All language is infinite.¹ But there is one language whose infinity is deeper and different from all others (besides the language of God). For whereas every language is always a positive expression of a being, and its infinity resides in the two bordering lands of the revealed and the silenced [Verschwiegenen], such that it actually stretches out over both realms, this language is different from any other language in that it remains throughout on the border [Grenze], exactly on the border between these two realms.² This language reveals nothing, because the being that reveals itself in it has no content (and for that reason one can also say that it reveals everything) and conceals [verschweigt] nothing, because its entire existence is based on a revolution of silence [Schweigen]. It is not symbolic, but only points toward the symbol; it is not concrete [gegenständlich], but annihilates the object. This language is lament.

Lament is certainly not the opposite of any type of language, such as jubilation, happiness, or the like, as a chaotic approach would suggest. Rather, the opposite of lament is only revelation itself, and for that reason it can be overcome or transformed through no other means than by leading it toward revelation. For happiness has an inner core [Kern], but lament is nothing other than a language on the border, language of the border itself.³ Everything it says is infinite, but just and only infinite with regard to the symbol. In lament, nothing is expressed and everything is implied. Lament is the only possible (and in a unique way, really actualized) volatile [labile] language. That is to say, each language can return to itself, can leave its sphere, enter other spheres

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¹ This essay is found in the original German in Tb2, 128–33. According to a diary entry from 3 December 1917, Scholem wrote it on 2 December, as an afterword to his translation of the book of Lamentations, which he had completed the previous day. The fair copy was dated “January 1918.” Whereas A. D. Skinner has translated the title of Scholem’s essay as “On Lament and Dirge” (in LY, 2007), we have chosen to translate it as “On Lament and Lamentation,” preserving the distinctions among the three German terms that Scholem uses: Klage, Klagelied, and Totenklage, which we have translated as “lament,” “lamentation,” and “dirge,” respectively.

² It would have been possible to translate Verschwiegenen as “concealed,” and perhaps the opposition of the concealed and the revealed would be more intuitive. However, we have translated this as “silenced,” given the importance that Scholem places on silence throughout this text and in his diaries.

³ We translate Scholem’s term Kern as “inner core,” since this allows us to bring out Scholem’s consistent opposition between language’s exteriorization in expression and its inexpressible interiority (for which Scholem uses the related term Mittelpunkt later in the text).
and return, saturated with other orders. But once lament has left its line [Linie], it can never win itself back, except by annihilating the revelation that impedes it: the essence of lament is irretrievably lost once it is no longer border. Lament has no stability.

Lament proves itself to be the genuine opposition of revelation in yet another respect. While lament encompasses all other languages as a unity, it does so in a way that is precisely contrary to revelation: that is, not as a unity of the all, but as a unity of the particular. For if revelation means the stage at which each language is absolutely positive and expresses nothing more than the positivity of the linguistic world – the birth of language (not its origin!) – then lament is precisely the stage at which each language suffers death in a truly tragic sense, in that this language expresses nothing, absolutely nothing positive, but only the pure border. Since, as we have already mentioned, each language lies in both realms – that of the revealed, expressed [Aussprechlichen], and that of the symbolized, silenced [Verschwiegenen] – so in its transition each language partakes of lament as its genuinely tragic point. (The language of tragedy is most intimately related to lament.) Language in the state of lament annihilates itself, and the language of lament is itself, for that very reason, the language of annihilation [Vernichtung]. Everything is at its mercy. It repeatedly attempts to become symbol, but this must always fail, because it is border. In this way, the infinity of lament is directed completely [restlos] toward the symbol: the transition from symbol to lament is different than that from lament to content. In human language, the latter transition is not at all feasible, although it can possibly be (and is probably) accomplished in other languages. There are no nuances in lament, just as there are no nuances in revelation. Thus, one lament cannot be meaningfully translated into another, since this translation transforms nothing, unless it plummets [stürze] out of its

4 Original: “Die Klage aber kann, hat sie einmal ihre Linie verlassen, nie sich wiedergewinnen, außer durch Vernichtung der Offenbarung, die sie daran verhindert.” We puzzled over how to translate this sentence, since the referent of the second sie is ambiguous. Dominic Bonfiglio helped us realize that the most logical translation is that revelation is what impedes lament (rather than lament impeding revelation). As Bonfiglio points out, the only ambiguity that persists is whether the final clause is nonrestrictive or restrictive. That is, should lament annihilate revelation tout court (all of which impedes lament from winning itself back), or should lament annihilate only that part of revelation that impedes lament from winning itself back? The alternative would be: “But once lament has left its line [Linie], it can never win itself back, except by annihilating revelation, which impedes it [from winning itself back].”

5 Whereas at first Scholem describes lament as the “opposite” [Gegenteil] of revelation, now he refers to lament as the “genuine opposition” of revelation [eigentliche Gegensetzung]. This may imply an activity of opposition, rather than a static contrast (Tb2, 128–129).
lability and becomes something else. But lament, as long as it is lament, remains always the same: there is only one border between the linguistic realms of speech and silence.\(^6\) Were there more than one border, they would enclose an area in which lament would correspond with a mental being that is not purely symbolic. But the mental being whose language is lament is mourning, the concreteness [Gegenständlichkeit] of which is of an exclusively symbolic nature.\(^7\)

Mourning, which we have described as a mental being, should of course not be said to designate an object in any concrete [konkreten] sense. The description of mourning as a symbolic object (which is more than a defense and which conveys something about the very nature of mourning) should prevent the misunderstanding, as if conceptual realism were at work here. Mourning is a condition of each thing, a state into which everything can fall, but the epitome of this state for each thing refers to an idea of this condition, and it is this idea that this examination concerns.

Mourning and lament stand in an unambiguous relationship to each other. Of course, mourning lies wholly in the realm of symbolic objects: it denotes for each thing the first order of the symbolic. Mourning is not itself a border in the realm of objects, but it is infinitely close to the border. And therefore its derivation in language is precisely the border itself. Of all symbolic languages, the language of mourning contains the deepest paradox, because its concreteness annihilates itself. Even the most silent gesture, the mutest word, succumbs to this paradox. The magic of mourning is thus entirely immanent and

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\(^6\) Although we use the English word “between” in this sentence, it is worth noting that Scholem uses the German word von rather than zwischen: Es gibt nur eine Grenze der sprachlichen Reiche von Reden und Schweigen (Tb2, 129). It is not clear whether this raises a conceptually significant point about how Scholem understands the “border” separating speech and silence. Elsewhere in this essay, however, Scholem does use the word zwischen to characterize the border language of lament, referring to “ihre besondere Grenzhaftigkeit zwischen den sprachlichen Reichen” (Tb2, 131).

\(^7\) Scholem takes the term “mental being” [geistiges Wesen] from Benjamin’s “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man.” According to Benjamin, all expression of the contents of mind, and not just communication in words, should be understood as language. Benjamin distinguishes a “mental being,” which expresses itself in language, from a “linguistic being” [sprachliches Wesen], which refers only to what is communicable in a mental being (Language, 64–65). Whereas Scholem regards mourning as the mental being to which lament corresponds, he does not consider lament to be the linguistic being of mourning, since the expression of lament emerges only through the paradoxical destruction of this being, or the self-overturning of mourning. Scholem registers this paradox involved in the expression of mourning by referring to lament as its “linguistic derivation” [Ableitung in der Sprache] rather than its linguistic being (Tb2, 130).
seems to be withdrawn from any connection with other orders. As such, the most powerful revolution of mourning’s innermost center [Mittelpunktes] is necessary (through the restoration [Zurückführung] of the symbolic to revelation) in order to induce mourning’s self-overturning, which, as a result of its own reversal, allows for the course toward language to emerge as expression. It is the essential law of mourning, which can only be recognized as such here, that it cannot escape this revolution, as long as its purity is not otherwise marred. Thus mourning partakes in language, but only in the most tragic way, since in its course toward language mourning is directed against itself – and against language. What appears here is the truest anarchy, which emerges most clearly in the impression made by lament, in the utter inability of other things to answer lament in their language. There is no answer to lament, which is to say, there is only one: falling mute [das Verstummen]. Here again lament shows itself to be the deep opposition of revelation, which is the linguistic form that absolutely demands an answer and enables one. One cannot even answer lament with a lament itself. For to answer lament means wanting to give mourning, which is directed only toward its own downfall, another direction. Only One can answer lament: God himself, who through revelation evoked it [i.e., lament] out of the revolution of mourning.

What share symbolic objects have in that connection of things whose idea we call teaching [Lehre] is a question of great significance. Teaching encompasses not only language, but also, in a unique way, that which lacks language [das Sprachlose], the silenced, to which mourning belongs. The teaching that is not expressed, nor alluded to in lament, but that is kept silent, is silence itself. And therefore lament can usurp any language: it is always the not empty, but extinguished expression, in which its death wish and its inability to die join together. The expression of innermost expressionlessness, the language of silence is lament. This language is infinite, but it has the infinity of annihilation, which is, as it were, the ultimate power [Potenz] of what has been extinguished. The latter never reaches the finite, because even its highest intensity, which is based on annihilation (of mourning), is counteracted by something

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8 *Lehre* (teaching or doctrine) is another term that Scholem developed, at least in part, through his ongoing discussion with Benjamin. In *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, Scholem gives a retrospective account of the importance of this term for Benjamin’s (and implicitly, his own) thought between the years 1915 and 1927. According to Scholem, Benjamin’s use of *Lehre* included but surpassed the philosophical realm and was interpreted as “instruction,” in the sense of the original meaning of *torah* in Hebrew. Instruction was not limited to the “true condition and way of man” in the world, but it also taught about the “transcausal connection of things and their rootedness in God” [*den transkausalen Zusammenhang der Dinge und ihr Verfasstein in Gott*] (WGF, 73; WSF, 69).
that owes its infinity to revelation. Lament is a completely unsymbolic lan-
guage, since there is no symbol of a symbol. It is only symbolic in relation to
that in mourning, which itself is neither a symbol nor an object, but was a
symbol and an object; now, however, in annihilation, it signifies the infinite
nothing, the zero [Null] to an infinite degree: the expressionless, the extin-
guished. But this does not mean that lament is a completely concrete [sachli-
che] language⁹ – on the contrary, since the object [Sache] would here be annihi-
lation itself. Rather, lament founds a completely autonomous order, which has
already been recognized above as the language of the border.

That lament can be transmitted belongs to the great, truly mystical laws of
the peoplehood [Volkstum]. Not to everybody, but only to the children of one’s
own people can lament be passed down. What unheard-of [unerhörte] revolu-
tions must a people undergo to make its lament transmissible: that an entire
people speaks in the language of silence can only be surmised [geahnt werden].
The most eminent example of this kind is perhaps the destruction of the Tem-
ple, the lament for which has been passed down to our day. (In ancient Israel
[another example] might be the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, after which David
ordered that the children of Judah be taught his dirge [Totenklage]).¹⁰

Every lament can be expressed as poetry, since its particular liminality be-
tween the linguistic realms, its tragic paradox, makes it so. (This is also why
Hebrew has only one word both for lament [Klage] and lamentation [Klagelied]:
Kinah.) Perhaps, indeed, the languages of symbolic objects have no other pos-
sibility to become languages of poetry except in the state of lament. And how
much more clearly this appears in human lament! The infinite tension that
inflames each word of lament, as if to make it cry – there is hardly any other

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⁹ We have chosen to use “concrete” for three terms used by Scholem to describe language in
this text: gegenständliche, konkrete, and sachliche. These could potentially be translated as
“referential,” “concrete,” and “factual” (language), respectively. We opted for the word “con-
crete” to avoid imposing strict linguistic or scholarly terminology on Scholem’s text. The term
“concrete” is also crucially used by Scholem in relation to language and its “realization” or
“concretization” in his ninth “unhistorical aphorism” on the Kabbalah: “The ‘true’ language
cannot be spoken, just as the absolutely concrete cannot be realized” (quoted in Biale 1985,
87).

¹⁰ 2 Samuel 1.17–27 begins with an explicit command to teach the Judahites the dirge for the
deaths of Saul and Jonathan. “And David intoned this dirge over Saul and his son Jonathan –
his ordered the Judahites to be taught ‘The Bow’” (2 Samuel 1.17–18). Scholem translated the
Song of the Bow following the death of his best friend, Edgar Blum, who was wounded in the
war and passed away on 1 November 1916. According to Skinner, Scholem’s reference to the
lament for Saul and Jonathan is a hidden memorial to his friend – a silent tribute, taken up
into the textual tradition (LY, 164). This hypothesis is also suggested by Scholem’s remark,
“The time will come to erect for my best friend a living monument” (Tb1, 416; LY, 147).
word in human languages that cries and falls silent more than the Hebrew word הָאֵיךְ (eikhah) [how], with which the dirges begin – the infinite force with which each word negates itself and sinks back into the infinity of silence, in which the word's emptiness [Leere] becomes teaching [Lehre], but above all the infinity of mourning itself, which destroys itself in lament as rhythm, prove lament to be poetry. The silent rhythm, the monotonity of lament is the only thing that remains: as the only thing that is symbolic in lament – a symbol, namely, of being extinguished [Erloschensein] in the revolution of mourning, as was said above. But the very inviolability of rhythm in relation to words is what, in the most elementary sense, constitutes all poetry. Monotonity is the deep linguistic symbol of expressionlessness, which sends its radiance inward, and of the darkness of all mourning, which absorbs its own light. Each word appears only to die, and perhaps one may venture to assume that the artistic form of most late Hebrew lamentations – the alphabetical acrostic – has a symbolic meaning that is at least connected with the fact that lament encompasses all language and destroys all language. The acrostic is the magical form in which the infinity of language is spellbound. Lament is thus in poetry what death is in the sphere of life.

Lamentation is, in its deepest sense, mythical. In it, myth itself seeks exit to a world to which there is no access, in which one can and cannot be, but into which, since eternity, no one can reach from another world. In lamentation, mythical enchantment (with which it was perhaps originally enmeshed) is shattered by the unheard-of linguistic phenomenon of the border. The order of lament itself destroys the possibility of exploiting its magic as enchantment: enchanted words must not be tragic. For this reason, and because mythical reality – which consumes itself within the song of lament – is of such great internal truth, could Judaism, as it overcame myth and banned enchantment, absorb lament within itself. In this way, the Hebrew kinah arose. David's dirge for Saul and Jonathan, the lamentations for the destruction of the first Temple,

11 Scholem's note in the text reads: “The magical character of the acrostic in the domain of the spell is now considered proven.” Scholem also pursues the theme of the magical character of the acrostic form in an undated, double-sided sheet entitled “Notiz über das alphabetische Akrostichon” (“Note on the Alphabetic Acrostic”): “Alphabetic acrostic as a magical instrument can, without doubt, still be found in the Gaonic period [...]. It is probable to suppose that these mystics (yorde merkabah, descendents to the chariot) were not only pursuing rationally clear ends with this arrangement (mnemonics), but that it had a mystical background: to procure some effect through the proper order of the hymns, and the proper one meant for them precisely the mystically given order of the alphabet. These alphabetical hymns also have the typical doubled infinity of the acrostic and of the inner infinite repetition of the attributes: the intensive and the extensive” (Tb2, 551).
and Jehuda Halevi’s lament for Jerusalem in the Zionide, or that of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg for the burning of the Torah (sha’ali serufa), mark the three stages of this path, which signifies the attempt to elevate lament to the perspective of the divine. Naturally, along this path lament itself dies, and only the ever-recurring force of the border phenomenon prevents lament from becoming stable, which means nothing other than symbolic babble. For this people, teaching and lament were intertwined such that it could come to pass that the teaching lamented and lament taught, without causing the orders to collapse, as endangered as they were. For the great misfortune that was their destiny gave rise again and again to mourning, and the mourning revolutionized itself in lament, and lament dies before God with the teaching for the sake of [um] this people’s soul.

The orders of creation itself preserve lament from downfall, a fact that is expressed in a deeper way in an aggadah in the petichtah of the midrash Eikhah Rabbati – the famous “entrance to the great lament,” in which God himself laments over the Temple.13 So long as the inviolability of silence is not threatened, men and things will continue to lament, and precisely this constitutes the grounds of our hope for the restitution of language, of reconciliation: for, indeed, it was language that suffered the fall into sin, not silence.

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12 Scholem translated this lament under the title of “Ein mittelalterliches Klagelied” and published his translation, along with a short introduction, in Martin Buber’s Der Jude 4.6 (1919–1920). Sha’ali Serufa was written by Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (1215–1293) to commemorate the burning of the Torah in Paris in 1242.

13 The petichtah, or proem, to the midrash is a compositional form that allowed the rabbis to incorporate and link material from disparate scriptural contexts. Scholem’s expression “entrance to the great lament” is his literal translation of the petichtah (“opening” or “entrance”) to Lamentations Rabbah. Scholem also refers to Lamentations Rabbah in “Ezekiel Ch. 19: A Lamentation for Israel’s Last Princes” (Tb2, 548–550). The reference is to Lamentations Rabbah 1.16, in which God, rather than the people of Israel, is interpreted as the one who weeps. See Galit Hasan-Rokem’s chapter in this volume for a discussion of the figure of the weeping God in Lamentations Rabbah (especially section 2.4, “Lamenting Goddess”).