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GREEKS, JEWS, AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

MOSES MENDELSSOHN'S SOCRATES

Miriam Leonard

Simply to acknowledge the fact," wrote Nietzsche, "Socrates is so close to me that I am almost continually fighting with him" (1979, 127). Nietzsche's combat with Socrates is a paradigmatic moment in the struggle between antiquity and modernity. Nietzsche is far from being the last modern to have been consumed by his attempts to get to grips with the Athenian sage; Jacques Lacan, for his part, found himself crying out "*Ce Socrate me tue!*" in the middle of the night (101). Cracking the enigma of Socrates for Nietzsche and Lacan, for Hegel and Kierkegaard, not to mention for Derrida, has been paramount to understanding the ethical, metaphysical, and epistemological basis of modernity (see Harrison; Kofman; Leonard; Trapp 2007a; 2007b).

For Nietzsche, Socrates was famously the "archetype of *theoretical man*" (1999, 72), but this figure of uncompromising rationality also embodied a decidedly Christian decadence. "Socrates was a misunderstanding," he writes in the *Twilight of the Idols*,

the entire morality of improvement, Christianity's included, was a misunderstanding . . . the harshest daylight, rationality at all costs, life bright, cold, cautious instinct-free, instinct resistant: this itself was just an illness, a different illness—and definitely not a way back to "virtue," "health," happiness. . . . [T]o have to fight against the instincts—this is the formula of decadence. (1998, 15)

Nietzsche's Socrates represents at one and the same time the advent of Greek reason and the transition from happy paganism to life-denying Christianity. But as so often with Nietzsche, the critique of Christianity conceals a harsher denunciation of Judaism. Socrates' rationality may augur the self-denial of Christ, but his "*jaundiced malice*" is borrowed from Jews:

You choose dialectics only when you have no other means. . . . It can only be an emergency defence when you have no other weapons left. You must *force* your being in the right out of other people: otherwise you do not use it. That is why the Jews were dialecticians; Reynard the Fox was one: what? and Socrates was one, too? (13)

“Was Socrates,” asks Nietzsche, “a Greek at all?” As Sarah Kofman concludes, “Nietzsche begins by comparing Socrates to the venerable masters of Greek philosophy and ends up turning this figure—who never ceases to haunt and trouble him—into a veritable monster, a hybrid creature, more Jew than Greek” (12).

Where for the late Nietzsche, Socrates had come to represent the Jew in another guise, for his predecessor, Hegel, he would represent the anti-Jew par excellence. As Glenn Most has argued, “in the long history of attempts to open the black box, Hegel’s interpretation of the figure of Socrates is perhaps the only one that can be compared to Plato’s” (2).¹ Hegel’s deeply reflected analysis of Socrates dates back to his very first published work, where he introduces the Greek philosopher as the antithesis to the rabbis:

Socrates who lived in a republican state where every citizen spoke freely with every other and where a splendid urbanity of intercourse flourished even among the lowest orders, gave people a piece of his mind in the most natural manner imaginable. Without didactic tone, without the appearance of wanting to enlighten, he would start an ordinary conversation, then steer it in the most subtle fashion toward a lesson that taught itself spontaneously. The Jews on the other hand, in the tradition of their forefathers, were long accustomed to being harangued in a far cruder fashion by their national poets. The synagogues had accustomed their ears to direct instruction and moral sermonizing. (1984, 59)

In Hegel’s account, the violence of Jewish persuasion is contrasted with the benign surreptitiousness of Socratic instruction. Where Nietzsche had identified Socratic dialectics with the force of Jewish logic, Hegel sees Socrates’ spontaneous conversation as the opposite of the synagogue’s harangue. Hegel’s meditations on Socrates and the Jews soon give way to the more familiar dyad of Socrates and Christ.²

Glenn Most argues that Hegel’s Socrates can only be understood in his difference from the Socrates of the eighteenth century: “For the age of Enlightenment . . . Socrates was less an instrument of philosophical reflection than an occasion for moral outrage” (3). For

Most, the Socrates of the *philosophes* had become assimilated to a one-dimensional program of “reason and virtue” (3). But as Russell Goulbourne argues, far from a uniform presentation, “there were as many Socrateses as there were *philosophes* in the eighteenth century” (244). Despite this uncontested plurality, what remains striking are the continuities between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Socratic obsessions. Hegel’s and Nietzsche’s respective Socrateses find echoes in an Enlightenment figure who repeatedly negotiates the poles of Hellenism and Hebraism.

If the twentieth century, in the wake of Freud’s compelling reading of Sophocles, has been known as the “age of Oedipus,” the eighteenth century could be called the age of Socrates (see Böhm; Trapp 2007b; Trousson; Viellard-Baron). The Enlightenment witnesses what Raymond Trousson has called a “prise de conscience ‘socratique’” (17). As intellectuals across Europe sought to associate their endeavors with the Athenian sage, Socrates was transformed into a figure of modernity. But those, like Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot, who wanted to make of Socrates a paradigm of reason had to contend with a tenacious tradition that linked Socrates to the figure of Christ. Long before Percy Bysshe Shelley proclaimed Socrates “the Jesus Christ of Greece,” Christian writers had been drawn to accounts of Socrates’ death as a precursor to Christ’s own agony. The specter of a thousand dying Christs looms behind even Jacques-Louis David’s aggressively secular *Death of Socrates*. The age of reason may have worked hard to topple Jesus Christ from his position of authority and replace him with the pagan Socrates, but this effort more often than not resulted in an insidious juxtaposition rather than a straightforward substitution. It was Voltaire, after all, who named Christ the “Socrates of Palestine” (see Goulbourne; Wilson).

While the return to the classical world in this period has been well documented (see, for instance, Hartog; Marchand; Mossé; Vidal-Naquet), scholars have increasingly noted the striking prominence of discussions of Judaism in Enlightenment and Idealist philosophy.³ The figure of the “Jew” is repeatedly articulated as a problem for the universalist precepts of philosophy. But as Foucault among others has argued, the very concept of the Enlightenment can be seen to be bound up with the Jewish Question. In September 1784 the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* published an answer to the question of what is enlightenment,

written by the Berlin Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Immanuel Kant's more famous answer to that same question, published in the same journal three months later, "marks" what Foucault has called "the discreet entrance into the history of thought of a question that modern philosophy has not been capable of answering, but it has never managed to get rid of, either." "With the two texts published in the *Berlinische Monatschrift*," continues Foucault, "the German *Aufklärung* and the Jewish *Haskala* recognize that they belong to the same history" (43–44). For Foucault, the beginning of a new philosophical era, indeed the beginning of modernity itself, was not heralded by Kant's essay, which has ever since been seen as a clarion call for enlightenment, but rather by the collocation of these two essays, Kant's and Mendelssohn's.

The philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, grandfather of the composer Felix Mendelssohn, was a central figure in the fight for Jewish emancipation and a prominent exponent of the German Enlightenment.⁴ In fact, this was not the first time that an essay of Mendelssohn's had come into competition with Kant. He started off his career by pipping Kant to the post for a prestigious prize from the Prussian Royal Academy of Sciences. Mendelssohn was thus, from the very start, the embodiment of an *Aufklärer*. His work and life brought him into contact with every important figure of his age—indeed a list of his intellectual and personal interlocutors reads like a who's who of Enlightenment thought: Locke, Hume, Leibnitz, Voltaire, Rousseau, to say nothing of Lessing, Jacobi, Hamann, Herder, and Kant. The scope of his work was also impressive. In addition to his essays and books on metaphysics and epistemology, he wrote extensively on political theory, theology, and aesthetics (it was Mendelssohn, for instance, who inspired Lessing to write his *Laocoön*). In addition, his work as a literary critic led him to write essays on Homer, Aesop, and Pope. Mendelssohn was such a respected figure in his age that he came to be known as the German Socrates.

The image of Mendelssohn as Socrates' *doppelgänger* was so compelling that it even left its mark on artistic representations of the thinker. In one much-copied picture by the Jewish painter and engraver Michael Siegfried Lowe, Mendelssohn and Socrates are represented in profile facing each other in a contest for wisdom (figure 1). Above them is a haloed owl in flight, and before them stands a skull



Figure 1. Frontispiece image of Mendelssohn and Socrates, from J. Heinemann, *Moses Mendelssohn. Sammlung theils noch ungedruckter, theils in anderen Schriften zerstreuter Aufsätze und Briefe von ihm, an und über ihm*, Leipzig, 1831. Courtesy of the British Library.

with a butterfly resting on its head. The butterfly, a Christian symbol of resurrection, represents the flight of the soul from the body to the promise of an afterlife. In Lowe's representation of Mendelssohn, then, Hellenic, Christian, and Jewish symbolism vie for attention. Mendelssohn and Socrates mirror each other's philosophical physiognomy (the high brow, the arch of the eyebrows), while each retains his individual traits: Socrates his famous snubbed nose, Mendelssohn his unmistakably Jewish one.⁵ The closer they are brought into proximity, the more important their differences. Christian doctrine appears as the synthesis of the antithetical attitudes of the Hellenic and Jewish sage.

But such a science of the face was brought to a new level by the publication of Johann Caspar Lavater's *Physiognomische Fragmente* in 1775 (figure 2). The Swiss theologian's great tome in four volumes caused a sensation in its time (see Shookman). Lavater claimed to detect in the facial features of his subjects their underlying character. Mendelssohn's silhouette is prominent among them:

Supposedly you know the silhouette? I can hardly conceal from you that it is exceedingly dear to me! Most expressive! . . . I revel in this silhouette! My glance welters in the magnificent curve of the forehead down to the pointed bone of the eye. . . . In this depth of the eye a Socratic soul is lodged! The firmness of the nose;—the magnificent transition from the nose to the upper lip—the height of the both lips, neither protruding beyond the other, oh! How all this chimes with another to make the divine truth of physiognomy perceptible and visible to me. Yes, I see him, the son of Abraham, who some day, in unison with Plato and Moses, will recognize and worship the crucified Lord of Glory! (Lavater, 243 translated in Altmann, 319)

Although Lavater "revels" in Mendelssohn's physical features, it is ultimately his "Socratic soul" that draws his attention. Lavater sees through Mendelssohn's Jewish body to his Greek soul. And it is through the exposure of this inner Hellene that Lavater discerns his route to salvation. "The divine truth of physiognomy" turns out to be a prelude to conversion. The antithesis of Mendelssohn's Jewish body and Greek soul is resolved in the synthesis of Christianity.

How did Mendelssohn come to assume the epithet of the German Socrates? What did it mean to assimilate Mendelssohn, a practicing Jew, to the figure of the Athenian sage? Despite Most's insistence on



Figure 2. Silhouette of Moses Mendelssohn, from Lavater, Johann Caspar, *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*. [Essays on Physiognomy designed to promote the knowledge and love of mankind . . .] Translated by H. Hunter, 3 vol. London, 1789–98. Courtesy of the British Library.

the uncompromising rationalism of the eighteenth century, the question of religion was never far from the surface of the Enlightenment's Socratic effusions. Johann Georg Hamann's 1759 *Socratic Memorabilia* is a case in point. When Hamann, another one of Kant's close associates, had a spectacular pietistic conversion experience during a failed business trip to London, Kant suggested to him that he set about translating some entries from the French *Encyclopédie* as remedy for his departure from rational methodology. Hamann responded to Kant in a letter that, as one critic puts it, has "good claim to be the first clash between the *Aufklärung* and the *Sturm und Drang*" (Beiser, 23). In the letter Hamann casts Kant in the role of Socrates and assumes for himself the identity of Socrates' *daimon*—the figure of genius who speaks

through Socrates (see Nicholls, 82ff). Hamann's prophetic message announces the end of the tyranny of the Enlightenment and a return to faith and to feeling. Hamann, thus, uses Socrates himself as the voice of inspiration that had been repressed in his Enlightenment reception. In his response to Kant, Hamann sarcastically topples Socrates as a figure of reason. The letter was only a prelude to his more extended identification with Socrates' spirit in his *Socratic Memorabilia*. Hamann's account of the life of Socrates is a full-frontal attack on the arrogance of the Enlightenment, written in the name of its most favored representative. Composed in an obscure prose densely overlaid with biblical references, the *Memorabilia* represents Socrates' battle with the Sophists as a precursor to Hamann's own battle with Kant and his Enlightenment cronies:

The opinion of Socrates can be summarized in these blunt words when he said to the Sophists, the learned men of the time, "I know nothing." Therefore these words are a thorn in their eyes and a scourge on their backs. All of Socrates' ideas, which were nothing more than expectorations and secretions of his ignorance, seemed as frightful to them as the hair of Medusa's head, the knob of the Aegis. (167)

Hamann can think of no more provocative a challenge to Kant than to proclaim his own ignorance. As frightful "as the hair of Medusa's head," the realization that "I know nothing" is the symbolic castration of the Enlightenment. The injunction to "believe" stands in stark opposition to the Enlightenment imperative to think. To Kant's *sapere aude*, Hamann answers *credere aude*. And for Hamann, genius is the corollary of belief:

What for a Homer replaces ignorance of the rules of art which an Aristotle devised after him, and what for a Shakespeare replaces the ignorance or transgression of those critical laws? Genius is the unanimous answer. Indeed Socrates could very well afford to be ignorant; he had a tutelary genius, on whose science he could rely, which he loved and feared as his god, whose peace was more important to him than all the reason of the Egyptians and the Greeks, whose voice he believed, and by means of whose wind . . . the empty understanding of a Socrates can become fruitful as well as the womb of a pure virgin. (171)

It is not difficult to see how Hamann's hymn to "genius" marks him out as a precursor to Romanticism. Indeed, Hamann's whole portrait of Socrates in his *Memorabilia* seems unsettlingly modern. His untimely

emphasis on ignorance and self-knowledge anticipates many of the obsessions of both the nineteenth and twentieth century's characterizations of Socrates.⁶ But Hamann's notion of genius also articulates a cultural conflict. Socrates' "tutelary genius" is a more integral part of his identity "than all the reason of the Egyptians and the Greeks." Despite the reference to Homer, Hamann sees Socratic genius as distinctly "un-Greek." Not for the first time, Hamann allusively suggests a communality between Socrates and Christ. Socrates' "empty understanding" has the same promise as the "womb of a pure virgin." It is almost as if Socrates' ignorance *is* the womb from which Christ will emerge.

Hamann's Hellenic proto-Christ, then, voices a polemic against the Enlightenment and its adoption of Greece as the homeland of rationality. Locked in a confrontation with Kant, Hamann's conceit was to assume the mantle of Socrates to expose the arrogance and hypocrisy of the Age of Reason's philhellenic aspirations. "It is one of the exciting facts of cultural history," writes O'Flaherty, "that in the year 1759, exactly at a time when the Enlightenment was at the zenith of its influence, Hamann published his *Socratic Memorabilia*, a treatise presenting a version of Socrates in direct contrast to the portrait of that philosopher presented by the Enlightenment" (5). Hamann's *Socratic Memorabilia* pulls Enlightenment time out of joint. His Socrates is simultaneously premodern and postmodern. He embodies both the devotion of the middle ages and the suspicion of the present.

By the time Hamann's Socratic rebuke appeared in press, Moses Mendelssohn's own Socrates project had already been conceived. Early in his career Mendelssohn set about rewriting a version of Plato's *Phaedo*, the dialogue that recounts the death of Socrates. Mendelssohn's own dialogue on the immortality of the soul was an immediate best seller, and its first edition sold out within four months. It was subsequently published in numerous editions and translated into Dutch, French, Russian, Danish, Italian, and English within Mendelssohn's lifetime.

The choice of a dialogue on the immortality of the soul has a specific resonance within the religious discourse of the eighteenth century. The belief in immortality was one of the few dogmas of natural religion. Mendelssohn's task in his *Phaedo* was to provide a proof for the immortality of the soul without reference to revelation. By putting

his proofs in the mouth of the pagan Socrates, Mendelssohn attempts to show how immortality can be deduced from reason alone. His *Phaedo* represents an attempt to reclaim Plato for the Enlightenment. In this passage from the introduction on the “Life and Character” of Socrates, Mendelssohn returns to the issue of his *daimon*, the guardian spirit he claimed gave him moral guidance. This mystical aspect had played directly into the hands of those, like Hamann, who wanted to see Socrates as a precursor to Christ:

The opinion of scholars is divided about the guardian spirit [Daemon], which Socrates alleged to possess, and which, as he said, always deterred him from doing anything harmful. Some believe that Socrates allowed himself a little poetic license here, in order to gain the ear of the superstitious population; but this seems to dispute his usual sincerity. Others understand by this guardian spirit a keen sense of good and evil, which, through reflection, long experience, and constant exercise, became moral instinct, by virtue of which he could judge and test every act of free will by its probable results and effects, without being able to give an account of it through judgment. Several instances are found in Xenophon and Plato, however, where this spirit foretells things to Socrates, which cannot be explained by any natural power of the soul. These instances perhaps have been added by his students from good intention. (2007, 54–55)

Mendelssohn’s argument here is hedged in the rhetoric of philological learning. He situates his own text against the background of scholarly opinion. The “guardian spirit” here is the subject of academic debate rather than theological conviction. Both he and Hamann highlight the controversy of this aspect of Socrates’ biography, but while Hamann uses it as a springboard for revolutionary intellectual history, Mendelssohn domesticates it as a quandary for the community of scholars. Rather than leading his readers to the edge of reason, Socrates’ *daimon* calls on the faculty of reason to fathom it. Rationalization is the order of the day. Such an appeal to mysticism can be understood either as “poetic license” or as moral reason by another name: “a keen sense of good and evil, which, through reflection, long experience, and constant exercise, became moral instinct, by virtue of which he could judge and test every act of free will by its probable results and effects, without being able to give an account of it through judgment.” While Mendelssohn admits that Socrates’ acts are driven by “instinct” and are unable to “give an account of [themselves] through judgment,”

he nonetheless insists that this “instinct” is based not only on “reflection” and “long experience” but even, after all, on “judgment.” Despite himself, Socrates remains a Kantian *avant la lettre*. Even Socrates’ most suspect idiosyncrasy is here brought in line with the rational imperatives of morality and the moral imperatives of reason.

And yet, Mendelssohn seems aware that Socrates’ *daimon* at some level seems to resist the schema of Enlightenment thought:

Perhaps also, Socrates, who, as we saw, was disposed to raptures, was weak or enthusiastic enough, to transform this vividly moral feeling, which he didn’t know how to explain, into an intimate spirit, and to attribute those forebodings to it afterwards, which arise from entirely different sources. Must then an admirable man necessarily be free from all weaknesses and prejudices?

In our days, it is no longer popular to mock apparitions. Perhaps, in Socrates’ time an exertion of genius was necessary to do that, which he used for a more productive purpose. All the same, it was usual for him to tolerate any superstition, which did not lead directly to moral corruption. . . . The felicity of the human race was his only study. As soon as a prejudice or superstition gave rise to open violence, injury to human rights, corruption of morals, etc., nothing in the world could stop him from defying all threats and persecutions, to profess himself against it. (2007, 55)

Even Socrates nods. . . . If Socrates is not “free from weakness and prejudice” what hope is there for the rest of us? Socrates’ “enthusiasm” is used by Mendelssohn as a test case of how the Enlightenment should deal with its doubters. As Francesco Tomasoni argues:

“Radical Enlightenment” has often been accused of having nurtured the impossible dream of an absolutely free and autonomous reason, forgetting that “imprinting,” that “horizon” which defines us. Nevertheless, distinction is made between legitimate and illegitimate prejudice, and therefore the superior criterion of reason is re-proposed. . . . During the period of the Enlightenment, there emerged a far more articulate awareness than is commonly admitted of the play between reason and prejudice. (2–3)

Tomasoni shows how in different ways both Mendelssohn and Kant strove to demonstrate that the distinction between “convenient” and “harmful” prejudices involved the exercise of reason (3–4). Moreover, the issue of “tolerance” that Mendelssohn ascribes to Socrates is clearly crucial to his vision of an enlightened society. Tolerance of prejudice

has its limits, however, in the violations performed in its name. Where prejudice stands in opposition to “human rights,” Mendelssohn declares, Socrates would be the first to denounce it.

But what is the significance of a practicing Jew like Mendelssohn turning to Socrates? To choose to discuss the issue of immortality had a particular resonance in a Jewish context. Christians had long been critical of Judaism’s neglect of the issue of the immortality of the soul. From the Christian perspective, the question of immortality was just one more indication of the essential lack of Judaism. Paradoxically, immortality is a Greek not a Jewish idea. Jewish philosophers like Philo had to turn to Plato to fill in the gaps of Jewish theology. In this version, Platonism is not so much the antithesis as the supplement to Judaism. Plato hardly represented the dangerous lure of paganism. Jews needed Plato to become better Jews.

The Socrates of the Enlightenment, then, is an ambivalent figure of reason. When Mendelssohn chose Socrates and when his contemporaries for their part chose to identify Mendelssohn with Socrates, more was at stake than any facile conflict between enlightenment and religion. The epithet “German Socrates” expressed a complex series of questions and anxieties about Judaism and its relationship both to pagan Athens and Christian Berlin. In some ways Moses Mendelssohn’s assimilation to the figure of Socrates challenges the framework of an opposition between Hellenism and Hebraism. This Jewish Platonist seems to call into question the Enlightenment concept of reason. Far from an opposition between Greeks and Jews, Mendelssohn seems to be highlighting the profound continuity between Athens and Jerusalem.

But this emphasis on continuity is not only conceptual, it also has an urgent political dimension. The figure of Socrates was not just important as a paradigm of intellectual enlightenment. Where Mendelssohn’s Socrates spends his dying hours seeking metaphysical enlightenment, Jacques-Louis David’s Socrates is above all else a political figure.⁷ Painted in 1787 in the immediate run up to the Revolution, *The Death of Socrates* represents a heroic self-sacrifice in the name of the fatherland (figure 3). Socrates’ death is portrayed as an act of political resistance. Defying the tyrannical state in the name of truth and virtue, he embodies a new social order, a different relationship between the individual and the state and a revolutionary model of citizenship.

Socrates thus not only represents the aspirations of enlightenment reason, he also prefigures a new understanding of civil society that has its roots in the classical polity. Marx famously proclaimed that the French Revolution was acted out in Roman costumes and with Roman phrases, but it was the ancient Greek model of citizenship that was promoted in the revolutionaries' desire for radical democracy (see Hartog; Mossé; Vidal-Naquet). Despite the irony of the historical Socrates' opposition to democracy, in David's picture and elsewhere his death became associated with a thirst for Greek freedom. The question of how much like Socrates a Jew like Mendelssohn could be had become political.

The exclusion of the Jews from civil society and indeed from citizenship itself was one of the most hotly debated political questions of the pre-revolutionary period (see Blumenkranz and Soboul; Schechter). Their congenital indisposition for citizenship is succinctly expressed by Hegel in his early essay "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate" precisely in terms of the Greek/Jew antithesis we have been tracing:

Among the Jews, the fact that they had no freedom, no rights, since they held their possessions only on loan and not as property, since as citizens



Figure 3. Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, 1787. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1931 (31.45) image copyright, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

they were nothing at all. The Greeks were all equal because all were free, self-subsistent. The Jews equal because all were incapable of self-subsistence. (1948, 197–98)

Mendelssohn spent much of his life campaigning for Jewish emancipation, arguing against Hegel that ancient Jerusalem as much as classical Athens could provide a model for the modern city (see especially Hess). While his writings had some influence on the political landscape of Prussia during his lifetime, it is with his posthumous reception in the French Revolution that he had the most direct success in pushing his agenda. Mendelssohn's ideas had such a profound effect on the revolutionary comte de Mirabeau that he was driven in 1787, in the immediate aftermath of Mendelssohn's death, to write a fifty-eight-page biography of the Berlin Jew before he put forward his own case for political reform permitting the Jews to exercise rights that he deemed universal (see Schechter, 95–101). Mirabeau's biography of Mendelssohn draws on many of the familiar tropes of his representation by contemporaries. In particular, Mendelssohn's singular journey from the generalized misery of the Jewish condition toward the heights of social and intellectual recognition is stressed. "Un homme jetté par la nature au sein d'une horde avilie . . . s'est élevé au rang des plus grands écrivains que ce siècle ait vu naître en Allemagne," opens Mirabeau's account (1). But Mirabeau's wider argument will need to underline the exemplarity rather than the exceptionalism of Mendelssohn's trajectory. Mirabeau maintains that if all Jews were given access to the civic benefits that Mendelssohn (against all adversity) was able to avail himself of, they too would become a benefit to the society that had so mistreated them. While David was painting the death of Socrates, Mirabeau was writing a eulogy to the figure he called "le Platon moderne" (1). Accounts of the French Revolution have stressed the absence of a sustained intellectual argument about the position of the Jews in France before the 1780s and highlight the importance of German debates in formulating the demands of the new revolutionaries. In modern narratives, the German Socrates is credited with having put the issue of emancipation of the Jews on the table for the French Revolution (see Blumenkranz and Soboul). Five years after Mendelssohn's death in September 1791, France would grant full citizen rights to the Jews—it was the first European nation to do so.

Mendelssohn, then, has a double identity as the Jewish Socrates:

the one who stealthily exposes the Greek limits of philosophy by assuming the identity of Socrates and confronts reason with its Hebraic other and the figure who draws citizenship away from its inescapably Greek legacy to claim a place for the Jew in the modern city. Despite the idiosyncrasy of Hegel's and Nietzsche's nineteenth-century Socrateses, the complex figure who emerges from the Enlightenment defines the contours of Socrates as a figure of modernity. Between philosopher and citizen, savior and demon, Greek and Jew, Socrates is the embodiment of the paradoxes of reason and subjectivity as they were explored in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy. Mendelssohn's Jewish Socrates reveals not just the persistence of the enigma of Socrates, but also the violent struggle between "Greeks" and "Jews" in the construction of modernity.

Notes

1. See especially the section on Socrates in Hegel 1974.
2. For the early history of this comparison, see Hanfmann; see also Wilson.
3. See Rotenstreich and Tomasoni; for a more historical analysis, see Hess.
4. See Altmann for a magisterial biography.
5. See Gilman on the "Jewish Body."
6. From Hegel to Lacan, as it were. See Harrison; Kofman; Leonard; Trapp 2007b.
7. See Potts. For a more complex account of the politicization of this picture, see Mainz.

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