**INTRODUCTION**

**Philosophical Esotericism and the Creation of the World**

*It is impossible to tell mortals of the power of the Account of the Beginning. For this reason Scripture tells you obscurely: In the beginning God created, and so on.*

Cited in the introduction of Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed*,[[1]](#footnote-1) this text, which presents itself as an ancient rabbinic teaching,[[2]](#footnote-2) suggests that the question of the creation of the world – the “Account of the Beginning” (*Macaśe Be-reↄšit)* as it is traditionally known – shares common ground with esoteric literature. This intersection is illustrated by the opening verse of Genesis, in all its obscurity.

Indeed, it is striking that, in the medieval Jewish philosophical corpus of which the *Guide* is the major text, the question of the creation of the world leads many authors to adopt complex “writing strategies” – to take up specific “arts of writing,” to use Leo Strauss’s phrase. This monograph thus undertakes to reflect at once on the philosophical problem of the creation of the world and on the invention, in philosophy, of a particular manner of writing.

This project was born from the observation of a paradox: the question of the creation of the world is unanimously seen as fundamental in the medieval Jewish philosophical corpus, but no synthetic approach to the topic in the work of the principal medieval Jewish philosophers has been proposed since Norbert Samuelson’s 1994 volume.[[3]](#footnote-3) That volume’s scope – beginning with the Bible and ending with Franz Rosenzweig – far exceeds the medieval period. In another 1994 article to which I will return,[[4]](#footnote-4) Jacob I. Dienstag lists 156 studies dedicated to the question of the creation of the world only in Maimonides since the beginning of the twentieth century. This bibliography has only grown since then. Monographs have been devoted entirely or in part to one or another of the authors tackled here.[[5]](#footnote-5) Brian Ogren’s recent volume on the question of creation,[[6]](#footnote-6) *The Beginning of the World in Renaissance Jewish Thought*, begins historically precisely where this one ends. *The Creation of the World and the Limits of Language* thus fills a void in the scholarship and can be read as an exploration of medieval Jewish philosophy that emerges from one of its central questions. It is, however, something other than an overview of the various philosophical doctrines held by Jewish thinkers during the Middle Ages. It proposes to approach them through the lens of a decidedly essential problem for what historians of Jewish thought commonly call “Jewish mysticism”: that of the limits of language.

**Medieval Jewish Philosophy**

I do not wish here to enter into the complex conversations about the scope of the concept of “Jewish philosophy” or about its margins.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is certainly problematic to attach an identitarian predicate, whether national or religious, to the term “philosophy.”[[8]](#footnote-8) But it is also just as obvious that, in its history, philosophy established itself within the framework of specific intellectual traditions, within which authors shared both philosophical and extra-philosophical problems, concepts, and references.

By “Jewish philosophy,” I mean a certain kind of philosophy that emerged historically from the encounter between the Jewish intellectual tradition and the philosophical tradition that arose from Greek Antiquity – an encounter that occurred many times across different cultural contexts. By “medieval Jewish philosophy,” I point to a segment[[9]](#footnote-9) of the history of this encounter which spans the medieval period, between the tenth century – with the first rationalist texts within rabbinic Judaism – and the fifteenth century and the rupture caused by the Spanish Expulsion. This segment found its point of origin in Islamic civilization and its primary idiom of expression first, until the thirteenth century, in the Arabic language, and then in Hebrew. Despite their geographical and temporal distance from each other, the authors I take up here clearly constitute a single intellectual tradition. Indeed, they considered themselves to belong to such a tradition; some of these authors referred, either explicitly or implicitly, to some of their predecessors, whether by adopting one of their philosophemes or by critiquing one of their arguments.

The encounter occasionally became a confrontation when the claims attributed to each of these traditions conflicted with each other. This was the case, singularly and dramatically, with the question of the origin of the world. In the medieval moment, the biblico-rabbinic hypothesis on this question was dominated by the idea of absolute creation.[[10]](#footnote-10) “Absolute” creation refers to both a temporal and a material characterization of creation: “absolute” creation is *de novo* – which is to say that past time is finite, an idea also denoted by the term “adventicity.” It is also *ex nihilo* – which is to say that the material substrate of the world is also understood to have been created. Inversely, the “philosophers’” theory held that the world is eternal *a parte ante* (the theory attributed to Aristotle), or at least that the matter is pre-eternal (the theory attributed to Plato via a literal reading of the myth he presents in the *Timaeus*). Neoplatonism also threatened the idea of creation as the voluntary act of a transcendent divinity, by deeming material reality to be the result of a process of necessary emanation from the first principle. Each of the thinkers in this study would propose his own manner of resolving or at least of confronting this contradiction.

**Philosophical Esotericism**

Many of them did so by employing “esoteric” writing strategies. An esoteric teaching is a teaching reserved for a certain kind of audience; for example, scholars have traditionally distinguished, in the Aristotelian corpus, “exoteric” treatises, which were addressed to a large audience, from the acroamatic (i.e., orally transmitted lessons) or esoteric treatises, which recorded teachings intended for the advanced disciples of a science. This weak sense of esotericism – foregrounding the selection of a message’s audience – is connected to its stronger meaning, which identifies the root cause of this selection in the message’s own obscurity or inaccessibility. Although Aristotle chose the students with the aptitude to attend his oral teaching, it does not necessarily follow that this teaching must be concealed from others. Rather, because of its technical nature, the teaching requires competencies that are not universally shared. In contrast, other practices of esoteric teaching, such as those associated with Pythagoreanism or Gnosticism, attached greater significance to the arcane as a discipline. By its nature, the knowledge to which the message gives access cannot be transmitted in clear language. Esoteric teaching, then, falls under the umbrella of a discipline of initiation, in which the initiate is made privy to a secret whose possession distinguishes him from the common man.

The term “esoteric” thereby denotes two kinds of difference: between two kinds of audience and between two kinds of content. The idea of an “esoteric” art of writing, which according to Strauss is theorized in the introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*,[[11]](#footnote-11) retains this paradox: such an “art” would allow the writer to mobilize both of these discursive registers and address two distinct audiences, at the same time. Acknowledging that one cannot control whose hands it will fall into, esoteric writing intends to transmit within a text a secret teaching destined only to the reader capable of receiving it, while remaining undetected by other readers.

One of the major characteristics of the medieval Jewish philosophical corpus is its recourse to esoteric writing. This is for two reasons: one the one hand, medieval Jewish philosophy emerged from the context of Islamic philosophy, which, to use Christian Jambet’s terms, must be understood as a “prophetic philosophy” or as a “philosophy of revelation.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This revelation presents itself as a revelation of truth; but it also constitutes the source of a religious and political law. Prophetic revelation carries within itself a double dimension – spiritual and collective – which rests on a division between an outward literal meaning (ẓ*āhir*) and a hidden spiritual meaning (*bāṭin*), calling for exegesis (*taʾwīl*). In Islam, philosophy internalizes this division within the discipline of philosophy itself. As Jambet emphasizes, the latter is “esoteric” in two ways: first, insofar as it claims to offer access to a hidden truth, and second, insofar as it conceals this truth by maintaining the veracity of the literal meaning of the revelation.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This “exegetical” esotericism can also be found in Jewish philosophy, which is similar to Islamic philosophy insofar as it is itself a “prophetic” philosophy: a philosophy wielded in the context of the prophetic revelation of a law that claims to hold, at its heart, the very truth. Within Judaism, esotericism is not a medieval invention, derived from the Islamic environment. It is an aspect of the rabbinic tradition, dating back to its most ancient strata. One famous *Mishna* holds that teaching related to certain subjects – among them the explication of the tale of the creation of the world (or of the Account of the Beginning) – is reserved for a select and selected group of students, and ultimately for a single disciple.[[14]](#footnote-14)

On the other hand, the recourse to philosophical esotericism was undoubtedly exacerbated by the political situation of medieval Jews. For Strauss and his disciples, the use of an esoteric writing, which is to say a writing that reveals the real idea as much as it conceals it, can be largely explained by the philosopher’s fear of the persecution that his heterodox ideas might incite. The philosopher makes a certain number of claims that conflict with the beliefs held by the vulgar. This collision is potentially dangerous on several fronts. The traumatic precedent set by Socrates has shown how far society’s hostility to the philosopher or to the truth can extend. First and foremost, the philosopher must preserve his own life by turning to a secretive writing. Extending Strauss’s work by showing the importance of esotericism in the broader philosophical tradition until the eighteenth century, Arthur Melzer speaks in this way of a “defensive” esotericism.[[15]](#footnote-15)

But if truth and society are in conflict, philosophy does not only threaten the life of the philosopher. Or rather, insofar as it does so, it is because this truth also undercuts society’s credos, which in the Middle Ages were circulated by religion. Some philosophical assertions directly contradicted certain claims associated with monotheistic religions; we might think here of the eternity of the world, or of God’s lack of knowledge of individuals, countervening the idea of individual providence. In this way, what philosophy imperils is also, on the one hand, the very authority of the law, and on the other, the incompetent reader. The latter must be protected by esoteric writing, which will mask the truths that he is not able to grasp. In this way, Averroes forbade the teaching of the principle of divine incorporeality to the vulgar, insofar as they believe only in that which has a body and might be at risk of deducing that God does not exist.[[16]](#footnote-16) In Melzer’s classificatory schema, this esotericism that aims to preserve society and its foundations is a “protective” esotericism.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In the case of Jewish philosophy, both the threat of persecution and the danger to society were amplified by the situations of minority status and exile in which Jewish philosophers found themselves, as well as by the absence of institutions organizing the intellectual sphere. Exile placed Jews under the constant threat of external persecution, even if in certain medieval contexts they benefitted from relative tolerance and integration (notably during the “Golden Age” of al-Andalus, between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries). Moreover, philosophers were more at risk within the Jewish world insofar as they lacked the protection of institutions equivalent to the Latin world’s universities, which might have screened them from popular censure.

**Models of Esotericism**

Two models for understanding esoteric writing have arisen from the study of the medieval Jewish philosophers. The Straussian paradigm can be defined as a “politico-religious” esotericism: secret writing, the discipline of the arcane, appears fundamentally as a means for the philosopher to protect himself by ensuring that the heterodox thrust of his thinking is concealed, or mostly concealed, from the public. This paradigm rests on a series of claims about the relationship between philosophy and religion, and it draws on a certain epistemology and a certain understanding of philosophical writing.

Philosophy (“Athens”) is considered, as a discipline, radically heterogeneous relative to religion (“Jerusalem”). The political and therefore religious question is the primary question of philosophy, insofar as political life structures the philosopher’s existence. The problem of *writing* philosophy thereby becomes a fundamental question: if truth and society are at odds, philosophy is not made to be written, as Plato had already claimed.[[18]](#footnote-18) The reasons are not intrinsic to the work of thinking: orality guarantees the constant challenging and reassessment – the dialogical character of meaning-making – that emerge both from the Socratic dialogues and from the classical rabbinic tradition. Rather, because writing is in its essence a public mode of expression, the sender has less control than he does in oral communication. The philosopher, master of his knowledge, is also master of his discourse, using writing as he pleases as an interface between himself and society. In this model, esotericism can be qualified, as per Moshe Halbertal, as “instrumental.”[[19]](#footnote-19) It can also be described as “accidental” or “extrinsic” insofar as it is determined only by the philosopher’s existential situation, and by the *de facto* conflict between philosophical thought and the political condition. If he lived in an ideal society, the lover of wisdom would not need to turn to such complex writing. Besides, he only aspires to bring such a peaceful coexistence of the philosopher and society to pass.

Another model, however, can be opposed to this one: in a “philosophical” or “essential” esotericism,[[20]](#footnote-20) there is an intrinsic link between the turn to esoteric writing and the subjects that are taken up in this kind of writing. In other words, secret writing is mandated by certain problems that cannot be enunciated in a clear, unequivocal language. This is particularly the case in relation to certain questions that challenge language’s expressive capacities. One characteristic example lies in the question of divine attributes: a consequent negative theology can only culminate in a mysticism of silence. If any term for an attribute of God necessarily lacks its object – because human language cannot adequately capture divine reality – then the only way to accede to a knowledge of God is to make do without language. But at the same time, language is required to convey this very inadequacy.

The Talmudic formula “The Torah speaketh in the language of the sons of man,” as it is taken up by Maimonides for his own purposes in the chapters dedicated to the allegorical interpretation of biblical anthropomorphism,[[21]](#footnote-21) can be understood as this kind of esotericism. It means, in a weak sense, that people being more accustomed to designating material realities, the Torah had to deploy a material language to discuss a spiritual reality.[[22]](#footnote-22) But it also means, in a stronger sense, that the Torah or its writer had no choice but to use the language of men, which is *intrinsically* inadequate to evoke divine realities. Esotericism, then, emerges from the fact that some ideas are inevitably both masked and unveiled by their linguistic expression.

**The Creation of the World: An Esoteric Question**

The question of the creation of the world fits neatly into each of these two models of philosophical esotericism. From the point of view of “politico-religious” esotericism, the thesis of absolute creation, which was understood to be “the thesis of Moses’s Torah,” appears as a religious creed without a rational basis.[[23]](#footnote-23) Philosophy – identified with Aristotelian science – offers a global understanding of natural reality; it makes do without the weighty hypothesis of creation. Moreover, Aristotelian science depends on several principles that are incompatible with this hypothesis. Certain arguments drawing on the fundamental concepts of physics (time, movement, prime matter…) and metaphysics (the incorporeality of the Prime Mover or its immutability)[[24]](#footnote-24) make the hypothesis inadmissible for a philosopher worthy of the name. Creation, then, is reduced to an *ad hoc* thesis that allows the philosopher to support the Torah’s edifice. It ensures the possibility of miracles, and thereby of revelation, by presenting a God who originated the whole range of creatures and who is thus liable to change them. This hypothesis is also purported to emerge from the literal meaning of the Scriptures. There is thus reason to be suspicious of the philosopher who claims to adhere to the doctrine of creation, to be convinced of the eternity of the world, who feigns – before an audience of naïfs – to be a true believer. To show that Maimonides or other medieval Jewish philosophers were not sincere believers in creation would be to suggest that they were not sincere followers of the law of Moses, that their loyalty went only to Athens, rather than, as they claimed, also to Jerusalem.

Furthermore, the issue of the creation of the world appears among those questions that most fundamentally compel esoteric writing because it touches paradigmatically on the problem of the limits of language. At stake is nothing less than trying to enunciate the radical origin of any thing, when language always presupposes the existence of the thing which it names. In his *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein mentions his wonder before the very existence of the world, as an experience of transgressing the limits of language. To say “I wonder at the existence of the world” comes down to misusing the verb “wonder,” insofar as one can only ever wonder at the fact that something does not conform to what one might have expected. Yet one could not wonder that the world exists, since it is impossible to imagine it not existing, or to project oneself into a situation in which it does not exist. Language being, at a certain level, the vehicle for a pronouncement on a state of matter, it thus could not pronounce itself on the very fact that there are things it is about. According to the Lecture’s magnificent formula, if wondering at the existence of the world comes down to seeing the existence of the world as a miracle, as a fact which is inexplicable on its face in relation to the knowledge at one’s disposal, then “the right expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, though it is not any proposition *in* language, is the existence of language itself.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

There is consequently no adequate way to capture a radical origin *in* language, even if the existence *of* language makes the attempt to give an account of such an origin both necessary and, according to Wittgenstein, futile.[[26]](#footnote-26) In this way, the creation of the world can be categorized among those questions which, by their very structure, at one and the same time must be posed and must lead any attempt to answer them into knotty problems concerning the correct way to speak of such things at all.

**Beyond the Author’s Intention**

Strauss owes his discovery of “politico-religious” esotericism to his reading of Maimonides’s Introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*. However, as I will show in detail,[[27]](#footnote-27) this foundational text also contains the resources to think an “essential” esotericism. “Politico-religious” esotericism was later used by Strauss and his followers as a hypothesis guiding their reading of the entirety of the history of medieval Jewish philosophy,[[28]](#footnote-28) and even of the history of premodern philosophy in general.[[29]](#footnote-29) In the same way, I intend to use the hypothesis of an “essential” esotericism as a starting point to explore the reflections of a variety of medieval Jewish philosophers on the creation of the world.

However, this interpretive hypothesis comes up against a strong claim related to the *Guide*’s reception history, and more fundamentally, against a global methodological consideration in the history of philosophy. The Straussian reading, which turns Maimonides into an orthodox Aristotelian or a “radical” philosopher, is not new. It leans on the authority of a tradition going back to the *Guide*’s first generation of readers, starting in Maimonides’s lifetime with its first translator from Arabic into Hebrew, Samuel Ibn Tibbon (c. 1165-1232, Provence).[[30]](#footnote-30) After Samuel Ibn Tibbon, a whole school of radical readers of the *Guide* emerged (among whom the Averroists Joseph Ibn Kaspi and Moses of Narbonne (Narboni), who were active in Provence in the fourteenth century, are important representatives) who fervently sought to demonstrate that, despite his claims, Maimonides’s “true doctrine” corresponds – a few details excepted – to that of Aristotle, which these same commentators identified with Averroes’s own doctrine.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Inversely, it was not until the end of the 1970s that, with Shlomo Pines’s foundational work,[[32]](#footnote-32) the first “skeptical” readings of the *Guide* appeared. In keeping with the hypothesis of an essential esotericism, these readings foregrounded considerations on the limits of possible human knowledge. Some of the modern skeptical readers tried to justify the novelty of their interpretation despite the eight centuries that separated them from the text’s writing.[[33]](#footnote-33) In fact, the critical or skeptical attitude that these readers attributed to Maimonides corresponds much more neatly to the modern – especially post-Kantian – philosophical spirit than it does to that of his twelfth-century Andalusian contemporaries, Ibn Bājja or Averroes. Certainly, it is possible that someone as singular as Maimonides might have stood alone in his philosophical moment. But there is reason to fear that such interpretations might have succumbed to an illusion which consists in projecting onto a thinker of the past one’s own ideas – an illusion that Maimonides himself deplored in some of his contemporaries.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The fundamental principle on which this objection rests was formulated by Strauss, in his critique of Kantian and post-Kantian “progressivism.” Starting from a vision of history in which modernity is the most “advanced” epoch, and perhaps even the very culmination of history (Hegel), this progressivism claims to understand the philosophers of the past “better than they understood themselves,” to cite Kant’s famous formula with regard to Plato.[[35]](#footnote-35) For Strauss, on the contrary, it is advisable to read a philosopher “exactly as he understood himself.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Maimonides understood “philosophy” to mean nothing other than Aristotelian science;[[37]](#footnote-37) consequently, to turn him into a “critical” or “skeptical” philosopher ahead of his time is redolent of anachronism or of a teleological reading of the history of philosophy.

It is also in the name of historical rigor that Dov Schwartz, extending the Straussian paradigm of philosophical esotericism to span the whole of medieval Jewish philosophy, distrusts any reading of our corpus which would see in it a kind of skepticism or a reflection on the limits of human knowledge. At the same time, Schwartz acknowledges that the reader of an esoteric text might sometimes be positioned such that he cannot decide between the various possible interpretations of a given author’s project. He shows how the Straussian paradigm might work in a direction that Strauss himself had not anticipated: it is not only the philosopher in a non-philosophical milieu who might experience the risk of persecution, but also the anti-philosopher, in an environment broadly converted to the cause of philosophy.

Strauss had read Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari* (before 1075-1141) against the grain as a secret defense of philosophy, even though the text presents itself as a defense of Judaism against various adversaries, philosophy among them.[[38]](#footnote-38) Schwartz shows that, inversely, we can also view the apparent legitimation of philosophy in this clearly anti-philosophical text as a clue that Halevi felt the need to conceal an even more conservative intellectual position: in a milieu already marked by philosophical thought, he could not have admitted his true position.[[39]](#footnote-39) On the subject of other authors, Schwartz proposes an “open hermeneutic” showing that various readings are equally legitimate and that it is impossible to choose among them. In a striking example, he shows that it is completely possible to produce coherent esoteric readings of Maimonides’s *Guide* oriented in two radically opposed directions (Maimonides as an esoteric radical philosopher and Maimonides as secretly anti-philosophical).[[40]](#footnote-40)

If Schwartz acknowledges the undecidability that esoteric writing induces with respect to the author’s real doctrine, he follows Strauss in admitting only the politico-religious motivation of persecution (whether by the vulgar or by the philosophers), and this specifically in relation to Jewish thought. Schwartz grants that the dialectical method in scholastic thought – in which the *sic* and the *non* continually confront each other – can be interpreted as reflecting an acknowledgment of the intrinsic limitations of human knowledge. The University opens a space where this culture of doubt can be expressed. But a reading of this kind, which according to Schwartz is influenced by a “postmodern” hermeneutic, is inadmissible in relation to Jewish thinkers, who had no institutions guaranteeing them similar intellectual freedom and who were therefore constantly exposed to the threat of political violence.[[41]](#footnote-41)

This critique seems perfectly cogent as long as we do not question the intentionalist assumption at the root of all of the major interpretive traditions we have encountered so far. This assumption consists more or less in reducing the meaning of a text to its author’s intention, and to supposing that the only legitimate aim of an interpreter is to determine the author’s “real thought.” Indeed, in the case of Maimonides, both the Straussian interpreters who read him as a “radical” philosopher and the interpreters who see him as a skeptical or “proto-critical” thinker give themselves the task of identifying his “true doctrine,” [[42]](#footnote-42) even as they concede that no such certainty is possible.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Yet, whatever one’s perspective on the recourse to esoteric writing might be, it seems to me that this intentionalist assumption must be abandoned.

From the point of view of “politico-religious” esotericism, the author’s intention appears, at first glance, as the alpha and the omega of the esoteric text. The discourse originates in an intent to communicate and ends in the reader’s identification of this intent to communicate, as per the traditional communication schema whose foundation was laid by Aristotle.[[44]](#footnote-44) The message’s sender seeks to transmit to a receiver the “affections or impressions of the soul.” The sender therefore chooses the vehicle of “words spoken,” which will indicate the “mental affections” in question to the receiver who shares the same language and make them arise in his soul. In the case of a written message, the additional step of transcribing the words into graphic signs is added. All the reader has to do is translate these signs into words and the words back into thoughts.

The model of “politico-religious” esotericism rests on the idea that esoteric writing – being instrumental – modifies this standard communication schema only slightly. Ultimately, the translation of the state of the sender’s soul into linguistic symbols is always a form of encryption, and the receiver’s interpretive operation one of decryption. The only specificity of the esoteric message is that only a single kind of reader is supposed to have the capacity and the tools necessary to *correctly* decrypt the message. The message is coded such that other readers will decrypt it incorrectly and, without even knowing so, mistake the sender’s true intention. More than in a standard message, the sender is understood to be the absolute master of his discourse and of its effects, capable of producing a plurivocal message and of determining which of his readers will be able to understand its true meaning and which will perceive another meaning. Curiously, this claim about the author’s absolute sovereignty over his discourse emerges, in particular, in several of Maimonides’s claims in his introduction to the *Guide*.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Yet, upon further reflection, in the case of an esoteric text – even through the lens of a “politico-religious” esotericism – the conditions subtending the traditional reading pact are actually completely upended. Insofar as the text is deliberately opaque, the reader is forced to attempt to reconstruct the author’s position by devising a key for interpreting the text, to evaluate the plausibility of his reading in the light of that reading’s internal coherence (which is to say its ability to give an account of the text it interprets) or of its external coherence with what the reader otherwise knows of the author’s thought (which is to say, generally, of the author’s other texts). It is possible to convince oneself of the pertinence of one’s own reading and of the probability that it might correspond to the author’s effective intention; however, any certainty about such a correspondence is necessarily rendered impossible by the message’s obscurity, and by the absence of the author to clarify his statements or confirm, in whatever confessional, that this in fact was his true intention. Moreover, even supposing such a confession existed, could the reader be certain of the author’s sincerity? Can the reader ever be sure that he is one of the “chosen” readers, that the author did not send him off on the wrong track in order to further conceal his true intentions – that the apparent confession is not part of the wider strategy of concealment?

In the reading pact for an esoteric text, the relation of mutual trust between the author and the reader is broken. Instead, a complex game of trust and suspicion plays out between them. The author mistrusts his reader, who might be someone incapable of understanding his ideas. Nevertheless, he trusts that, conversely, the qualified reader will be able to access the real thrust of his thinking. He therefore uses a style of writing that at one and the same time conceals his thought and reveals it. In turn, the reader trusts that the author inserted his true thinking in his text, but also mistrusts him, always suspecting him of not saying what he thinks, even as it is impossible to determine with any certainty where he is sincere and where he is not. The esoteric text is therefore a strange object: it carries an intent to communicate, but the meaning finds itself hidden behind the very vehicle designed to transport it. In the end, the only thing transported is the intent to signify, which the reader reconstructs in a hypothetical, probabilistic manner.

The paradox of such a writing technique lies in the fact that, in seeking to be the master of his discourse, the author actually cedes to the reader a freedom of interpretation much greater than that of an ordinary text, whose intention is clear and explicit. By choosing his words meticulously, by using sophisticated writing techniques such as allusion, parable, or deliberate contradictions, the author purports to communicate his true thinking only to a certain kind of reader, and other ideas to other readers. But in reality, by investing the reader with such a critical role in the elaboration or re-elaboration of the meaning of his text, he *de facto* renounces any absolute mastery over the meaning of his own text. Without wanting to, the esoteric author thus puts into practice Barthes’s theoretical gesture reversing the balance of power in the traditional reading pact: the “death of the author” leads to the birth of reader.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The corollary of such a gesture is to renounce the notion of a “work” in favor of the idea of a “text.” The work is what the author produces. The text is a surface that arises in the reader’s field of vision, calling for the reader’s interpretation. “The author,” Barthes argues, “is reputed to be the father and the owner of his work; literary science thus teaches us to respect the manuscript and the author's declared intentions, and society postulates a legality of the author's relation to his work […]. The Text, on the other hand, is read without the Father's inscription.”[[47]](#footnote-47) It is therefore as “Texts” that we will consider the various texts of our corpus, all of which ponder the question of the creation of the world. As such, they cannot be reduced to their author’s intention to communicate. Neither can the philosophical content they carry be limited to the author’s philosophical doctrine, or to that of his contemporaries, or to his conception of philosophy itself. The Straussian critique of any reading that would find something other than the author’s intention in a text is thus moot, because of the contradictions stemming from the very premises of “politico-religious” esotericism.

From the perspective of “essential” esotericism, the notion of the author’s intention is contested even earlier, at the very moment of the text’s writing. Indeed, the fundamental principle of this model of esotericism is that the very fact of wanting to express oneself on certain specific subjects leads the author, despite himself and however much he might want to express himself clearly, to run up against the intrinsic inadequacy of his mode of expression. It is as though language begins to speak independently of the author’s intent to communicate, as though the author is seized by his subject, or rather that the subject has seized from him the mastery that he claims over his own writing. In this perspective, it is the message in itself – which, in the end, is the only thing that readers can access – rather than the author’s thought that becomes the primary matter for interpretation. The surface meaning of the esoteric text is thus reinfused with value. However, this does not imply that we should take the author’s words to represent his “true thought.” This would entail denying esotericism itself and obscuring the meaning that emerges from the author’s text, in spite of him. The task is not to consider the “surface” statement as a statement of doctrine, but rather as a statement through which something is being said about a certain philosophical problem.

All in all, taking the stakes of esotericism into account leads us to radically alter the question we ask of an esoteric text. We will not ask what the author of a given text “really thinks” about the question of creation, but rather what this text allows us to think about the question.[[48]](#footnote-48) In the same way, abandoning the doxographic perspective leads us to renounce the project of attempting by all means to provide a coherent reading of the entirety of an author’s *oeuvre*; instead, we must seek to draw, out of the tensions that his texts contain, a philosophical teaching.

In the light of these preliminary remarks, I can now describe my project: to treat the sophisticated strategies of writing about creation not as stratagems aiming to conceal a heterodox opinion, but rather as attempts to expose, in and through language, something of language’s own limits – to know as far as possible something that by its very nature escapes the framework of human knowledge.

**Our Authors**

It might seem paradoxical that a book challenging the category of the author centers each of its chapters on a single author. My goal is to show that, despite the diversity of their arguments around the question, each of the selected authors confronted the problem of the expressive limits of language, whether or not they wanted to. This is true even of those authors who in the end did not support the thesis of absolute creation and who therefore cannot be suspected of duplicity. Beyond the problem of their doctrinal positioning, there is thus a constant that appears across their texts: the reflection on the problem of creation in itself is coupled with a reflection on the manner in which it is possible to speak of creation. The doctrinal outcome – when such an outcome is clearly stated – seems always to result from a reflection on the status of the discourse about the creation of the world.

The six authors I study here – Saadia Gaon (tenth century), Abraham Ibn Ezra (twelfth century), Maimonides (twelfth century), Isaac Albalag (thirteenth century), Gersonides (fourteenth century), and Ḥasdai Crescas (end of the fourteenth-beginning of the fifteenth century) – all mark important milestones in the history of medieval Jewish philosophy.[[49]](#footnote-49) Each is commonly identified as the paradigmatic representative, whether he avows it or not, of one of the various positions on the problem of cosmogenesis (absolute creation, creation *ex aliquo*, eternal creation) and their different variants. Each also deploys a singular writing strategy to address the problem. What I want to show is how, whatever his position may have been, each was confronted by the problem at the heart of essential esotericism. My itinerary will follow a globally chronological trajectory, with the central pivot point being the author and the text at its heart, Maimonides and his *Guide of the Perplexed*.

This book is thus about writing and unconditional creation, but its writing was made possible only through the various supports I received. With their complementary voices, Judith Olszowy-Schlanger and Paul Clavier guided a first version of this project. The comments of Jean-Pierre Rothschild, Zeev Harvey, Rémi Brague, and Olivier Boulnois helped make my thinking deeper and more precise. Conversations with Gad Freudenthal, Colette Sirat, Catherine Chalier, José Costa, Ron Naiweld, and Éric Smilévitch also allowed me to improve specific chapters of this book. Those on Maimonides owe much to my conversations with Emmanuel Bonamy and Jérôme Benarroch. Thanks also to Mehdy Fatnassi for his help in preparing this manuscript.

1. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), “Introduction to the First Part,” 9. When it is pertinent, I also refer to the corresponding Arabic passage in the “Munk Joel” edition (the line numbers follow the page numbers): *Dalālat al-Ḥā*ʾ*irīn*, ed. Salomon Munk and Issachar Joel (Jerusalem: Azrieli, 1931). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This text, however, does not appear in any well-known rabbinic source. Its probable source was found in manuscript fragments from the Cairo Geniza, which were collected with the title *Midraš Šenei Ketuvim*, published in *Batei Midrašot*, ed. Solomon A. Wertheimer (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1952), vol. 1, 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Norbert M. Samuelson, *Judaism and the Doctrine of Creation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jacob I. Dienstag, “Creation in Maimonides-Bibliography” [in Hebrew], *Da’at* 32‑33 (1994): 247‑68. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See especially Jacob J. Staub, *The Creation of the World According to Gersonides* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982); Kenneth Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and very recently Ari Ackerman, *Hasdai Crescas on Codification, Cosmology and Creation: The Infinite God and the Expanding Torah* (Leiden: Brill, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brian Ogren, *The Beginning of the World in Renaissance Jewish Thought:* Ma’aseh Bereshit *in Italian Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah, 1492-1535* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Raphael Jospe’s short monograph *What Is Jewish Philosophy*? (Ramat Aviv, Open University of Israel, 1988) offers a good starting point for this discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On this subject, see the vivid debates of the 1930s which opposed the partisans of the notion of a “Christian philosophy” (Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, to name only the French philosophers) to its opponents (Émile Bréhier and Jacques Brunschwig). A recent synthesis can be found in Thierry-Dominique Humbrecht’s preface to *Introduction à la philosophie chrétienne* by Étienne Gilson (Paris: Vrin, 2007 [1968]). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I borrow this concept of the “segment” from Gérard Bensussan, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie juive ?* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nevertheless, this appears to be neither the biblical thesis nor that of the majority of rabbis. In the abundant bibliography on this topic, useful references can be found in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, “Creation and Cosmogony in the Bible.” On the rabbinic literature, see Alexander Altmann, “A Note on the Rabbinic Doctrine of Creation,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 7 (1956), 195‑206, and more recently, José Costa, “Le récit de la création dans l’exégèse des rabbins et des Pères de l’Église : essai de comparaison,” in *Judaïsme et christianisme dans les commentaires patristiques de la Genèse*, ed. Marie-Anne Vannier(Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 13‑42. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See the essays collected in Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988 [1952]), especially “The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed.*” On the importance of Maimonides for Strauss’s thinking, see Rémi Brague, “Leo Strauss et Maïmonide,” in *Maimonides and Philosophy: Papers Presented at the Sixth Jerusalem Philosophical Encounter, May 1985*, ed. Yirmiyahu Yovel and Shlomo Pines (Dordrecht, M. Nijhoff, 1986), 246‑268. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Christian Jambet, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie islamique* *?* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 65 and *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid.*, 87-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mishna, *Ḥagiga*, II, 1. A *Mishna* is a teaching originating from the oldest strata of the oral tradition of rabbinical Judaism, compiled in the second century. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 4, ch. 5, and *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See the translated excerpts of the *Exposition of Religious Arguments* (*Al-Kashf*) in Averroes, *Faith and Reason in Islam*, trans. Ibrahim Najjar (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 56-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, 4, ch. 6, and *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Plato, *Phaedrus,* 275d-276a and 277e-278d; Seventh Letter. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications*, trans. Jackie Feldman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 149-155. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid.*, 156-162. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See for example the Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 71a, *Baba Meṣiʿa* 31b, and *passim*,and Maimonides, *Guide*, I, Ch. 26, 56 and *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 54-62. Conversely, for a “politico-religious” interpretation of Maimonides’s use of this Talmudic phrase, see Abraham Nuriel, ““The Torah Speaks in the Language of Human Beings” in the *Guide of the Perplexed*” [in Hebrew], in *Religion and Language*, ed. Moshe Hallamish and Assa Kasher (Tel Aviv: University Publishing Projects, 1981), 97‑103, reprinted in *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 93-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Against such an understanding, Paul Clavier argues in *Ex nihilo* (Paris: Hermann, 2011), 2 vols., for the properly philosophical pertinence of the concept of creation *ex nihilo* (but not *de novo*). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For these arguments, see the classic studies: Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006 [1983]), parts 3 and 4, and Herbert A. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation, and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) (hereafter *Proofs*). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*, ed. Edoardo Zamuner, Ermelinda Valentina Di Lascio, and D.K. Levy (John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid.,* 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Infra., p. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought* [in Hebrew], (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines.* [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. On the subject of Samuel Ibn Tibbon as an esoteric reader of the *Guide*, see Aviezer Ravitzky, “Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *AJS Review* 6 (1981): 87‑123 and Carlos Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel Ibn Tibbon. The Transformation of the Dalālat al-Ḥāʾirīn into the Moreh ha-Nevukhim* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. On the history of the *Guide*’s reception and in particular the “radical” interpretive tradition, see especially Aviezer Ravitzky, “The Secrets of Maimonides: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries,” in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 159‑207 and reprinted in *History and Faith: Studies in Jewish Philosophy* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1996), 246‑303; Alfred L. Ivry, “Strategies of Interpretation in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *Jewish History* 6, no. 1-2 (1992): 113‑130; and Moshe Halbertal’s useful typology of readings of the *Guide* (conservative, philosophical, skeptical, and mystical) in *Maimonides: Life and Thought*, trans. Joel Linsider (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 277-368. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Shlomo Pines, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Fārābī, Ibn Bājja and Maimonides,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 82‑109, and “The Philosophic Purport of Maimonides’ Halachic Work,” in *Maimonides and Philosophy: Papers Presented at the Sixth Jerusalem Philosophical Encounter, May 1985*, 1‑14. For a searing critique of this approach, see Alexander Altmann, “Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics,” in *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärun: Texts and Studies in Early Modern Judaism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 60‑129. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Yair Lorberbaum, “On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics, and Esotericism in Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 55, no. 4 (2002), 749‑750. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See *Guide*, Introduction, 15, cited *infra*, PG# in n. #. This reproach is addressed to those who promote the skeptical reading and, especially to Shlomo Pines, in Pierre Bouretz, *Lumières du Moyen Âge. Maïmonide philosophe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), 343-344. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 370, AK III, 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Leo Strauss, “How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy” [1944], in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Leo Strauss, “The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*,” *op. cit.*, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing.* [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought,* ch. 2, 45-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Ibid.*, ch. 3, 68-111. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *Ibid.*, 266-267. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Leo Strauss, “The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*,”73: “we are certainly in need of a general answer to the general question: which of the two contradictory statements *is in each instance considered by Maimonides as the true statement*? That answer would be *the* guide for the understanding of Maimonides’ work” (my emphasis). For an anti-esoteric reading, see Kennet Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World*, 181: “I suggest, therefore, that *Maimonides’ convictions* are exactly as he states them” (my emphasis). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See, for example, Warren Zev Harvey’s concluding remarks in “A Third Approach to Maimonides’ Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 3 (1981), 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, I, 16a. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Guide*, I, Introduction, 15, cited and analyzed *infra,* p.  [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 49-55. On the subject of the “death of the author,” see Foucault’s famous lecture “What Is an Author?,” trans. Josué V. Harari, reprinted in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. II:* *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 205-222. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *The Rustle of Language*, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. For other reasons that come down to contesting the *Guide*’s very esotericism, some interpreters have urged that the quest for Maimonides’s “true thought” be abandoned. See Yair Lorberbaum, “On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics, and Esotericism in Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed*,” 748, and Herbert A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 393-402. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. I end my history with Ḥasdai Crescas who concluded, with his critique of Aristotelianism, an important chapter of the history of medieval Jewish philosophy. The medieval reflection on our problem would nonetheless continue in the Renaissance, notably in the intersection of philosophy and Kabbalah in Italy. For these extensions, see Brian Ogren, *The Beginning of the World in Renaissance Jewish Thought:* Ma’aseh Bereshit *in Italian Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah, 1492-1535* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), which also insists on the importance of the epistemological status of the problem in the writings of Yohanan Alemanno, Isaac Abarbanel, Pico della Mirandola, and Judah Abrabanel (Leo the Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)