Consolation is one of the fundamental longings of human existence. Man seeks consolation, as he seeks meaning, or love. While the question of love or of meaning has occupied philosophers intensively over the ages, the philosophical literature on consolation is very limited, and rare. Moreover, not only was consolation left on the margins of the history of philosophy (in antiquity and the Middle Ages), consolation in modernity became the object of a form of rationalistic critique of religion. The consolations of religions, for the moderns, are considered to be imaginary, untrue, and harmful. This paper proposes a reflection on consolation that challenges this modern critique. In what follows I will try to be attentive to the existential desire for consolation, and will propose an original reflection on the philosophical question of evil and suffering from its point of view. What is consolation? Is it possible to formulate a non-naive, philosophically valid wisdom of consolation? And what is the relation between consolation and lament? How does lament contribute to a different hearing of consolation? These are the questions I will address here.

1 The question of consolation

One of the theoretical pillars on which, at least since the seventeenth century, the philosophical critique of religion reposes is the dichotomy between reality and imagination. Spinoza distinguishes in his *Ethics* between real beings (or beings of reason [*entia rationis*]) and imaginary beings [*entia imaginationis*] (Spinoza 2000 [1677], 101). Whereas real beings have true concepts, discovered by means of clear and distinct reasoning, imaginary beings are the products of human imagination, provoked by the (bodily) emotions of fear and hope. Such imaginary beings, Spinoza claims in the introduction to his *Theologico-Political
Treatise, are at the origin of superstition, prejudice, and religion (Spinoza 2007 [1670], 49–51). This Spinozistic order of discourse would easily identify the discourse of comfort with the regime of imagination: the longing for consolation results directly from our deepest hopes and fears. When one loses a loved one, when one fears an imminent danger, when one hopes for better days, one seeks a consoling word. When one suffers, when the body collapses, one seeks consolation. The discourse of consolation can be recognized as the discourse of imagination par excellence: it is the product of man’s unstable existence, of his “fluctuating soul” [fluctatio animi]. And insofar as the logos of consolation is a modality of religious discourse, its concepts, resulting from fear and hope, are false, imaginary concepts, which do not account for the “true reality.”

The dichotomy imagination/reality operates exemplarily in two major nineteenth- and twentieth-century critiques of religion: namely, those derived from Marx and from Freud. Written in 1843, Marx’s opening lines to “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’” link religion and consolation “naturally,” recognizing their shared origin in illusion or imagination:

Religion is the general theory of this world [...] its general basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human being inasmuch as the human being possesses no true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly a struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion [...] Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. (Marx and Engels 1964, 43–44)

Following the dichotomy of Spinoza, Marx posits on the one side religion and its “consoling aroma” as the “fantasmatic realization” of man, and on the other side “true reality.” The simplicity of his account is a symptom of the self-evident character of his thesis: the difference between reality and imagination, and the identification of religion and consolation with imagination, goes without saying. Hence the popularity of the paragraph’s closing sentence.

Nearly one hundred years later, in clinical language, Dr. Freud repeats the same scheme in his critique of religion in The Future of an Illusion (1927):

Thus I must contradict you when you go on to argue that men are completely unable to do without the consolation of the religious illusion, that without it they could not bear the troubles of life and the cruelties of reality. That is true, certainly, of the men into whom you have instilled the sweet or bitter-sweet poison from childhood onwards. But what of the other men, who have been soberly brought up? Perhaps those who do not suffer from the neurosis will need no intoxicant to deaden it. (Freud 1968 [1927], 49)

Religion enables man to bear the cruelties of reality thanks to its consoling doctrines (afterlife, divine justice, its giving existence a sense of purpose). But there is a price to this: “true reality,” as Freud puts it. Instead of being blinded
by phantasmagoric illusions, Freud, like Kant before him,\(^2\) summons us to be adults, to leave our childhood behind, to silence the child in us: “Man cannot remain children for ever; they must in the end go out into ‘hostile life.’ We may call this ‘education to reality’” (Freud 1968 [1927], 49). The dichotomy reality-imagination, again, organizes Freud’s logic: on one side religion and its consoling virtues, and on the other side the suffering of existence, the encounter with the true and cruel reality.

“The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation” (Camus 1961 [1942], 60). These are the words of Camus, describing the absurd man in his *Myth of Sisyphus*. A life without consolation: this is what philosophical modernity proposes to us. Despite the deep differences in the thought of each philosopher, from Spinoza to Camus the dichotomy between “true reality” (rational for Spinoza, materialistic for Marx, absurd for Camus) and “consoling illusion” (offered by religion) is maintained. I claim this dichotomy to be the unquestioned axiom of the modern critique of religion. This axiom implies at least two elements worth highlighting. 1) It supposes that the distinction between reality and imagination is unambiguous; it supposes that we possess a clear and unquestioned, clear and distinct, notion of what is “true reality.” 2) The axiom is judgmental. The value of each of the alternatives is always already presupposed and understood: whereas reality is positively connoted, imagination is negatively connoted. Hence the critique. I claim, furthermore, that we moderns have completely assimilated this axiom: it governs how we think, and we are unable to think otherwise. This axiom delineates our philosophical (positivistic, scientific) modernity. This is why the discourse of consolation, not to speak of the discourse of religious consolation, is always suspect in our eyes. We are incorrigible adults. We have indeed forsaken the child in us. We are dogmatically modern.

Is this modern evidence unsurpassable? Can the axiomatic identification of consolation and illusion be undone? If we question the scientific and positivistic idea of reality, perhaps a positive answer to this question can be suggested. Inspired by existential philosophy and phenomenology, I will try here to open a path in this direction. I will propose a phenomenological meditation on consolation and lament that challenges the fundamental axiom of the modern

\(^2\) See the opening lines of Kant’s “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” (Kant 1991 [1784], 54–55).
critique of religion while trying to get closer to the existential meaning of consolation.

2 Theodicy and consolation

I will start my inquiry with Leibniz. Leibniz is perhaps the only philosopher in modernity who provided a philosophical discourse of consolation. In his work on Leibniz and the Stoics, Donald Rutherford remarks that among other things, Leibniz’s *Theodicy* was meant to propose an alternative to Cicero’s *De Consolatione*:

In comprehending the justice of God’s action, we acquire our fullest knowledge of the unity of the divine perfections of power, knowledge and goodness, and this knowledge itself and our consequent love of God is, for Leibniz, the source of true happiness. The first of these benefits is the one most closely associated with the traditional idea of *consolation*. In understanding the larger context in which God exercises his justice, we are aided in dealing with loss, grief, pain, and alienation – circumstances that reflect our limited power and vulnerability to fortune. (Rutherford 2001, 139)

Theodicy – the justification of God given a world full of evil – is one of the classical forms that the discourse of consolation adopts in religion, and, since Leibniz, in philosophy. It stems from a rationalization of a basic religious conviction: there is no evil without cause, no evil without origin. And Leibniz’s text on theodicy is a text on the question of the origin of evil. Yet his rationalization produces an alternative to the classical religious approach to the question of evil. Instead of looking at evil and suffering as punishments – no suffering without sin, says the Talmud in tractate *Shabbat* (55a) – Leibniz regards evil to be an integral part of being. Leibniz’s thesis is well known: among the infinite possible worlds God could have created, our actual world is the best possible world. Relying on his metaphysical concepts (pre-established harmony, the principle of sufficient reason, the idea of individual substances [monads], God’s goodness, his almightiness, etc.), Leibniz establishes in his *Essais de Théodicée* the rationality of evil: “It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like

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3 This reasoning can already be found in Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Descartes 1931 [1641], 177–179), but it is Leibniz who systematically developed the idea, bringing it to full maturity in his 1710 *Essais de Théodicée* (full title: *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l’homme et l’origine du mal*).
Utopian or Sevarambian romances: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness” (Leibniz 2009 [1710], 129; bk. 1, § 10). Leibniz renders evil relative and necessary: relative because in order to estimate the badness of evil one should be able to compare this world to all other possible worlds; necessary because, seen from above, in the general sum of things and in comparison with other possible worlds, evil is necessary for the shaping of the best world we live in. Nevertheless, because as finite human beings our perspective on the world is limited, we are unable to see this, and thus we cannot truly account for evil. All we have is a theoretical understanding of the necessity of evil, and not a concrete understanding of it. We are subjectively impressed by the visibility and tangibility of evil, without being able to calculate its rational necessity: “I cannot show you this in detail. For can I know and can I present infinities to you and compare them together?” writes Leibniz (2009 [1710], 129; bk. 1, § 10). We think evil is terrible, it is a sign of the imperfection of the world, and therefore a sign of the imperfection of its creator, of its cause (God). But, as Leibniz writes, “if the smallest evil that comes to pass in the world were missing in it, it would no longer be this world; which, with nothing omitted and all allowance made, was found the best by the Creator who chose it” (Leibniz 2009 [1710], 128–129; bk. 1, § 9).

Leibniz, in his *Theodicy*, disregards the subjective Erlebnis of evil: he disregards concrete, bodily suffering. Reason is a cure for our human, all-too-human sufferings. The self as body plays no role in Leibniz’s economy of evil. Rutherford writes: “Leibniz’s theodicy does not pretend to console by speaking directly to our emotional suffering. Its point is best expressed in a remark Leibniz makes in the essay *On Destiny*: ‘with the eyes of the understanding we are able to occupy a point of view that the eyes of the body do not and cannot occupy’ (G VII 120/W 572). This change of point of view supplies the basis for what can be described as a ‘philosophical consolation’” (Rutherford 2001, 139). In Leibniz, philosophical consolation is possible provided one contemplates the world with purely theoretical eyes.

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4 Later in the text Leibniz’s claim will be that the visibility of evil is not a sign for its reality: “We know, moreover, that often an evil brings forth a good whereto one would not have attained without that evil. Often indeed two evils have made one great good: *Et si fata volunt, bina venena juvant*. Even so two liquids sometimes produce a solid, witness the spirit of wine and spirit of urine mixed by Van Helmont; or so do two cold and dark bodies produce a great fire, witness an acid solution and an aromatic oil combined by Herr Hoffmann. A general makes sometimes a fortunate mistake which brings about the winning of a great battle; and do they not sing on the eve of Easter, in the churches of the Roman rite: *O certe necessarium Adae peccatum, quod Christi morte deletum est! O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem!*"
Leibniz links reason and consolation. In this respect, he differs from authors such as Spinoza, Marx, or Freud. While for them imagination and consolation are linked, Leibniz dissociates this bond and arrives at the opposite thesis: absolute knowledge (which can compare infinite worlds) consoles. Consolation for Leibniz is achieved when reality is seen for what it is, without illusions. Nevertheless, one should ask whether Leibniz’s philosophical consolation can really procure consolation for the human subject. Indeed, if consolation depends on absolute knowledge, then, strictly speaking, God is the only one who can profit from such consolation, precisely because in Leibniz’s metaphysics He is the only monad possessing absolute knowledge. Hence what one could call the paradox of Leibniz’s philosophical consolation: God, who created the world by choosing the best possible one, and who by doing so determines the very existence and intensity of evil in the world he created, is the only one who can understand this choice – and thus he is the only one who can be consoled for the evil resulting from this very choice. Consolation becomes in Leibniz’s theory a predicate of God, leaving man unconsolored.

Leibniz’s Theodicy, from the perspective of the question of human consolation, results in an aporia: the only subject of consolation is also He who creates – or permits evil. This aporia is the symptom of a more fundamental problem in Leibniz’s theory. Leibniz requires that we disregard the body and adopt the perspective of pure intellect. We should rely on “the eye of the understanding” alone, and not the “eyes of the body.” From the start, theodicy avoids looking into concrete evil, into the phenomenon of evil, i.e., suffering. It addresses the idea of evil (Leibniz’s sole problem being the theoretical question of how to combine the goodness of God with the reality of evil), avoiding looking into the original givenness of evil, into human suffering as it is lived subjectively by man. Or stated more conceptually: Leibniz reduces quality (pain, suffering) to quantity, supposing that quality is quantifiable. This is precisely what Galilean science is about: an absolute measure for all that is, quan-

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5 To avoid the idea that God, who is absolutely good, is directly responsible of evil, Leibniz distinguishes between God “wanting” the good and “permitting” evil, writing in Discourse on Metaphysics (written in 1686 and published posthumously): “We must make a distinction [...] For if the action is good in itself, we can say that God wills it and sometimes commands it, even when it does not take place. But if the action is evil in itself and becomes good only by accident, because the course of things (particularly punishment and atonement) corrects its evilness and repays the ill evil interest in such a way that in the end there is more perfection in the whole sequence than if the evil had not occurred, then we must say that God permits this but does not will it, even though he concurs with it because of the laws of nature he has established and because he knows how to draw a greater good from it” (Leibniz 1989, 40).
tity – i.e., mathematics – being the key to understanding being.\textsuperscript{6} It is exactly at this point that theodicy encounters a huge obstacle: suffering is not quantifiable. If one detaches evil from its subjective, qualitative root, one deforms the phenomenon itself. To adopt a theoretical attitude toward evil means to avoid looking at the phenomenon itself, to avoid \textit{being in relation with} suffering – be it my suffering or the suffering of the other. Calculative reason, to cite Horkheimer and Adorno’s conception (2002 [1944], 88), necessarily fails to account for reality whenever it faces concrete suffering. Not because it lacks reasonable answers, but precisely because, looking at evil through the lenses of Reason, it does not recognize suffering. The problem is not our inability as finite beings to make God’s calculations, but the very idea that evil can be integrated into an equation. Suffering is invisible to calculating reason. This is why, often and very coherently, evil is considered by rational philosophers to be an illusion, a nonentity. Privation, as it is sometimes put. A phantasm: \textit{entia imaginationis}. From the point of view of reason, \textit{sub specie aeternitatis}, the category of evil does not apply to Being. But we are in the world. And \textit{as such}, we long for consolation. Which philosophy cannot provide.

\section{Consolation in Nietzsche’s \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}}

Is it possible to envisage consolation otherwise? Is it possible to formulate a thinking of consolation that does not disregard the \textit{quality} of suffering? To address this question I propose to turn to Friedrich Nietzsche and to the theme of consolation in his early work \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} (1872). In this book Nietzsche proposes a meditation on suffering, and tries to think tragedy as consolation. This Nietzschean meditation will help us transition from a theoretical to an existential discussion of consolation.

Consolation plays a central role in Nietzsche’s work on the origin of tragedy. The highest goal of tragedy is, according to Nietzsche, to procure “metaphysical consolation”: “In the older tragedy one could feel at the end the metaphysical consolation, without which it is impossible to imagine our taking pleasure in tragedy” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 107).\textsuperscript{7} If for Aristotle the \textit{telos} of tragedy is

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  \item \textsuperscript{6} This is one of Husserl’s insights in his account of the Galilean revolution, as analyzed in Husserl 1970, 37–42. See also Alexandre Koyré’s account of Galilean science, inspired by Husserl, in his \textit{Galileo Studies} (Koyré 1978 [1939]).
  \item \textsuperscript{7} In his 1886 foreword to the book (“A Critical Backward Glance”), Nietzsche rectifies his terminology: instead of speaking of metaphysical consolation he proposes the notion of “ter-
a *katharsis* of the emotions of pity and fear, for Nietzsche the end of tragedy is consolation. To understand the nature of what Nietzsche calls metaphysical consolation, we should reconstruct Nietzsche’s analysis of the birth of tragedy from the point of view of the question of consolation. The myth of Silenus in paragraph three of *The Birth of Tragedy* will be our starting point, as it is there that the primordial suffering of existence is described:

An old legend has it that King Midas hunted a long time in the woods for the wise Silenus, companion of Dionysos, without being able to catch him. When he had finally caught him the king asked him what he considered man’s greatest good. The daemon remained sullen and uncommunicative until finally, forced by the king, he broke into a shrill laugh and spoke: “Ephemeral wretch, begotten by accident and toil, why do you force me to tell you what it would be your greatest boon not to hear? What would be best for you is quite beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second is to die soon.” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 29)

The myth of Silenus teaches the truth of existence: it would have been better for man not to have been born than to have been born. Nothing justifies human existence. No purpose, no final destination. Everything that is is pure contingency. This “terrible wisdom of Silenus” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 33) unveils the most intimate suffering in human existence: being is absurd; man is doomed to live a meaningless life. This is his inevitable fate. Once he is born, he will never be able to undo the fact of his existence, the fact of his being. All he can do is pray for a quick end: to die soon. This is the starting point of Nietzsche’s philosophy of existence.

The Dionysian principle, for Nietzsche, is a reaction to this initial suffering and a cure for it. The Dionysian *Erlebnis*, best illustrated by the state of drunkenness, is one in which the absurdity and meaninglessness of being are lived positively. This is how the ancient Greeks responded to the unbearable truth of Silenus: instead of wishing to die, they managed to recognize a deeper layer
in being, one that fills the subject with the impression that beyond contingency, beyond the futility of existence, there is some consistency in being. “Life,” says Nietzsche, is experienced here as “indestructibly joyful and powerful.” And this Dionysian experience is an experience of consolation:

The metaphysical consolation [Der metaphysische Trost] – with which, I wish to say at once, all true tragedy sends us away – that, despite every phenomenal change, life is at bottom indestructibly joyful and powerful, was expressed most concretely in the chorus of satyrs, nature beings who dwell behind all civilization and preserve their identity through every change of generations and historical movements. (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 50; see also 53)

Anticipating the theme of amor fati, Nietzsche describes here an existential Erlebnis where sorrow turns into joy, where the terrible truth of existence is lived positively. Despite the ever-changing nature of things, despite man’s finitude, the subject senses through the Dionysian experience a joy and a power underlying everything that is. Consolation consists in this access to the depths of being, made possible by Dionysian art. Later in the text Nietzsche again stresses this idea:

Dionysiac art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal delight of existence, but it insists that we look for this delight not in the phenomena but behind them. It makes us realize that everything that is generated must be prepared to face its painful dissolution. It forces us to gaze into the horror of individual existence, yet without being turned to stone by the vision: a metaphysical consolation momentarily lifts us above the whirl of shifting phenomena. For a brief moment we become, ourselves, the primal Being, and we experience this insatiable hunger for existence. (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 102)

“To gaze into the horror of individual existence, yet without being turned to stone by the vision …”: a new gaze, a new way of looking at being, this is what Nietzsche is describing in his phenomenology of the Dionysian. A vision that is not petrified by evil, but is capable of standing before suffering and seeing it, experiencing it, otherwise. The world of causes is not the world of Dionysus: the Dionysian effect procures no explanation; it does not point at the causes of evil, but, through an immediate experience of being, evil is lived joyfully.

Nietzsche’s analysis of tragedy does not stop here. The Dionysian state is only the first reaction to evil, a reaction that implies the erasure of the subject. Indeed, according to Nietzsche’s phenomenology, the Dionysian state is one in

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9 In Ecco Homo he writes: “My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it — all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary – but love it” (Nietzsche 1969 [1888], 258).
which the subject, the individual self, is absorbed by being: “Dionysiac stir-
rings arise either through the influence of those narcotic portions of which all
primitive races speak in their hymns, or through the powerful approach of
spring, which penetrates with joy the whole frame of nature. So stirred, the
individual forgets himself completely” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 22). The ancient
Dionysian celebrations are described by Nietzsche as celebrations where the
subject ecstastically merges into nature, where he abandons himself to a kind
of mystical unity, and becomes one with “the primordial One” [Das Ur-Eine]:
“He feels himself to be godlike and strides with the same elation and ecstasy
as the gods he had seen in his dreams” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 24). Man is one
with nature, one with the others, one with the gods. He is not himself anymore.
He is outside of himself: ec-stasis. Whence Nietzsche’s latent question in The
Birth of Tragedy: how can one experience metaphysical consolation without
losing the subject? How can consolation be experienced by the subject himself,
and not by some ecstatic I which, returning to reality after the moment of ecsta-
sy, will inevitably be confronted again with the absurdity and meaninglessness
of existence?¹⁰

For Nietzsche the Dionysian principle is at the origin of tragedy,¹¹ yet this
principle does not suffice to account for the accomplished form of tragedy.
Tragedy is not the expression of Dionysus alone, but is rather that of the merg-
ing of Dionysus and Apollo (the father of the plastic arts, the arts of representa-
tion, Dionysus being associated with music). While initially the Apollonian re-
sponse to the Dionysian myth of Silenus was one of rejection and negation
(resulting in an inversion of the wisdom of Silenus¹²), eventually Apollo and
Dionysus were joined together, and from this reconciliation – “the most impor-
tant event in the history of Greek ritual” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 26) – tragedy
emerged: “Thus we have come to interpret Greek tragedy as a Dionysiac chorus
which again and again discharges itself in Apollonian images […] Tragedy is
an Apollonian embodiment of Dionysiac insights and powers …” (Nietzsche

¹⁰ Here is how Nietzsche describes this way back to reality: “As soon as that quotidian reality
enters consciousness once more it is viewed with loathing […] The truth once seen, man is
aware everywhere of the ghastly absurdity of existence, comprehends the symbolism of Ophe-
lia’s fate and the wisdom of the wood sprite Silenus: nausea invades him” (Nietzsche 1956
[1872], 51–52).
¹¹ See § 7, where Nietzsche defends the thesis according to which “tragedy arose out of the
tragic chorus and was, to begin with, nothing but chorus” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 47).
¹² “The Greeks were keenly aware of the terrors and horrors of existence; in order to be able
to live at all they had to place before them the shining fantasy of the Olympians […] Now it
became possible to stand the wisdom of Silenus on its head and proclaim that it was the worst
evil for man to die soon, and second worst for him to die at all” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 30).
Accomplished tragedy consists in facing the unbearable truth of existence (the wisdom of Silenus, which the Apollonian, at first at least, negates) without quitting the locus of the subject. This is possible only when Apollo represents the Dionysian truth, when Dionysus dresses himself in the clothes of Apollo:

The Apollonian embodiments in which Dionysos assumes objective shape are very different from the continental interplay of shifting forces in the music of the chorus, from those powers deeply felt by the enthusiast, but which he is incapable of condensing unto a clear image. The adept no longer obscurely senses the approach of the god: the god now speaks to him from the prosenium with the clarity and firmness of epic, as an epic hero, almost in the language of Homer. (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 58–59)

Instead of the obscure presence of the god, enthusiastically absorbing the subject and annihilating his self, tragedy is the place where the god speaks to the subject. This speech, if we can push Nietzsche’s analysis a little bit further, is a consoling speech. This is the miracle of Tragedy: an (Apollonian) speech, whose (consoling) effect is Dionysian. Through tragedy (an event described here in terms of revelation: “the god now speaks to him”), the world regains sense. And this is exactly how Nietzsche, in the first paragraph of his text, understands the unique virtue of the Apollonian principle: as in dreams, the Apollonian representations are such that they speak to us and that through them, sense is made. Describing the Apollonian effect, Nietzsche writes: “Here we enjoy an immediate apprehension of form, all shapes speak to us directly [alle Formen sprechen zu uns], nothing seems indifferent or redundant” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 30). The Apollonian event of meaning is an event of saturated meaning: everything speaks to us, every detail counts, even if we are unable to say exactly how or why. Meaning here is experienced in its immediacy, without the mediation of reason, as in dreams. Returning to the analysis of tragedy, we can thus say that tragedy is not a theory of suffering or of evil but the event where sorrow is turned into joy through the Apollonian representation of it, which speaks directly to us. This immediacy of meaning, without offering the experience of ecstasy from the one side and without discarding evil from the other side, is the original event of consolation for Nietzsche, one he finds in ancient Greek tragedy.

This phenomenology of consolation is so important to Nietzsche that when he depicts the fall of tragedy (and the simultaneous rise of philosophy) he emphasizes the difference between metaphysical-existential consolation and false, philosophical consolation. Opposing the Dionysian-musical art of tragedy of Sophocles and Aeschylus to the theoretical-Socratic tragedy of Euripides, Nietzsche shows that whereas Sophocles’s and Aeschylus’s tragedies produce
true existential consolation, Euripides, influenced by his *daemon* Socrates,\(^{13}\) introduces a fake, theodiceic form of consolation (containing a principle of calculation, ideas of reward and punishment):

Yet the modish anti-Dionysiac spirit shows itself most clearly in the denouements of the new plays. In the older tragedy one could feel at the end the metaphysical consolation, without which it is impossible to imagine our taking pleasure in tragedy. Most purely, perhaps, in *Oedipus at Colonus* we hear those harmonious sounds of reconciliation from another world. But, once the genius of music has departed from tragedy, tragedy is dead, for what, henceforth, is to furnish that metaphysical solace? The new dramatists tried to resolve the tragic dissonance in terrestrial terms: after having sufficiently buffeted by fate, the hero was compensated in the end by a distinguished marriage and divine honors. He thus resembled a gladiator, who might perchance be set free after he had taken his beatings and was covered with wounds. The place of metaphysical solace was now taken by the *deus ex machina*. (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 107)

Dismantling the classical opposition between imagination and reality, Nietzsche is imposing here a new criterion for truth. The question is no longer the question of true reality versus imagination, but the question of the nature of consolation: *dues ex machina* or metaphysical comfort. The measure of truth, no longer mathematical, is now existential. Sophocles’s tragedy is true because it procures genuine consolation, whereas Euripides’s tragedy is false because it offers only a *simulacrum* of consolation. Euripides speaks the language of theory, of philosophy, whereas Sophocles’s tragedy speaks the language of consolation. And this language of consolation is the language of lament: “the infliction of pain was experienced as joy while a sense of supreme triumph elicited cries of anguish from the heart. For now, in every exuberant joy there is heard an undertone of terror, or else a wistful lament over an irrecoverable loss” [*Aus der höchsten Freude tönt der Schrei des Entsetzens oder der sehende Klagedauj über einen unersetzlichen Verlust*] (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 27). Nietzsche knows the central role lament occupies in tragedy.\(^{14}\) Lament, *trenos* in Greek, comes from *trenomai*, to cry out loud at funerals. In lament, pain is verbalized, exteriorized, and this verbalization is the very place where sorrow is experienced differently. Nietzsche pushes this phenomenology to its extreme: “the infliction of pain was experienced as joy,” he writes (1956 [1872],

\(^{13}\) According to Nietzsche’s reconstruction of the beginnings of philosophy, Socrates whispered his degenerated philosophical wisdom into the ears of Euripides. Socrates, as Nietzsche depicts it in an ironic way, is the *daemon* of Euripides (see Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 76–78).

\(^{14}\) Aristotle, as part of his analysis of the essential elements of tragedy, offers in his *Poetics* a description of lament, *kommos*: “a *kommos* is a lament [*trenos*] shared between chorus and actors” (see Aristotle 1995, 69).
Again, pain is experienced positively, as joy. The core of Nietzsche’s phenomenology of consolation (the inversion of sorrow into joy) is linked to lament, *Klagelaut*. Tragedy, through lament, procures a lived and unmediated consolation. The suffering subject is immediately relieved. He re-lives.

Like Spinoza, Marx, and Freud, Nietzsche understands the inconsolable nature of reality. But unlike them, the existential philosopher recognizes the central place of the longing for consolation in human existence. As such, this longing has to be addressed. Therefore both the concept of truth and the idea of consolation need to be revisited. And this is exactly what Nietzsche does in *The Birth of Tragedy*: he criticizes the Socratic-philosophical idea of truth and formulates an alternative to the theoretical consolations of philosophy. Ancient tragedy as understood by Nietzsche offers a new way of approaching the enigma of consolation. Consolation should address the very place of distress, of sorrow, of suffering. This is what tragedy does: it effects an inversion in the experience of pain itself. This immediate, non-intellectual inversion is what qualifies existential consolation as opposed to theoretical consolation. This form of consolation confronts rather than masks evil, and affects it in its very essence: suffering is *lived* differently (without being conceived differently, without being justified).

### 4 Ein Menachem: Lamentation, consolation

Of all the means of consolation there is none so efficacious for him who has need of it as the declaration that in his case no consolation can be given.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn of Day*

Equipped with this Nietzschean lesson I wish to turn in the final section of this study to the *book of Lamentations* [*Eikhah*] and analyze the relation between lament and consolation in its first chapter. My analysis will concentrate on two words, which appear five times in the opening chapter of Lamentations and can thus be recognized as the chapter’s *leitmotiv*: *ein menachem*, “there is no consoler.” In what follows I will try to listen to those two words and to render audible their very particular tonality.

First let us recall the verses themselves:

Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are upon her cheeks. Among all her lovers there is none to comfort her [*ein la menachem*]. (1.2)

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15 Nietzsche 1911 [1881], 294; § 380.
Her filthiness clung to her skirts; she did not consider her future. Her fall was astounding; there was none to comfort her [ein menachem la]. “Look, O LORD, on my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed.” (1.9)

For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water, because the comforter that should relieve my soul is far from me [ki rachak mimeni menachem]: my children are desolate, because the enemy prevailed. (1.16)

Zion spreadeth forth her hands, and there is none to comfort her [ein menachem la]: the LORD hath commanded concerning Jacob, that his adversaries should be round about him: Jerusalem is as a menstruous woman among them. (1.17)

People have heard my groaning, but there is no one to comfort me [ein menachem li]. All my enemies have heard of my distress; they rejoice at what you have done. May you bring the day you have announced so they may become like me. (1.21)

The opening lines of *Lamentations* are striking: no consoler, says the poet. No redemption, no messianic end to suffering (one of the names of the Messiah, according to the sages of Israel – who deduce it from the first verses of *Lamentations*16 – is Menachem, the consoler). Lamentation, so it seems, excludes consolation: the genuine expression of lamentation is ein menachem, there is no consoler. At first sight, lamentation begins with the casting out of consolation.

But perhaps this reading is right only at first sight. Inspired by Nietzsche’s analysis it could be possible to hear those verses otherwise. This other possibility is what I wish to explore here.

To hear those verses differently we should return to the phenomenology of lament and consolation we have met in Nietzsche, and elaborate it further. Lament, we have said, is the verbalization of suffering. Lament is the very expression, in language, through language, from within language, of suffering. It is the ex-pression of suffering. It occurs when wailing becomes speech: *threnos* in Greek – a wailing that becomes speech [*ode*]. And this speech, this very verbalization of pain – mysteriously – consoles. This is the initial proposition we have to look at more closely: expression functions as the medium for consolation, as the *locus* of consolation.

The idea of lament as a particular modality of expression is explored by Gershom Scholem in his essay “On Lament and Lamentation.” Lament, says Scholem, is “a language of silence”: “The expression of innermost expressionlessness, the language of silence is lament” (*Lament*, 316). Scholem does not state that lament *is* silence, but that lament is *the language* of silence. As if silence is not always silence, as if silence has a language of its own, as if language itself can be silent. This is the paradoxical nature of lament: it says

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16 *Babylonian Talmud*, *Tractate Sanhedrin* 98b.
Nothing (positive); it is not a language of propositions. As such, lament exists on the edge of nothingness: it is a borderline phenomenon, between language—or revelation, as Scholem puts it—and silence. Better: lament is the very expression of this border: “This language expresses nothing, absolutely nothing positive, but only the pure border” (Lament, 314). Lament is expression and the negation of it, the “expression of innermost expressionlessness.” This moment in Scholem’s analysis is extremely insightful. It designates a linguistic region that is pure expression. Not expression of something, but simple and pure ex-pression. The language of lament, in this sense, not only exists on the border but demarcates the meaning itself of the borderline shared by every language: the dimension itself of expression that, as such, precedes speech and conditions language. The (non-)language of lament is a language prior to all languages, a language conditioning every language, it is the language of expression as such. Pure expression is what is left over after “each word negates itself and sinks back into the infinity of silence,” after language has “absorbed its own light” (Lament, 318). The formula of Scholem is dense and precise: “expression of innermost expressionlessness.” Following this intuition, one can push the analysis further: in its most primal and archaic form, lament is a pure and simple crying out loud: “Ah!” Lament is the absolute beginning of language: a single letter coming out from the deepest of one’s soul. Pure expression, lament invents or reinvents language. It reminds us of the essence of language.

What is the particular modality of expression in lament? Threnodia: a wailing that becomes speech. Like a baby’s cry, mysteriously becoming language. Like a child’s cry, on the edge of language. This cry is not expressionless but it is here that expression manifests itself in its purest form. Crying is not yet ordinary language or everyday language—not because nothing is said, but because too much is said. The cry is an excess of expression, it is a saturated expression, the expression of expression itself. A crying face: pure expression. Tears: a body that is overflowed by it(s)elf. A moment of saturation of meaning, yet to be deployed, yet to be made explicit. Lament is this wailing becoming speech, this bursting out of expression. In this sense, lament is the very passage from silence to speech. As Scholem notes, lament is a borderline phenomenon: a first language, a language before language, perhaps a prolegomenon for every possible language. The mouth opens, a sound is being heard, a word is ex-teriorized from the depths of one’s being: there is meaning. Eikhah.

From the depths of one’s being: lament is the innermost expression of the soul. It is the soul as expression. Ex-pression: I’m pressed to expose myself, to open up. Expression is the very movement of the opening of the soul to exteriority, to transcendence. In suffering, the subject is closed within himself. La-
ment is this very moment where an opening occurs. In his phenomenology of suffering, Emmanuel Levinas describes this initial opening up of the soul, this initial expression, precisely as an initial lament: “‘Why do you make me suffer and not reserve for me, rather, an eternal happiness?’ A first saying, a first question or first lamentation or first prayer” (Levinas 1998 [1978], 129). “How?” “Why?” “Eikhah?” A first question that is not a question but the initial verbalization of pain, the first moment of expression, or the very awakening of the soul. In lament, it is not reality that is expressed, but the singular self who speaks a speech that transcends ordinary speech, a speech that silences ordinary language. Reality is questioned in its entirety: a cry in the dark, waiting – perhaps eternally – for consolation.

Theodicy misinterprets this first expression, this first question: “Why?” The “why” of lament extends beyond the theoretical structure question-answer. It is a lament-question, which as such does not require an answer. What does it require? Consolation, precisely. This is the fundamental misunderstanding of theodicy: it does not hear the true sense of “Why?” It is deaf to Eikhah.

Lament is not only a pure cry but is already speech: it inscribes itself in language. If indeed lament is a language of pure expression, this expression deploys itself in language. Not only is it expressed in a language, but, as Schol-em says, lament catches the most intimate and intransmissible essence of each language: “Not to everybody, but only to the children of one’s own people can lament be passed down” (Lament, 317). It is important to recognize the true sense of the linguistic facticity of lament. Language is the element in which the questioning soul, the crying soul, expresses itself. Yet language as such is never mine. Even our mother tongue is not “ours.” Language constitutes a first sphere of exteriority, a first sphere of transcendence. Expression is not only this movement from the insight to the outsight but also a movement from the outside to the inside: the letting in of a dimension of transcendence, language. Lament is not only a primordial expression but also a primordial affection by

17 Here is where the phenomenology of lament and consolation meets the form of thinking Rosenzweig dubbed “new thinking,”. “New Thinking” is an existential mode of thinking, attentive to moments of transcendence that condition the opening up of the subject to otherness. What Rosenzweig articulates in the second book of the second part of the Star of Redemption is precisely a phenomenology of love, which he presents as the very choreography of revelation, depicting the opening up of the subject to the call of the other (Rosenzweig 1971, 173–185). The phenomenology of lamentation that I propose here tries to grasp this choreography from another angle.

18 I’m indebted to Prof. Moshe Halbertal, who developed the idea of Eikhah as a pure question, as a pure plaint that does not expect an answer, in his essay in this volume. For a linguistic analysis of the term Eikhah, see Yechiel Z. Moskowits’s commentary on the first word of Lamentations, in Daat Mikra on Eikhah (Jerusalem 1973).
otherness. It is both expression in its purest form and language in its most factical dimension (otherness). Language, in lament, takes over: the self is guided by the depths of language, by a singular otherness suggested without being grasped, without being mastered. This letting in of otherness is a true revolution of the soul: it is, to use Rosenzweig’s category, a first miracle.\(^{19}\) According to this analysis, contrary to Scholem’s phenomenology, lament is not opposed to revelation but is already a moment of revelation. Through language, lament is already a primordial relation of man to otherness. The first encounter of God with Adam-the-First, the first dialogical revelation of Transcendence to Man is spelled exactly like the first word of Lamentations: Ayeka [Where art thou] / Eikhah [How; הכה] (Genesis 3.9).\(^{20}\)

We are now ready to formulate the thesis that will allow us to tie together lament and consolation. Consolation is not about saying the right words (“consoling speech”), it is not about explaining evil, but rather it is about the very opening – or re-opening – of the dimension of otherness. Consolation is about making the pure event of otherness present, thus opening the very dimension of future, of hope. Levinas, in a penetrating passage, suggests this intuition while providing a phenomenology of the caress.

The caress of a consoler which softly comes into our pain does not promise the end of suffering, does not announce any compensation, and in its very contact, is not concerned with what is to come afterwards in the economy of time; it concerns the very instant of physical pain, which is then no longer condemned to itself, is transported “elsewhere” by the movement of the caress, and is freed from the vice-grip of “oneself,” it finds “fresh air,” a dimension and a future. (Levinas 1988 [1947], 91)

The caress “concerns the very instant of physical pain,” writes Levinas. It is neither a distraction nor a compensation but the redemption, in pain, of the moment of pain itself. Alterity – the contact of the other – has this miraculous effect. The question is not what causes this effect (this would transpose us out of phenomenology, out of the discourse of meaning), but what the very sense of the consoling effect is. Otherness, proximity, consoles because consolation consists in the opening up of the dimension of otherness. Lament, like caress, is already a first contact with otherness. Lament is always already, even though

\(^{19}\) See especially Rosenzweig 1971 [1930], 108–111. For Rosenzweig, the passage from silence to language is the very passage from a mysterious, mythical, and closed realm to the dialogical and open world of revelation.

\(^{20}\) The classical rabbinical commentary on Lamentations (Eikhah Rabbah) explicitly links the verse in Genesis 3.9 and the first word of Lamentations: the word Eikhah in Genesis 3.9 should be understood as God’s lament after the transgression of His commandment by Adam-the-first (see Eikhah Rabbah, 4th petichtah).
mostly via negativa, an attestation of otherness (in language [language as otherness], but also through language [language as address, as solicitation]). Lament is a language of proximity, it is proximity made language. As such, in its raw materiality, through the facticity of language, lament consoles.

We can now address the question of the content of the language of lament in the book of Lamentations. The only true content of lament is one that negates the very idea that lament is about content. Therefore, the only original lamentation is the one who negates consolation as a theme: “ein Menachem la,” “ein la Menachem.” There is no one to comfort her, no positive word of consolation. If it is true that consolation is not about compensation or calculation (as in theodicy); if it is true, as Nietzsche teaches, that consolation is to be found not in myths about afterlife but in facing suffering truly while experiencing it otherwise (as in tragedy), then the book of Lamentations offers one of the most radical possibilities of consolation. Facing evil directly, formulating its irreducible nature, means, for the author of Lamentations: negating the consoler, ein menachem. Yet this very act is a new form of consolation. The lack of a consoler is indeed the content of lament – but at the same time, verbalizing evil at its extreme, lament produces a consolation of a higher degree: the verbalization of evil is already a making present of otherness. This is the aporia of consolation. Authentic consolation is susceptible to emerge only at the moment when the inconsolable nature of evil is being verbalized. The book of Lamentations activates this aporia: consolation can be suggested only through its absence, through its negation.

By verbalizing suffering a new form of consolation emerges. Indeed, the poet does not say “no consolation,” but “no consoler”: as if negating the presence of a consoler does not mean negating consolation. It suggests another form of consolation: this consolation inscribed in the very act of lament, this consolation made possible by the very existence of lament as a modality of the soul. Ein menachem awakens this radical, on the edge of atheistic, effect of consolation. Ein menachem: the only truthful ex-pression, the only words – or anti-words – capable of consoling.

21 The very fact of facing evil and exteriorizing it by proclaiming its pure and irreducible nature has a consoling effect. This is not a causal or psychological explanation of consolation (verbalization as therapy, or as a technology of relief), but an attempt to describe the phenomenon of consolation, to hear its meaning. The relation between consolation and expression in language is what interests me here, a relation that can also take written form, in literature for instance. Literature, in Kafka, or Blanchot, can be understood as one of the possible modalities of consolation. For a first-person testimony on this subject, see Stig Dagerman’s powerful meditation in Dagerman 1989.

22 I’m thankful to Dr. Ilit Ferber for having drawn my attention to this crucial distinction.
Everything depends on hearing the tonality of these words. I have tried to restitute the original music of those two words: *ein menachem*. This tonality is present *immediately* in the recitation of *Lamentations* during the Jewish liturgy of the ninth of the month Av (the day commemorating the sufferings of the people of Israel throughout history). This tonality, like a caress, consoles. A consolation irreducible to any critique of religion as illusion. A consolation that, affecting the soul immediately, preserves its mystery intact.

**Bibliography**

**Works keyed to abbreviations**

*Lament*  

*Tb*  

**Other references**


