Kabbalah and Sefer ha-Zohar, coming from within the modernist framework of discourse, held an ambivalent attitude towards Jewish mysticism and towards those traditionalists, both in Eastern Europe and in Muslim countries, who maintained the old Kabbalistic tradition. Their ambivalent re-canonization of the Zohar, which combined admiration and disgust - an expression which I take from the writings of both Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem - determined, at least until recently, the attitude towards the Zohar and Kabbalah in modern Israeli and Jewish culture.

II

Before turning to a discussion of the attempts at 're-canonization' of the Zohar, I wish to briefly discuss the 'de-canonization' of the Zohar during the Enlightenment period. Whereas a categorical rejection of the Kabbalah and Zohar had not yet taken shape among the earliest Maskilim in Germany, once we turn to the second generation of the

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Schochet, 'Lithuanian Kabbalah', p. 195. On the claim of R. Meshulam Feibush of Zbarazh in his Yosher Divrei Emet, that the Zohar and the Lurianic writings may only be understood by a small minority who attain devequt (mystical attachment to God), see M. Idel, Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic, Albany 1995, pp. 36-37. On reservations about study of Zohar and Kabbalah in the Hasidic schools of Pryszysucha–Kotzk, see R. Mahler, Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment, Philadelphia 1985, pp. 269-270; S. Maggid, Hasidism on the Margin, Madison 2003, p. 12. The limitation in the involvement in Kabbalah during this period derives in part from the critique of the dissemination of Zohar to broader circles during the 18th century (see n. 2 above), and it may be in part also the influence of the maskilic critique.

Mendelssohn and Wessely did not categorically reject Kabbalah, and even quoted
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_Haskalah_, such a critique did occupy a central place in the cultural praxis of the _Maskilim_ in both Western and Eastern Europe, within the framework of building a modern Jewish identity and the struggle against Hasidism. The _Maskilim_ sought to create a new Jewish identity, whose past encompassed the Bible, classical Rabbinic Judaism, and medieval philosophy, and whose present was identified with the Enlightenment movement. The _Maskilim_ contrasted this 'enlightened Judaism' with a kind of negative image of a backward Judaism that began with the Kabbalah and _Zohar_, and continued through Lurianic Kabbalah, Sabbatianism and Hasidism. The debunking of the antiquity of _Sefer ha-Zohar_ strengthened the _Maskilim_’s claim that the Kabbalah was not an ancient Jewish tradition. Attaching to Kabbalah and Hasidism was the ethical stain of claiming a book which was essentially a forgery as their basic source. Thus, for example, the Galician _Maskil_, Judah Leib Mises, in his work, _Qinatz ha-Emet_ (Vienna, 1828) writes the following:

> You shall find another evil disease among them, an ancient leprosy that attaches itself to their souls, which serves as an adversary to the wise of heart who attempt to correct their beliefs and improve their ways. This evil is the belief implanted in their hearts involving many vain things, which they refer to by the

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5 Severe criticism of Kabbalah appears in _Ketav Yosher_ by Shaul Levin-Berlin, printed anonymously in Berlin, apparently in 1794 (see Y. Friedlander, _Peraqim ba-Satira ha-Ivrit be-Shilhei ha-Me’ah ha-Y”H be-Germania_, Tel Aviv 1980, pp. 66, 91-113) and in the satirical play by Aharon Wolfson-Halle, _Silha be-Eretz ha-Hayyim_, which was also published anonymously in installments in vol. 7 of _Ha-Me’asef_, between 1794 and 1797 (see Friedlander, op cit., pp. 145-197).
names of 'knowledge and wisdom of the Kabbalah', as well as their powerful attachment to the sanctity of Sefer ha-Zohar. The classic formula of the Maskilim reflecting the negative approach to Kabbalah, which enjoyed extremely broad influence, was that by Heinrich Graetz, who referred to the Zohar as 'The Book of Lies'. He blamed the Zohar that it 'blunted the sense for the simple and the true, and created a visionary world, in which the souls of those who zealously occupied themselves with it were lulled into a sort of half-sleep, and lost the faculty of distinguishing between right and wrong'.

However, along with this harsh criticism of the Kabbalah on the part of 19th century champions of Enlightenment, a number of Western European Jewish thinkers and scholars expressed a more sympathetic approach. One of the most explicit expressions of this view is found in the book by Adolphe Franck, a French Jewish scholar of law and philosophy, entitled La Kabbale, ou la philosophie religieuse des Hébreux (Paris, 1843; translated into German a year later by Adolph Jellinek). Many chapters of this book are devoted to establishing the antiquity of the Zohar, to a description of its exegetical method and an analysis of its religious doctrines. Franck (who based himself on a partial Latin translation of the Zohar) argued that the Zohar was in fact based upon the teachings of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, which were initially transmitted orally and subsequently set down in writing, until they were edited in a final manner in the 13th century. According to Franck, Sefer ha-Zohar is deserving of preservation, primarily because of its historical value. According to him, Sefer ha-Zohar, like Sefer ha-Yezirah, is:

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6 Y. L. Mises, Qin’at ha-Emet, Vienna 1828, p. 134.
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… a creation of several generations. Whatever may be the value of the doctrines that they incorporate, they will always be worthy of preservation as a monument to the patient struggle of a people for intellectual freedom during a period of religious tyranny. But that is not all. The system that they present constitutes, by virtue of its source and its influence, an extremely important element in the history of human thought.9

Similar approaches to the Kabbalah and the Zohar appear among other scholars of the period. For example, Meyer Heinrich Landauer, who expressed great interest in the Kabbalah, and who in his Wesen und Form des Pentateuch (Stuttgart, 1838), even before the publication of Franck's book, argued the antiquity of the Zohar. While Landauer later changed his mind and attributed the Zohar to R. Abraham Abulafia, this did not alter the great interest and esteem in which he held the Zohar.10 Other scholars, including Solomon Munk11 and Ignatz Stern,12 also adopted Franck's position that the Zohar, notwithstanding its late editing, incorporates earlier strata as well. Other scholars rejected Franck's claim regarding the antiquity of the Zohar, but in order to disprove his opinion devoted detailed historical studies to this work.

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David Heiman Joel, in reaction to Franck's book, wrote his Midrash ha-Zohar: Die Religionsphilosophie des Sohar und ihr Verhältnis zur allgemeinen jüdischen Theologie; Zugleich eine Kritische Beleuchtung der Franck'schen 'Kabbalah' (Leipzig, 1849), in which he refuted Franck's claim regarding foreign influences upon the Kabbalah and argued that the Zohar expresses the authentic Jewish theology of the Middle Ages. Adolph Jellinek, who had translated Franck's work into German, devoted his own book, Moses ben Schemtob de Leon und sein Verhältnis zum Sohar (1851), to proving Moses de Leon's authorship of the Zohar. Notwithstanding the fact that Jellinek's research strengthened the critics of the Zohar and his studies served as the basis for Graetz's harsh attack on the Zohar, his own approach to Kabbalah and to Zohar was far more positive. The intention of his research was, as phrased in his own words:

... to arouse more interest in an area of great importance for the history of philosophy and theology ... Among the Kabbalists are people who, in terms of the depth of their thought and the consequences of their ideas, are far superior to the chorus of rationalists who emerged from the school of Maimonides.

The historian Isaac Marcus Jost, a member of the Society for the Culture and Science of Judaism, who in his first book (Berlin, 1820-1828), expressed a negative, 'Enlightenment' approach towards the Kabbalah rejecting the antiquity of the Zohar, changed his mind towards the end of his life. In his later work, Geschichte des Judentums und seiner Sekten (Leipzig, 1857-1859), Jost described the appearance of the Zohar as 'an important event in the history of religion'. While Jost did not accept the antiquity of the Zohar, he nevertheless argued that

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14 Überhaupt beabsichtige ich mit diesen "Beiträgen" mehr Interesse für ein Gebiet hervorzurufen, das für die Geschichte der Philosophie und der Theologie von höchster Bedeutung ist ... Die Kabbalisten zählen Männer in ihren Reihen, die was Tiefe des Gedankens und Consequenz der Ideen betrifft, jene grosse Schar Rationalisten überragt, die aus der Schule Mose ben Maimon's hervorgegangen sind'; see A. Jellinek, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Kabbalah, Leipzig 1852, pp. v-vi; and cf. Tishby, The Wisdom of the Zohar, p. 49.
one should not accuse its author or authors of forgery and that, despite its late date, the Zohar incorporates early views. In his opinion, the Zohar contains 'the soul of the Torah', and deep reflection upon it is a valuable counterweight to the 'dead letters' of the Talmudic tradition.15

A particularly positive approach to the Zohar was expressed by Elijah Benamozeq, an Italian Jewish Maskil of North African origins, who devoted two entire books - *Eimat Mafgi* (1854-1855) and *Ta'am Leshad* (1863) to disproving the arguments against the antiquity of the Zohar. The approach of Benamozeq, who wrote in Hebrew and even published an edition of the Zohar, was closer to the traditional approach than that of the scholars mentioned above. But Benamozeq was also influenced by romantic notions which shaped the positive view of the Zohar during this period.16

### III

While the criticism and de-canonization of the Zohar within maskilic circles derived from the adoption of the values of the Enlightenment and their imposition upon the Jewish tradition, the more positive approaches to the Kabbalah and the attempt to restore the Zohar to its central status were part of the romantic perspective adopted by many European Jews during the course of the 19th century. The Romantic Movement - or perhaps one should say, the romantic mood - emerged at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, as a counter-reaction to modernity and as a critique of the values of the Enlightenment movement. Romanticism accepted the basic dichotomies of the Enlightenment, which posed reason against emotion and imagination, rationalism against mysticism, the modern era against the Middle Ages, and West against East. Contrary to Enlightenment, Romanticism rejected the positive evaluation of reason and modernity.

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as representing the 'light', and affirmed specifically those 'dark' elements that had been rejected by the Enlightenment.

Within this perspective, emotion, imagination, mysticism, the medieval era, and the East, enjoyed a positive evaluation. Within this framework, non-Jewish thinkers found interest in both Christian and Jewish Kabbalah. The outstanding spokesman for this tendency was the German theosophist Franz Molitor, who was close to Friedrich Schelling and to Franz von Bader and who devoted his life to studying Judaism and Kabbalah. His book, _Philosophie der Geschichte oder über Tradition_, was published in four volumes between 1827 to 1853.

The Kabbalah and Zohar, rejected by the Jewish _Maskilim_ as representing the irrational, imaginary, emotional, medieval and Oriental aspects of Judaism, were reaffirmed by Jewish thinkers adopting the Romantic perspective, some of whom were familiar with and influenced by Molitor's positive approach towards the Kabbalah.17 Those Jewish thinkers who who were influenced by the Romantic spirit praised the imagination, emotion and mystical depth found in the Kabbalah and the Zohar and emphasized their historical importance. Yet, these thinkers' positive attitude was ambivalent. Thus, for example, Adolphe Franck writes of the Zohar:

In the modest form of a commentary on the Pentateuch, the Zohar touches, with great independence, upon all the matters of the spirit, at times reaching heights that might impress even the strongest intellects of our generation. However, only rarely does it remain at these heights: quite frequently it descends to a language, to sentiments and ideas that betray ignorance and superstition.18

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17 Concerning Molitor and his influence on Scholem, see: C. Schulte, "Die Buchstaben haben … ihre Wurzeln oben", Scholem und Molitor, _Kabbalah und die Literatur der Romantik_, pp. 143-164.

18 'Sous la modeste forme d’un commentaire sur la Pentateuque, il touché, avec une entiere independence, à toute les questions de l'ordre spiritual, et quelquefois il s'eleve à des doctrines dont la plus forte intelligence pourra encore se glorifier de nos jours. Mais il est loin de se maintenir toujours à cette hauteur: trop souvent il descend à un langage, à des sentiments et à des idées qui décelent le dernier degré d'ignorance et de superstition'; see Franck, _La Kabbale_, p. 94 (English: Franck, _The Kabbalah_, p. 34).

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This ambivalence was substantive to the romantic perspective which, while opposing the values of the Enlightenment, largely operated within the same universe of discourse and adopted the basic paradigms of modernity. Primitive or oriental contents and traditions, which were valued by the Romantics, were only considered positive insofar as they remained within their own historical and geographical framework - that is, outside of 19th century Europe. This standpoint is expressed in a telling reaction on the part of Jellinek to Franck's remark that the Kabbalah is 'the heart and very lifeblood' of Judaism.19 Jellinek stated that, while this is true with regard to early Judaism up to the closing of the Talmud, the Kabbalah is an alien element for contemporary Judaism.20 Indeed, the majority of the above-cited Jewish thinkers who devoted historical and philological studies to the Zohar emphasized its historical, literary and metaphysical value, but did not act to disseminate the Zohar or to integrate Kabbalistic contents into contemporary Jewish culture.

IV

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there was a renewed awakening of interest and admiration for the Kabbalah and the Zohar, and especially for Hasidism, this time not only among Western European Jews, but also among certain circles from Eastern Europe. During this period many intellectuals and writers - including Micha Josef Berdyczewski, Samuel Abba Horodezky, Martin Buber, Ḫayyim Naḥman Bialik and Hillel Zeitlin - displayed admiration for Hasidism, Kabbalah and Zohar. It was against this background that Gershom Scholem, who was later to establish the study of Kabbalah as an academic discipline, also became engrossed in the Kabbalah. The interest

19 'Or, il est impossible de considérer la Kabbale comme un fait isole, comme un accident dans le Judaisme: elle en est au contraire la vie et la Cœur'; see Franck, *La Kabbale*, p. 382 (Franck, *The Kabbalah*, p. 219).

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in Kabbalah and Zohar among Jewish intellectuals in both Western and Eastern Europe at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century took place within the framework of the neo-Romantic perspective of that period; the concern with mysticism, the occult and the Orient (including Kabbalah), which characterized the fin de siècle, and the framework of Jewish nationalist, specifically Zionist, discourse developed in close tandem with this neo-romantic spirit. Continuing the tendency of Western European thinkers of the mid 19th century, these turn-of-the-century intellectuals emphasized the historical, literary and metaphysical value of the Zohar as well as its historical importance. Some of the intellectuals during this period, who tended towards neo-Romantic occult and mystical approaches, stressed the metaphysical and religious value of the Kabbalah and the Zohar, while others emphasized their historical significance as a national heritage. Intellectuals of this period often combined a nascent Zionist-nationalist ideology with their attraction towards mysticism and the occult. Paul Mendes-Flohr's study, 'Fin-de-siècle Orientalism and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation', cites examples of this combination, particularly in the activity of Martin Buber. Alongside Buber one might also mention Ernst Müller, who translated Zohar passages into German at the beginning of the 20th century (and later published a


book in English about the history of Jewish mysticism), and was a member of the Zionist Student Union in Prague, and a devotee of the anthroposophic school of Rudolph Steiner.23 The combination of Zionism and mysticism within an Orientalist perspective was also characteristic of Naphtali Herz Imber, author of the Zionist anthem *Hatikvah*, who was interested in Kabbalah and who was close to theosophic and occult circles (even referring to Hasidim as 'Jewish theosophists').24 The relationship between these two tendencies derived from an Orientalist-Jewish perspective, which saw in both Zionism and in the turn towards mysticism and Kabbalah a return to the Oriental sources of Judaism.

Within this framework of a positive attitude toward Kabbalah and Hasidism, the *Zohar* enjoyed a positive evaluation among various thinkers at the turn of the century. Romantic and expressive language

23 Müller's translations were published in the Journal *Der Jude* and at the end of the volume *Von Judentum*, the Association of Zionist Students in Prague, Bar Kochba, alongside translations by Hugo Bergman. See *Von Judentum*, Leipzig 1913, pp. 281-284. In 1920 his book *Der Sohar und Seine Lehre: Einleitung in die Gedankenwelt der Kabbalah* (Wein-Berlin), was published. This was followed by an anthology of *Zohar* passages which he translated into German, *Der Sohar: Das heilige Buch der Kabbalah, nach dem Urtext herausgegeben von Ernst Müller* (Wien, 1932). Later he published in English his *History of Jewish Mysticism* (1946), which was translated from the German by Maurice Simon, the English translator of the *Zohar*. On Müller and his involvement in Kabbalah and *Zohar*, see S. H. Bergman's introduction to *E. Müller, Der Sohar und seine Lehre: Einführung in die Kabbalah*, Zürich 1957, pp. 7-14; and J. Meir, 'Hillel Zeitlin's *Zohar, The History of a Translation and Commentary Project* [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 10 (2004), pp. 120-131, 147.

24 J. Kabakoff, *Master of Hope*, London 1985, p. 179. Imber was a protégé of Lawrence and Alice Oliphant, 'Christian Zionists', who were greatly interested in mysticism. During his years of wandering in the United States, Imber established contact with theosophic and occultist circles in Boston and in Indianapolis, lectured on Kabbalah, established a journal on Kabbalistic matters entitled *Uriel* (of which only one issue was published, in 1895), and even attempted to create a Kabbalistic circle, called 'The Inner Circle'. See Kabakoff, ibid., pp. 12-15. Kabakoff reprinted two passages from Imber's writings about the Kabbalah in *Uriel* (ibid., pp. 178-181), including one in which Imber discusses his plans to translate the *Zohar* into English (see below n. 35). Imber's Orientalist side stands out in his description of his travels 'to the ends of the East, eastward' (ibid., pp. 39-74, 125-142), as well as in his descriptions of his native Galicia: '... my native land of "Half-Asia"... is to Asia as its preface is to a book: it is the a, b, c, in which to prepare for the great Semitic college, Asia' (ibid., p. 32).
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repeatedly appears in descriptions of the *Zohar* during this period. Thus, for example, the writer Mendele Mokher Seforim, in his *Be-'Emeq ha-Bakha* ('In the Valley of Suffering'; 1904), describes the *Zohar* as the pillar of fire illuminating the darkness of the Middle Ages:

The *Zohar* is Sinai, the holy place, the mountain of God that strikes flames of the fire of love and sublime feelings of friendship. There heaven and earth unite in a lover's kiss of the sons of God and the sons of man as they embrace, and all of them together, the denizens of above and the denizens of below, sing praises to God with a sound of song and gratitude … The *Zohar* is the pillar of the fire of love which first appeared to the children of Israel in the darkness of the Middle Ages.25

Using similar language, but with greater emphasis on the religious and mystical value of the *Zohar*, Hillel Zeitlin began his essay, 'An Introduction to *Sefer ha-Zohar*', published in the periodical *Ha-Tequfah* in 1920, as follows:

What is the *Zohar*? It is a sublime Divine soul that suddenly descended earthward from the World of Emanation, that it might be revealed to human eyes, with millions of lights and shadows, colors and varieties. The Holy One blessed be He took a precious stone from his crown and threw it down to earth, the stone burst and scattered, sowing thousands upon thousands of lights, rejoicing and laughing in multitudes of hues and tones, which came from Eternity so as to brighten all of the dark corners and to satisfy whoever was thirsty and longed for the light, and to illuminate and warm whatever had been killed by the coldness of science and the darkness of ignorance, the blindness and heaviness of nature, and the evil and difficulty and cruelty of human beings. The *Zohar* was revealed to the people of Israel and to all the inhabitants of the earth through the influence of pictures, parables, stories, epigrams, charming thoughts, the heights of heavens, the deepest depths, the glory of the stars, the

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speech of the mighty mountains, the converse of the eternal
trees, the valley of the bushes of the forest …²⁶

Many thinkers and scholars at the beginning of the 20th century saw
the Zohar as representing the mystic, vital spirit of Judaism, in opposition
to halakhah and to philosophy. Thus, for example, Shimon Bernfeld,
an Eastern European Maskil who was active in Berlin at the end of the
nineteenth century, described the Zohar as follows in his book Da‘at
Elohim (Warsaw, 1899):

Over the course of time we have seen that no harm came to
Israel on account of the Zohar. To the contrary: it was extremely
helpful in opening the fetters of Judaism, which had become
closed up by Aristotelian syllogisms and Talmudic pilpul
[dialectics] … A book such as this is bone of our bones and
flesh of our flesh. It is the fruit of the Israelite spirit, which has
nothing to be ashamed of in this work of its spirit.²⁷

Like Bernfeld, who presents the Zohar as the 'fruit of the Israelite
spirit', and sees therein a power freeing Judaism from the bonds of
both philosophy and halakhah, Samuel Abba Horodezky, in his article
'Kabbalah', published in the Hebrew periodical Netivot in Warsaw in
1913, presented the Zohar as the living spirit of Judaism in exile, as
opposed to 'fossilized' Rabbinism:

The Zohar vitalized Judaism; it breathed a new breath of life
into the letters and words of the Torah; it gave a living soul to
the written word that had since time immemorial become

²⁶ H. Zeitlin, 'Introduction to Sefer ha-Zohar' [Hebrew], Ha-Tequfah 6 (1920), p.
214. Similar expressive language appears in the words of S. Z. Setzer, 'The
book-of-glory-and-of-foundation of esoteric doctrine, Sefer ha-Zohar is the great
and deep mystical sea whose waves rise to the heights of human imagination and
break upon the high air of space into colorful fragments and tones of which the
eye never has its fill'; see S. Z. Setzer, Ketavim Nivharim, Melqarim u-Masot,
Tel Aviv 1966, p. 113.

²⁷ S. Bernfeld, Da‘at Elohim, pp. 398-399. In a similar manner, Naphtali Herz
Imber presented the Zohar as opposed to the Rabbinic spirit in an article from
1895: 'That book is in opposition to Rabbinical tradition; as it explains the laws
according to their esoteric meanings and spiritual solutions, which are in conflict
with the dim, dogmatic dead letter'. See Kabukoff, Master of Hope, p. 179.
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fossilized by Rabbinism. It added to it ever more holiness and spirituality … In the Zohar we hear the echo of the voice of Israelite prophecy. The Zohar is the prophecy of Galut, of Exile. The Zohar nurtured itself on the history of prophecy, of aggadah. It was deeper, more sublime, more mysterious, more religious than the aggadah … The Zohar is the central point in the spiritual and religious life of the people of Israel, and from there its light spread round about.28

A similar position was expressed by the English Jewish scholar Joshua Abelson, who wrote the introduction to the English translation of the Zohar (1931), in which he described the Zohar in particular, and the Kabbalah in general, as representing the mystical spirit that vitalizes Rabbinic Judaism:

Indeed, herein may be said to lie the undying service which Cabbalism has rendered Judaism, whether as creed or as life. A too literal interpretation of the words of Scripture, giving Judaism the appearance of being nothing more than an ordered legalism, an apotheosis of the 'letter which killeth', a formal and petrified system of external commands bereft of all spirit and denying all freedom of the individual - these have been, and are still in some quarters, the blemishes and shortcomings cast in the teeth of Rabbinic Judaism. The supreme rebutter of such taunts and objections is Cabbalah. The arid field of Rabbinism was always kept well watered and fresh by the living streams of Cabbalistic lore.29

Within the context of this new admiration of the Kabbalistic tradition, there were again some who attempted to prove the antiquity of the Kabbalah and the Zohar. Hillel Zeitlin attempted to do so in his Hebrew studies, 'The Antiquity of Esoteric Doctrine in Israel' and 'Introduction

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to Sefer ha-Zohar', published respectively in 1920 and 1921. In his opinion, the Zohar originated in 'chapter headings' conveyed verbally by Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai and his disciples, was recorded and expanded at a much later period, and edited and given their present form by R. Moshe de Leon:

The development of the Zohar was thus as follows: Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, his cohorts and disciples, conveyed certain 'chapter headings' concerning the secrets of the Godhead to those who came after them, in the vernacular … They subsequently wrote interpretations of these 'chapter headings', unifying the body and the commentaries into a single entity, and they attempted to write their commentaries in the same style as the chapter headings … Rabbi Moses [de Leon] gathered and assembled all of the above-mentioned tractates with great devotion, but he was not merely an anthologizer and editor, but also incorporated his own spirit within them and brought down those holy and profound ideas which he found …

Many other scholars of this period advocated the view that Sefer ha-Zohar, even if it was edited in the 13th century, was based upon earlier sources. Thus, for example, in his Divrei Yemei Am Olam (History of the Jewish People), first printed in German (translated from the Russian by A. Steinberg) in 1927, Simon Dubnow argued the following:

One may assume that the composition of the Zohar, which is a collection of a series of separate mystical works, involved members of various generations: mystics in the Land of Israel and in Babylonia during the period of Sefer Yeẓirah; Spanish and Ashkenazi Kabbalists from the thirteenth and later centuries through to the mid-sixteenth century, when the Zohar was printed for the first time, in Italy. Each of these participants enriched

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31 Ibid., 7 (1920) 366-367 [reprinted in Be-Pardes ha-Ḥasidut veha-Qabbalah, pp. 142-143].
the collection by additions, which were adapted to the ancient style of the book. It achieved its final and set form under the editorship of Moses de Leon … The archaic style of the Zohar, which at times betrays real artistry, testifies, alongside its Aramaic language and its midrashic structure, that the basic framework of the book originated in the Orient rather than in the West. It may be that Nahmanides, who leaned towards Kabbalah, found in the Land of Israel remnants of ancient midrashim which he sent to Spain; the same is true of Abraham Abulafia, who also traveled in Eastern lands. These passages were certainly transmitted from one individual to another within Kabbalistic circles, until they were unified into one by Moses de Leon, who edited them in the ancient Aramaic language and introduced the new Kabbalistic ideas into the oldest text.32

A similar stance was expressed by Joshua Abelson, who in his introduction to the English translation of the Zohar wrote the following:

From the survey of the whole subject, one is drawn irresistibly to the conclusion that the Zohar, far from being a homogeneous work, is a compilation of a mass of material drawn from many strata of Jewish and non Jewish mystical thought and covering numerous centuries.33

As we shall see below, Gershom Scholem was initially among those who opposed the attribution of Sefer ha-Zohar to R. Moses de Leon, and he entertained the possibility that it in fact includes ancient materials.

V

Within the framework of the renewed evaluation of Jewish mysticism and Zohar, various cultural agents of this period engaged in the activity of enhancing the Jewish public's knowledge of the Zohar, incorporating


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it into Jewish culture, particularly through means of anthologies of Zohar passages translated into Hebrew, Yiddish, German and English.34 Naphtali Herz Imber - who reported an 1893 plan by the Reform rabbi Solomon Schindler and the president of the Theosophic Society in Boston to set up a society to enable him to undertake his own translation of the Zohar35 - included passages from the Zohar in his book, Treasures of Two Worlds (Los Angeles, 1910).36 The volume Von Judentum (1913), published by the Zionist Student Federation of Prague, Bar Kochba, included translations from the Zohar into German by Hugo Bergmann and Ernst Müller.37 Concurrently, the latter published additional translations in the periodical Der Jude, while in 1920 his book Der Sohar und seine Lehre was published in Berlin and in Vienna.38 Another anthology of Zohar passages translated into German was published in Berlin by J. Seidman Aus dem heiligen Buch Sohar des Rabbi Schimon ben Yochai,39 while in Warsaw a Hebrew anthology, Aggadot ha-Zohar, was published by Azriel Nathan Frenk.40 During those same years Shmuel Zvi Setzer published translations of certain

34 One should note that even prior to this, during the first half of the 19th century, Rabbi Eliakim Milzahagi translated the Zohar into Hebrew, a translation which has been lost. See I. Tishby, The Wisdom of the Zohar, p. 102. Fragments of Zohar passages translated into French were also included in the book of Michel Weill, the first French Chief Rabbi of Algerian Jewry, in his, La Morale du Judaisme, Paris 1875-1877, vol. 2, pp. 60-141. See Fenton, La cabale et l'académie, p. 223.
35 Thus Imber relates in his article in the periodical Uriel from the year 1895. See Kabakoff, Master of Hope, p. 181, and cf. ibid., p. 16.
38 See above, n. 23.
Zohar passages into Yiddish, and at a later date translated some into Hebrew. The second part of Hillel Zeitlin's 'Introduction to Sefer ha-Zohar', published in 1921, consists of an anthology of explicated Zohar passages organized by different subjects ('the Human Body', 'the Human Soul', 'Worlds', 'Godhead', etc.; in many respects this work anticipates the great anthology by Isaiah Tishby and Fishel Lachower, Mishnat ha-Zohar, first published in 1949). In 1922 Bialik, as part of the plans of the Devir Publishing House, proposed a far-reaching plan for publishing various Kabbalistic works, including Sefer ha-Zohar together with the Zohar Ḥadash and the Tiqqunim, 'with an introduction and a translation of the Aramaic sections and explanation of the difficult words'. Around the same time, Hillel Zeitlin launched a project for a translation of the Zohar into Hebrew, under the auspices of Ayanot Publishers, who according to Simon Rawidowicz, the initiator of the idea of translating the Zohar, saw this venture as 'a unique sort of national obligation'. This project did not take off, and only a translation of Zeitlin's 'Introduction to the Sefer ha-Zohar' was published, after he died in the Holocaust.

Setzer's translation of the Zohar was published under the heading 'Fon Zohar' in the periodical Das Wort, vols. 1-4, between 1921 and 1924. Zohar passages translated into Hebrew were published by Setzer in 1947 in Sefer ha-Shanah le-Yehudei Amerika and in the periodical Ha-Doar, 1954, nos. 24-25, 38-39. These translations were reprinted after his death in a collection Ketavim Nivharim: Megarim u-Masot, Tel Aviv 1966, pp. 17-110, and cf. Meir, 'Hillel Zeitlin's Zohar', pp. 138-139 n. 80. Meir also notes there J. D. Eisenstein's program to publish a book entitled Ozar ha-Qabbalah, which was intended to include passages from Sefer ha-Zohar and a 'Zoharic dictionary'.

See below, n. 53.

See Meir, 'Hillel Zeitlin's Zohar', p. 124. Even before that, in 1913, Bialik suggested translating Kabbalistic writings from Aramaic into Hebrew within the framework of his anthologizing project; see Meir, ibid.


Ha-Mezudah 1 (1943), pp. 40-81 [reprinted in his Be-Pardes ha-Ḥasidut veha-Qabbalah, Tel Aviv 1960, pp. 229-279].
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('The Book of the Singular Ones'). During the 1930s an English translation of the Zohar appeared in five volumes by Paul Lavertoff, Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon. Traditional circles were also active in translating and disseminating the Zohar during this period, no doubt in response to the revival of interest in the Zohar among enlightened and Zionist circles. At the beginning of the 20th century in Warsaw, R. Yudel Rosenberg launched a project of translating and editing the Zohar in Hebrew, a task which he worked on for many years in Warsaw, Lodz and Montreal. The first volume of this translation was published in Warsaw in 1906, under the title Sefer Sha’arei Zohar Torah; a full translation was published later, titled Sefer Zohar Torah al Ḥamisha Ḥumshei Torah (1924–1930). One should also note the publication of a 16th century Hebrew translation of the first section of Sefer ha-Zohar (Parshat Bereshit), by R. Ovadiah Hadayah, the head of Yeshivat ha-Mekubalim Beth-El, in 1946. As has recently been shown by Jonathan Meir, the publisher Bendit Cohen had planned to issue this translation earlier, under the rubric of the

46 Sifran shel Yiḥidim, Ketavim Mekubazim, pp. 9-16.
47 Sperling, Simon and Lavertoff, The Zohar. The introduction to this translation was written by the scholar Joshua Abelson.
48 Y. Y. Rosenberg, Sefer Sha’arei Zohar Torah, Warsaw 1906; one volume on Sefer Bereshit, Sefer Zohar Torah al Ḥamisha Ḥumshei Torah: vols. 1-2, Montreal 1924; vols. 3-5, New York 1924-25); Ha-Zohar ha-Qadosh, Bilgoraj 1929-1930. Rosenberg also published books about the heroes of Sefer ha-Zohar, in Hebrew and Yiddish, Nifla’ot ha-Zohar, Montreal 1927. On Rosenberg’s translations of the Zohar, see in detail Meir, ‘Hillel Zeitlin’s Zohar’, p. 145 n. 104. Rosenberg’s project of translating and editing the Zohar is discussed in detail in Chapter Four of the forthcoming book of Ira Robinson, A Kabbalist in Montreal: The Life and Times of Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg. I thank Professor Robinson for making the manuscript of this chapter available to me. Rosenberg (who attempted to establish himself as a hasidic rebbe during his stay in Lodz) acted within a traditional framework, justified his translation project by traditional messianic arguments, and introduced his volume with the haskamot (imprimatur) of various rabbis. Rosenberg was also acquainted with Haskalah literature and even sent a copy of his book to A. A. Harkavi, Head of the Department of Jewish Literature and Oriental Manuscripts at the St. Petersburg library, asking for his help in the translation of various terms into Hebrew. On the attitude of Rosenberg and his sons to contemporary secular culture, see I. Robinson, ‘The Tarler Rebbe of Lodz and his Medical Practice’, Polin 11 (1998), p. 55.
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Yalkut Publishing House of Berlin. \(^{49}\) R. Yehuda Ashlag began his translation of Sefer ha-Zohar into Hebrew during the 1940s, an undertaking only completed close to his death, in 1954.\(^{50}\)

As we shall see below, the Scholem school of Kabbalah research expressed little interest in the dissemination of the Zohar and its incorporation into contemporary culture. This notwithstanding, Scholem himself published a small selection of Zohar passages translated into English, in 1949.\(^{51}\) During that same year the first volume of Mishnat ha-Zohar, a comprehensive anthology of Zohar passages translated into Hebrew with explications, together with comprehensive introductions about the Zohar and various central themes thereof, was published by Mossad Bialik. This project, conceived by S. A. Horodetsky and Fishel Lachower,\(^{52}\) was carried out by Lachower and Isaiah Tishby (who completed most of the work after Lachower's death).\(^{53}\)

As part of the interest in mysticism and the occult at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, non-Jewish occult circles likewise engaged in the translation and dissemination of the Zohar. As mentioned earlier, Naphtali Herz Imber was asked to translate the Zohar for the Boston Theosophic Society. In 1887 an English rendition of chapters of the Zohar from Knorr von Rosenroth's Kabbalah Denudata was published for the first time, by Samuel Liddel Macgregor Mathers, a member of the Theosophical Society and the founder of the Order of the Golden Dawn.\(^{54}\) In 1894, a translation of the Idra Rabba, based on

\(^{49}\) See Meir, 'Hillel Zeitlin's Zohar', p. 150 n. 127. On the activity of Bendit Cohen and Yalkut Publishers, see ibid., 148-149 n. 120. The translation, Sefer ha-Zohar ha-Shalem 'al ha-Torah (Jerusalem 1946), was attributed by Hadayah to R. Berechiel; see Tishby, The Wisdom of the Zohar, p. 125 n. 604.

\(^{50}\) See E. M. Gottlieb, Ha-Sulam, Jerusalem 1997, pp. 162-169.

\(^{51}\) Zohar, the Book of Splendor, New York 1949. Even before that time, Scholem had translated the beginning of Parshat Bereshit of the Zohar into German: G. Scholem, Die Geheimnisse der Schöpfung, Berlin 1935.

\(^{52}\) F. Lachower's translation of the 'Bird's Nest' passage in Zohar Shemot was published earlier, in Sa'ar, Tel Aviv 1943, pp. 3-8.


\(^{54}\) S. Liddel Macgregor Mathers, The Kabbalah Unveiled, London 1887 (further...
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the *Kabbalah Denudata*, was made by the French occultist Eliphas Levi (the pseudonym of Alphonse Louis Constant) and published under the title *Le Livre des Splendeurs*. A year later, in 1895, a French edition of *Kabbalah Denudata* translated by Henrie Chateau appeared with an introduction by the French occultist Papus (a pseudonym for the physician Gerard Encausse), who also wrote the postscript for Levi's translation. Similarly, at the beginning of the 20th century, between the years 1905 and 1911, the *Zohar* was translated into French by Jean de Pauly, an enigmatic figure who claimed to be an Albanian nobleman but was evidently an apostate Jew.

VI

Like the 19th century scholars who called for a renewed evaluation of the *Zohar* from a romantic perspective, so too the Jewish thinkers who were active in calling for the re-canonization of the Zohar at the
dedications appeared in 1897 and 1909). Interestingly, in the same year a translation of the *Idra Zuta* (*The Lesser Holy Assembly*) into Judaic-Arabic was published in Poona, India, by Abraham David Ezekiel. The term 'the lesser Holy Assembly' was used also by Mathers to translate 'Idra Zuta'. This is no coincidence. As I hope to show in my forthcoming study of Zohar translations (to be published in *Te'uda*), Ezekiel was also a member of the Theosophical Society. Another leader of the Order of the Golden Dawn, Arthur Edward Waite, devoted to the *Zohar* a volume entitled *The Secret Doctrine in Israel; A Study of the Zohar and its Connections*, London 1913.

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Beginning of the 20th century, expressed an ambivalent attitude towards the Kabbalah in general and the Zohar in particular. Most of the thinkers discussed above, who expressed an interest in Jewish mysticism, found a metaphysical, literary and historical value in the Kabbalah, but accepted neither its authority nor its holiness (an exception to this was Hillel Zeitlin who, as noted, called for a far deeper commitment to the Kabbalah).

However, alongside their enthusiasm for and positive evaluation of the Kabbalah, certain thinkers also expressed a reservation and even revulsion toward the Zohar and other Kabbalistic writings. Thus, in his paper 'Jewish Mysticism', which introduced his book, The Tales of Rabbi Nachman, first published in 1906, Martin Buber wrote the following:

If in fact the power of Jewish mysticism derives from a basic characteristic of the people who created it, then over the course of time the destiny of the people was imprinted upon it. Its wanderings and its sufferings repeatedly engendered the same movements of despair within the Jewish soul, from which at times there in turn emerged a certain flash of ecstasy, but simultaneously prevented its flowering into the full fruit of ecstasy. They dragged it in such a way that that which was essential and vital became intertwined with that which was superfluous and random. Because they felt that the pain prevented them from saying what they needed to, they chattered on about subjects which were foreign to it. In this way such writings as Sefer ha-Zohar, which elicit both admiration and disgust, were created. Between clumsy anthropomorphisms, whose allegorical interpretation do not make them any more tolerable, and pointless and colorless discussions, that limp along in vague and rhetorical language, over and over again there shine through glimpses of the hidden depths of the souls and revelation of the secrets of the infinite.  

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57 'Kommt demnach die kraft der Jüdischen Mystik aus einer ursprünglichen Eigenschaft des Volkes, das sie erzeugt hat, so hat sich ihr des weiteren auch das Schicksal dieses Volkes eingeprägt. Das Wanderen und das Martyrium der Juden
Buber was not the only one to express an ambivalent attitude towards the Zohar. Simon Dubnow, for example, referred to the Zohar as 'a remarkable book … a mixture of metaphysics and illusions'. Joshua Abelson called the Zohar 'a veritable storehouse of anachronisms, incongruities and surprises'. Even in the words of Hillel Zeitlin, who actively worked for a religious renewal of Kabbalah, one finds a note of ambivalence in the description of the Zohar. Further on in the introductory section of his 'Introduction to Sefer ha-Zohar', quoted earlier, he writes the following:

The Zohar - a mélange of the deepest truths and of imaginings; of straight and crooked lines; of straightforward ways and serpentine paths; of clear, whole and suitable images, and strange and alien pictures; the power of the lion and the tenderness of a child; the voice of a waterfall and the whispering of a spring; dark wells and hidden caves - in brief: the clarity and sharpness of age-old wisdom together with long-winded and endless
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discussions interweave and mix with one another as in a long and complex dream … According to its contents and richness, the Zohar is entirely Divine; in terms of its exterior, at times confusion and cloudiness.60

VII

As stated earlier, the scholarly perspective of Gershom Scholem, who became the leading authority in the study of Jewish mysticism during the second half of the 20th century and who established Kabbalah research as an academic discipline, took shape within the framework of the neo-Romantic, nationalist and Orientalist perspective.61 Notwithstanding Scholem's disclaimers regarding the assertion that he was led to engage in Kabbalah by the neo-romantic spirit,62 he did not deny the profound impression left on him by Buber's writings about Hasidism. In his autobiography, From Berlin to Jerusalem, he complains that 'a certain function was played' in his interest in the Kabbalah 'by the impression left upon me by Buber's first two books on Hasidism,

60 H. Zeitlin, 'Introduction to Sefer ha-Zohar' [Hebrew], Ha-Tequfah 6 (1920), p. 214.
62 'It seems to me - without any proof of this - that there was something hidden there that attracted me. One could say, of course, that this "something" was no more than the Romantic spirit that dominated me and which I brought into my approach, or one can say this explanation is childish and was influenced by the widespread fashion today in such explanations. I cannot decide, and who knows the ways of the spirit? (certainly not the Marxists of the various sects); see Scholem, Mi-Berlin li-Yerushalayim, Tel Aviv 1982, p. 126.
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written in the best of the Viennese Jugendstil style, painting this area in a romantic glow. The works of Hillel Zeitlin also made a great impression upon the young Scholem, who in 1916 went as far as translating Zeitlin's article, 'Shekhinah', into German. During those same years, while staying in Berne, Scholem also read Horodezky's Hebrew writings on Hasidism, and even met with him.

Gershom Scholem's turn towards Kabbalah study was related to the Zionist ideology which he had adopted as a youth in Germany. In a 1974 interview with Muki Tzur, Scholem said:

I wanted to enter into the world of the Kabbalah via my thinking and belief in Zionism as a living thing, as the renewal of a people who had greatly degenerated ... I was interested in the question: did the Judaism of halakhah have sufficient strength to persist and to exist? Was halakhah really possible without a mystical basis? Does it have a vitality of its own to persist without degeneration over a period of thousands of years?

Like other thinkers who dealt with Hasidism and Kabbalah at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, Scholem saw Jewish mysticism as the vital, life-giving force within Judaism, as opposed to

63 Ibid., p. 126.
65 Ibid., p. 127. Scholem relates that he even began, at Horodezky's request, the translation into German of the manuscript of his Hebrew book entitled Zeramim Datiyim ba-Yahadut. Despite Scholem's disdain for theosophic and occultist circles (Huss, 'Ask No Questions', p. 148), Scholem met with the occult circle of Oscar Goldberg between the years 1921 and 1923. See Scholem, ibid., pp. 174-178; idem., Walter Binyamin, Tel Aviv 1987, pp. 98-100. During that same period Scholem was also in close contact with the converted Jewish scholar of religions, Robert Eisler, who expressed interest in Kabbalah and established the 'Johann Albert Widmannstetter Society for Kabbalah Research' under whose aegis Scholem published his first books: Das Buch Bahir, Leipzig 1923; Bibliographia Kabbalistica, Leipzig 1927. On the colorful figure of Eisler and Scholem's connection with him, see Scholem, Mi-Berlin li-Yerushalayim, pp. 149-155. Through Eisler's intermediae, Scholem met with the author of mystic literature, Gustav Meyrink; see ibid., pp. 156-158.
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the fossilized and degenerate force of Rabbinic Judaism. In the words of Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin:

Scholem saw the mystic element as the vital, revolutionary one within Jewish history; the element that incorporated its essence and facilitated its dynamic and watchful existence. This was what made its dialectical development possible and prevented Judaism, according to his argument, from sinking into the degeneracy to which it would have sunk had the only forces acting within it been those of Rabbinism. Kabbalah, according to Scholem, is the element in which true Jewish continuity is revealed ... The Kabbalah symbolizes the historical continuity whose contact with the 'external' culture is superficial, thus not touching upon its substantive layers. This, despite the fact that the concepts by which he himself breathed life into the hidden texts, were clearly those of European romantic culture. The history of the mystical stream, the hidden history, was transformed by Scholem into the true history of Judaism, whose revitalization is the condition for the national and spiritual renewal of the people as he saw it.67

But even though the neo-romantic tendencies influenced Scholem's turn towards the study of Kabbalah, already at the beginning of his path Scholem took exception to the neo-romantic enthusiasm over Jewish mysticism and to the attempts to describe the Kabbalah in the terminology of German expressionism.68 Scholem rejected the approaches of Buber, Zeitlin and Horodezky as unhistorical and sentimental;69 against them he posited strict philological-historical

68 Biale, Kabbalah and Counter-History, pp. 73-74, 88.
research as being the only legitimate path towards unraveling the significance of the Kabbalah. Scholem saw philological research as the only way to arrive at the metaphysical and mystical depths of the Kabbalistic texts. In this respect, Scholem's research may be regarded as a synthesis of the historical-philological approach of the 19th century school of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and the romantic-nationalist approaches of the *fin-de-siècle*. Scholem elucidated this approach to the study of Kabbalah in a letter to Zalman Schocken written in 1937, 'A Candid Letter About my True Intentions in Studying Kabbalah', as follows:

It may, of course, be that fundamentally history is no more than an illusion. However, without this illusion it is impossible to penetrate through temporal reality to the essence of the things themselves. Through the unique perspective of philological criticism, there has been reflected to contemporary men for the first time, in the neatest possible way, that mystical totality of truth (*des Systems*) whose existence disappears specifically because of its being thrust upon historical time.70

Scholem's approach to *Sefer ha-Zohar* was thus shaped by the neo-

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Romantic perspective, by Zionist ideology and by the use of philological-historical research methods. In the famous lecture he gave at the Institute for Jewish Studies in 1925 (14 Heshvan 5686), Scholem, using philological and historical arguments, opposed the attribution of the Zohar to R. Moses de Leon, thereby attempting to free the Zohar of the accusation of being a forgery and to point towards the possibility that it indeed includes ancient materials:

Thus, at the conclusion of our investigations and research - after an evaluation of the testimony of Rabbi Isaac of Acre and an overview of the relationship of the literary work of R. Moses [de Leon] to the Zohar - the theories viewing Moses de Leon as the author of Sefer ha-Zohar are seen to be flighty and non-existing (or, to be more precise: one may assume that they are non existent) in light of the facts. … We may say with confidence that we have no positive evidence to accuse R. Moses of forgery. This being the case, all of the questions about the origins of the Zohar, its editing and arrangement, and R. Moses de Leon's true relation to it, are reopened. Yet, in order to give a positive answer to these questions and to state how and when the Zohar came into being and was arranged, whether R. Moses de Leon may have arranged certain midrashic sources which were available to him from some unknown eras in a new manner, and whether in the process of editing he added a dimension of his own, and how these remnants from earlier generations came down to R. Moses and his predecessors among the Kabbalists of Castile - all these queries must await a new and systematic study of the development of Kabbalah as a whole.71

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71 G. Scholem, 'Did Moses de Leon Write Sefer ha-Zohar?' [Hebrew], Mada’ei ha-Yahadut 1 (1926), pp. 28-29; and cf. Biale, Kabbalah and Counter-History, pp. 117-118. Some of the arguments brought by Scholem against the attribution of the Zohar to de Leon were already raised by David Luria in Ma’amor Qadmut ha-Zohar and by Zeitlin (who relied upon David Luria) in his 'Introduction to Sefer ha-Zohar'; but see Scholem's critique of both David Luria and Zeitlin, ibid., pp. 24-25 n. 32. Zeitlin, on the other hand, in a 1933 letter to Z. Z. Weinberg argues that Scholem took his own arguments from his article. See Meir, 'Hillel Zeitlin's Zohar', pp. 135-136 n. 68.
During the course of his research, Scholem changed his mind and to a large extent came to accept Graetz's view, according to which Sefer ha-Zohar was written at the end of the 13th century by R. Moses de Leon. Scholem articulated this position in great detail in the first of two chapters he devoted to the subject of the Zohar in his classic work, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, first published in 1941 and based upon lectures he had given at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1938. Although Scholem, unlike Graetz (and other scholars of the Haskalah school), accepted the late dating of Sefer ha-Zohar and its attribution to R. Moses de Leon, this did not for him taint the value of the Zohar, which he described as one of the most significant books in Jewish literature and in mystical literature generally. Scholem concluded the chapter dealing with the Zohar and its author with the following words:

Pseudo-epigraphy is far removed from forgery. … The Quest for Truth knows of adventures that are all its own, and in a vast number of cases has arrayed itself in pseudo-epigraphic garb. The further a man progresses along his own road in this Quest for Truth, the more he might become convinced that his own road must have already been trodden by others, ages before him. To the streak of adventurousness which was in Moses de Leon, no less than to his genius, we owe one of the most remarkable works of Jewish literature and of the literature of mysticism in general. According to Scholem, not only does the pseudo-epigraphic style of writing not negate or reduce the value of the Zohar, it is itself a legitimate part of the 'adventure' of seeking the truth. As has been argued by David Biale:

Scholem then accepted Graetz's accusation of pseudo-epigraphy, but made it a virtue, since pseudo-epigraphy became a means
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for legitimizing a creative work as part of a hidden tradition. The authority of tradition is recognized, but the freedom of literary creation is preserved.\(^7^5\)

Yet, despite his renewed respect for Sefer ha-Zohar (the only subject to which two chapters in Major Trends were devoted) and the 'genius' of its author, Scholem shares in the ambivalence regarding the Zohar which, as we have seen, characterized the approach of many modernist thinkers to Jewish mysticism. Scholem's ambivalence in relation to the Zohar finds its expression in his words regarding the presence of primitive ways of thought and feeling in the Zohar, alongside profound contemplative mysticism. Scholem argues that like in many other mystics, in the personality of the author of the Zohar naïve and profound modes of thinking are fused:

... the author's spiritual life is centered as it were in a more archaic layer of the mind. Again and again one is struck by the simultaneous presence of crudely primitive modes of thought and feeling, and of ideas whose profound contemplative mysticism is transparent. … a very remarkable personality in whom, as in so many mystics, profound and naive modes of thought existed side by side.\(^7^6\)

In his introduction to Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, Scholem uses a type of language very close to that employed by Martin Buber in the introduction to the Tales of Rabbi Nachman of Braslav.\(^7^7\) Like him, he speaks of the 'admiration and disgust' aroused by the writings of the Kabbalists:

It would be idle to deny that Kabbalistic thought lost much of its magnificence where it was forced to descend from the pinnacles of theoretical speculation to the plane of ordinary thinking and acting. The dangers which myth and magic present to the religious

\[^{7^5}\] Biale, Kabbalah and Counter History, p. 119.
\[^{7^7}\] Ron Margolin noted that, in Buber's introduction to the Tales of Rabbi Nachman, he sketches the scheme according to which Scholem wrote his book, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. See Margolin, The Human Temple, p. 8.
consciousness, including that of the mystic, are clearly shown in the development of Kabbalism. If one turns to the writings of the great Kabbalists one seldom fails to be torn between alternate admiration and disgust.\textsuperscript{78}

Gershom Scholem, and in his wake his students, engaged in philological and historical study of the \textit{Zohar} attaining most impressive achievements in this area. It ought nevertheless to be emphasized that the school of research established by Scholem sought to examine and to preserve the Kabbalistic writings, including the \textit{Zohar}, as historical monuments (thus, as mentioned earlier, was the \textit{Zohar} described by Adolf Franck) without acting towards their inclusion as active elements in the contemporary cultural field. Nevertheless, there has been a unique attempt in the circle of Scholem's students to disseminate the \textit{Zohar} to a broader public: namely, the impressive project of Isaiah Tishby and Fishel Lachower, \textit{Mishnat ha-Zohar} (the first volume of this work was published by Mossad Bialik in 1949; the second in 1961; while an abbreviated version, issued by Sifriyat Dorot, was published in 1969). The purpose of this book, as articulated by Tishby in his introduction to the first edition, was 'to open up these hidden riches for the Hebrew reader. It comprises an extensive anthology drawn from all sections of the \textit{Zohar}'.\textsuperscript{79} It is interesting to note that, even though Tishby was a student of Scholem, and \textit{Mishnat ha-Zohar} to a large extent reflects Scholem's positions with regard to the \textit{Zohar}, the initiative for this project came from Lachower and Horodezky.\textsuperscript{80} It should also be emphasized that \textit{Mishnat ha-Zohar} is an anthology whose purpose is 'to reflect the teachings of the \textit{Zohar} and its literary character in an orderly and concentrated way' and not to present the Israeli reader with a complete, comprehensive translation of the \textit{Zohar}. In a certain sense, \textit{Mishnat ha-Zohar} is a kind of realization of the anthologizing project proposed by Bialik, who had planned to publish a translation

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{78} Scholem, \textit{Major Trends}, p. 36.
\item \textsuperscript{79} The Wisdom of the Zohar, p. XXV.
\item \textsuperscript{80} Ibid., p. XXV. According to Zeev Greis, it was Gershom Scholem who pressured Mossad Bialik to cancel its agreement with Horodezky, and convinced Tishby to team up with Lachower to finish the project of \textit{Mishnat ha-Zohar}. See Gries, 'On Tishby's Contribution' (above, n. 53). In wake of this, Horodezky took Mossad Bialik to court; consequently they published his introductions, separately from \textit{Mishnat ha-Zohar}.
\item \textsuperscript{81} Ibid., p. XXV.
\end{itemize}
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of the Zohar within the framework of a larger project in which he hoped to collect and edit the classics of Jewish literature in the spirit of secular Zionism.82

VIII

Involvement with Sefer ha-Zohar during the mid 20th century has thus been limited to extremely narrow circles: on the one hand, to academics in Israel and abroad by whom Scholem's approach to the Zohar has, until recently, been accepted without challenge; and, on the other, to those isolated Kabbalistic yeshivas in which the students engage in study (and, in the case of R. Yehudah Ashlag, also in commentary and translation) of the Zohar. The hegemonic Israeli-Zionist culture, which primarily revived traditional texts which were written in Hebrew and had some affinity to the Land of Israel, did not find much interest in a medieval text that originated in Spain and was written in Aramaic. Reservations concerning the Kabbalah and the Zohar also played a role in removing traditional groups who believed in the authority and holiness of the Zohar - i.e., ultra-orthodox Jews from Eastern Europe and immigrants from Islamic countries - to the margins of Israeli society.83 Thus, despite the involvement with the Zohar in academic circles, Sefer ha-Zohar did not attain a significant presence, neither in modern Israeli culture nor among Jewish communities abroad, where Reform and Conservative circles, enjoying cultural and religious dominance, were not much interested in Sefer ha-Zohar.

In recent years there has been a certain change in this situation - a change related to world-wide post-modernist tendencies - which has led to a renewed interest in mysticism and spirituality and in a blurring of the boundaries between modern Western and traditional cultures.84

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82 On Bialik's plan for an anthology, and his plan to include therein the translation of the Zohar, see Meir, 'Hillel Zeitlin's Zohar', pp. 120-124. On Bialik's reservations about Zeitlin and his Zohar translation project, see ibid., p. 139 n. 81. On Tishby's seeing Mishnat ha-Zohar as continuing Bialik's plan, see ibid., p. 155.

83 See Huss, 'Ask No Questions', p. 147.

84 See J. Garb, 'The Understandable Revival of Mysticism in Our Day - Innovation vs. Conservatism in the Thought of Yosef Ahituv' [Hebrew], in: A. Sagi and N. Ilan eds., Tarbut Yehudit be-Eyn ha-Se'arah: Sefer Yovel Likhvod Yosef Ahituv, Ein Zurim 2002, pp. 194-196, 199; B. Huss, 'All You Need is LAV: Madonna
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Steps have been taken to disseminate R. Yehudah Ashlag's Hebrew translation of the Zohar, the Sulam, together with additional translations and commentaries on the Zohar in Hebrew. More recently the Zohar with the Sulam commentary have been translated into English by Michael Berg, the son of Philip Berg, founder of the Kabbalah Center. Classes in Zohar are offered to the broader public in various frameworks, including the Internet. Kabbalistic, including Zoharic motifs, have become part of popular culture as well. A song based upon words from Sefer ha-Zohar (in the translation of the Sulam), entitled 'Qol Galgal' ('The Sound of the Wheel') was set to music by the 'Shotei ha-Nevuah' rock group.

In academic circles as well there has been a certain change in the approach to Sefer ha-Zohar, including challenges to Gershom Scholem's assumptions concerning the composition of Sefer ha-Zohar. Yehuda Liebes, in his 'How was the Zohar Written?', challenged the presumption of textual unity of (most) of Sefer ha-Zohar and its attribution to Moses de Leon, suggesting 'the possibility that the Zohar is the work of a whole group that dealt together with doctrines of the Kabbalah, on the basis of a common heritage and ancient texts'. This assumption also underlies the research of Ronit Meroz, who has in recent years been involved in a comprehensive study of the Zoharic literature.

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87 The most widely-known example of this is the incorporation of Kabbalistic motifs in the cultural products of the superstar of popular post-modern culture, Madonna. On this see Huss, 'All You Need is LAV', pp. 611-624.
88 The song is included in the album, Megapsim et Dorot (Helicon Records, 2004). The words of the song are taken from the Tosephta in Parshat Vayeiki, Zohar I: 233b.
90 The preliminary results of her research appear in her articles: R. Meroz, 'Ezekiel's
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New projects involving the translation of the Zohar into English and French by academic scholars have been undertaken. Charles Mopsik began a project of translating the Zohar into French in 1981, while Daniel Matt published the first three volumes of his translation of the Zohar in 2004-05. Both translations are based upon a philological-historical approach to the Zohar, and to a large extent accept Gershom Scholem’s guidelines regarding its composition. At the same time, their enterprise is intended to circulate the Zohar among a wider public and to integrate it within contemporary spiritual and cultural life. It seems to me that these phenomena, alongside other expressions of interest in the Zohar in postmodern culture, signal the beginning of a new era in the history of the reception of Sefer ha-Zohar.

93 It should be noted that the late Professor R. Schatz Uffenheimer formulated a plan to translate the Zohar together with a large team of scholars as part of her Mif'al ha-Zohar, which was terminated upon her death in 1992. See Z. Rubin, ’Mif'al ha-Zohar: Mattrot ve-Hessegim’, in: Asuppat Kiryat Sefer (1998), pp. 167-74. Dr. Ronit Meroz told me that she also plans a translation of the Zohar in the framework of the research with which she has been engaged in recent years.