MURMURING SECRETS:
EROTICISM AND ESOTERICISM IN MEDIEVAL KABBALAH

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When it cannot achieve its perfect form, the A Bao A Qu suffers great pain, and its moaning is a barely perceptible murmur similar to the whisper of silk.

But when the man or woman that revives the creature is filled with purity, the A Bao A Qu is able to reach the topmost step, completely formed and radiating a clear blue light.

—Borges, The Book of Imaginary Beings

Transmitting Secrets: Concealing the Concealment

I commence with a generalization the validity of which must be illustrated from particular instantiations: eroticism and esotericism converge at the point of their divergence. Or, so it might seem, as eroticism ostensibly exposes the concealed and esotericism conceals the exposed. On closer examination, however, this contrast does not engender divergence as much as difference that suggests its own sameness in being different. Alternatively expressed, exposure of the concealed and concealment of the exposed ought not be seen as binary opposites; hermeneutically, exposure is the most exposed concealment, and concealment the most concealed exposure. To attend this paradox is to ascertain that the exposed is precisely what is concealed in being exposed as what is concealed, an inherent duplicity that renders every act of uncovering a recovery, every act of undressing a redressing. It should be obvious that in this doubly concealed concealment, the exposure of exposing, one can discern something resonant with the nature of eros. In the course of this analysis, the relevance of this remark shall become more evident.

A specific application of this tenet may be elicited from the teachings expounded by medieval kabbalists. It is reasonable to presume that the elusive manner of divulging secrets through allusion satisfied a psychological need to reveal and a religious obligation to conceal, that is, to reveal in such a way that the revealing would conceal what was
revealed at the same time that the concealing would reveal what was concealed.\textsuperscript{1} As Abraham Abulafia succinctly expressed the matter, “the way of the mouth is to reveal the hidden and to conceal the revealed (legalot ha-nistar u-lekhassot ha-nigleh).”\textsuperscript{2} A noteworthy formulation of this approach is found in an important text likely to have been composed in the late-thirteenth or early-fourteenth century where a total of 112 esoteric teachings are transmitted as oral traditions received from the elder (zaqen).\textsuperscript{3} In the context of writing about the mystical significance of the cloud into which God descended and through which the glory was revealed to Moses, the anonymous kabbalist notes, “we mentioned it here as an allusion from the allusions of its secret (be-remez mi-rimzei sodo) in order to hide it (lema’an hastiro).”\textsuperscript{4} In other passages from this

\textsuperscript{1} I have articulated the paradoxical hermeneutic of esotericism in many of my previous publications. For example, see Wolfson, “Occultation of the Feminine”; Abraham Abulafia, 9–38; “Divine Suffering,” 110–115; Language, Eros, Being, 17–19, 27, 134–135, 222–224, 232–233, 262, 287, 363. The tension between disclosure and concealment in zoharic kabbalah has been explored as well by Liebes, Studies in the Zohar, 26–30. I note, finally, that this dialectic was also a critical aspect of Gershom Scholem’s orientation, although there are important differences between our approaches and the respective theoretical frameworks that we adopt. Here I simply note that Scholem, in contrast to Liebes, expressed in creative ways an irresolvable tension between the urge to communicate secrets and the apparent impossibility to do so without rendering the esotericism inauthentic. Liebes, by contrast, entertains that kabbalists, at least from the zoharic circle, affirmed the possibility of a full disclosure of secrets in the messianic era, and thus the tension (or ambivalence) between revealing and concealing is reflective of living in a messianically charged time before the coming of the messiah (Studies in Zohar, 30). See Biale, “Gershom Scholem’s Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms”; Wolfson, Abraham Abulafia, 26–29. As I noted in the aforementioned study, Scholem’s view regarding the possibility of an esoteric tradition cannot be separated from his depiction of mystical language as the symbolic communication of the non-communicable. On Scholem’s linguistic mysticism and his approach to symbolism, see Biale, Gershom Scholem, 89–92; Idel, “Zur Funktion von Symbolen bei G.G. Scholem.” Most tellingly, as part of his wrestling with the possibility of an esoteric tradition, Scholem at times questioned the legitimacy of his own participation in disseminating kabbalistic secrets. For recent discussion and citation of some of the relevant sources, see Weidner, “Reading Gershom Scholem,” 213–215. On the critical notion of an esoteric text in Scholem’s worldview, see Biale, Gershom Scholem, 147–162.

\textsuperscript{2} Abulafia, Mafteah ha-Ra’ayon, 69.

\textsuperscript{3} A version of the complete text is extant in MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, 2396, fols. 1b–63b. I am presently preparing an annotated edition based primarily on this manuscript, though I am utilizing as well fragments of the work found in other manuscripts. The composition has been previously mentioned by a number of scholars. See Scholem, On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism, 188; Kabbalah, 61 (in that context, Scholem identifies the zaqen as Moses); Idel, Golem, 111–12; “Introduction,” 36; Wolfson, Through a Speculum, 284 n. 50; “Beyond the Spoken Word,” 182–184 and the relevant notes; Abrams, “The Shekhinah Prays,” 531–532.

\textsuperscript{4} MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 2396, fol. 3b.