

## Rochberg as Secular Kabbalist

by Amy Lynn Wlodarsky

Biographies of George Rochberg often emphasize the well-known aspects of his life, most notably how the death of his son prompted him to foster a form of musical humanism rooted in neotonal idioms. In the literature, he has been identified as a soldier and father, a recovering serialist and American postmodernist, an innovator and plagiarist. But one biographical perspective has rarely been addressed in conjunction with his musical work: his identification as a secular Jew. Throughout his life, Rochberg was publically ambivalent, if not dismissive, of organized religion. As he once wrote to the Jewish-Canadian composer Istvan Anhalt, “Have I ever mentioned my abhorrence of the religion of Judaism, its narrow-chested, nationalistic legalisms, rituals, tribal echoes – none of which I can identify with in the least? Of course, this is only part of my general distaste for *all* orthodox religions.” And yet, he also acknowledged that his life was “religious” in that it was “dominated by a sense of the awesomeness of whatever powers fashioned this incredible universe & maintains it.”<sup>1</sup> This essay briefly examines the influence of kabbalistic thinking on Rochberg’s intellectual work in order to broaden our understanding of the unexamined Jewish contexts for his work.

Born in 1918, Rochberg’s youth correlated with the “flourishing of Jewish attempts to create a public and synthetic American Jewish identity.”<sup>2</sup> As a result, many maintained vague relations to Jewish religious traditions and instead embraced cultural practices that were “familiar and comforting” even as they held “many, even contradictory meanings for those who performed them.”<sup>3</sup> Rochberg’s parents did instruct their children

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- 1 George Rochberg, letter to Istvan Anhalt, 17 February 1988, in Istvan Anhalt and George Rochberg, *Eagle Minds: Selected Correspondence of Istvan Anhalt and George Rochberg*, ed. Alan M. Gillmor (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), pp. 211-13, esp. p. 212.
  - 2 Lila Corwin Berman, *Speaking of Jews: Rabbis, Intellectuals, and the Creation of an American Public Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 4-5, and Laura Levitt, “Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism,” *American Quarterly*, 59 (2007), no. 3, pp. 807-32, esp. p. 815.
  - 3 Levitt, “Impossible Assimilations” (see note 2), p. 817.

in Yiddish and Jewish cultural practices, thus marking the family in terms of its ethnic difference within an American context, but were ambivalent about organized religion. Their daily lives were filled with secularized Jewish rituals: the food they ate, the songs they sang, the stories they told. Rochberg admits never feeling entirely free from his Jewishness in his teenage years, noting that he “almost instinctively stayed away from all non-Jews, so strong was this feeling of differentness and strangeness inbred in me by my parents.”<sup>4</sup> Later, in the early years of his marriage, Rochberg cultivated Jewish cultural rituals – such as lighting candles for Shabbat – as part of their secular lives. The death of his son brought about a total loss of faith and rejection of Jewish symbols: “God is dead,” he lashed out in one entry, “and we live in an infinite misery.”<sup>5</sup>

Three years after Paul’s death in 1964, Rochberg read Gershom Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, in which Scholem describes kabbalism as a “mystical union” that transforms God from “an object of dogmatic knowledge into a [...] living experience and intuition.”<sup>6</sup> Rochberg was concurrently theorizing a response to modernism, and in envisioning his new attitude towards art, he drew upon kabbalistic metaphors to describe the act of musical composition as an “ecstatic experience.”<sup>7</sup> As Rochberg noted in one diary entry: “We cannot make art out of words that are [rational]. ... The purpose of art is to dream ourselves into a different level of existence, and break through the shell of the mundane and to lift [us] to places where reason has no place and cannot function. ... to make over ourselves and therefore the world through spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

Variations on these mystical themes appear in Rochberg’s essays of the time. In “The Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Survival” (1969), he envisioned the ideal composer as one who held a “profound relation to the cosmos” and believed in a “transcendent nature of private vision[s]” that would ultimately “reconnect [humanity] with the alpha language of the central nervous system, which is [...] a secondary derivative of the [...] cosmos.”<sup>9</sup> Such a figure would not only rescue art from “forms of rational knowledge” but also return it to its earliest cosmological roots, thus reveal-

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4 George Rochberg, Interview with Vincent Plush, 12 October 1983, Interview 150, transcript, p. 7 (Oral History of American Music Archive, Yale University, New Haven, CT), and George Rochberg, “Autobiographical Sketch,” unpublished (George Rochberg Collection, PSS).

5 George Rochberg, journal entry, November 15, 1963 (George Rochberg Collection, PSS).

6 Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1946), p. 10.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

8 George Rochberg, journal entry, December 19, 1969 (George Rochberg Collection, PSS).

9 George Rochberg, “The Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Survival” [1971], in *The Aesthetics of Survival: A Composer’s View of Twentieth-Century Music*, revised and expanded edition (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), pp. 225-41, esp. pp. 240-41.

ing “how far we have wandered from home.”<sup>10</sup> In one letter, he portrayed himself as a prophetic Moses-like figure, likening serialism to the Golden Calf that was foolishly worshipped by Aaron and his followers: “Music is being corrupted today, is being *lost* in the vagaries of ‘false idols.’ It has become *unclean*.”<sup>11</sup> In “Humanism versus Science” (1970), he continued to use such metaphors, decrying the elevation of scientific rationalists to the status of “secular saints” who cast themselves as being omniscient.<sup>12</sup> A mystical-humanistic position, he averred, envisioned the universe as a more mysterious and ineffable source of cognition.

More references to kabbalistic ideas emerged in the following decade. In 1982, Rochberg channeled Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his essay “The Marvelous in Art,” in which Rochberg suggested that modern audiences desired a realm that pointed away from “the literal to the [...] primal energy that created and sustains the universe” and which bound nature and man “into oneness and unity.”<sup>13</sup> He argued against what he perceived as a false dichotomy – “corporeal” and “incorporeal” – and suggested that the language of human consciousness, including music, is merely a mystical expression of world consciousness. Influencing his thoughts was Walter Benjamin’s “On Language,” which Rochberg found particularly compelling for its assertion that “every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language.”<sup>14</sup> As he wrote to Anhalt, “the universe itself is a form of ‘speaking’ and we are one of those forms ‘spoken’ by the universe; and *our* speech [...] reflects *back* on its source.”<sup>15</sup> Anhalt responded sympathetically, noting that “the depth, the tone, the idea of all this reminds me of the milieu of the Kabbalah ... It sounds terribly old, sweet, and Jewish ... Or do I hear eastern echoes in it? Or perhaps theosophical ones?”<sup>16</sup>

His analysis was certainly perceptive, for the textual sources behind “The Marvelous in Art” were themselves influenced by Jewish mysticism. Coleridge had read core kabbalistic texts and “owed much of this mystical thinking” to such explorations.<sup>17</sup> Benjamin and Scholem were close friends, with Scholem serving as a primary intellectual resource for the philosopher as he constructed his theories on language and being. But Rochberg’s think-

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10 Ibid., p. 241.

11 George Rochberg, letter to Istvan Anhalt, July 14, 1969, in *Eagle Minds* (see note 1), p. 74.

12 George Rochberg, “Humanism versus Science” [1970], in *The Aesthetics of Survival* (see note 9), pp. 135-44, esp. p. 135.

13 George Rochberg, “The Marvelous in Art” [1982], in *The Aesthetics of Survival* (see note 9), pp. 214-21, esp. p. 216.

14 George Rochberg, “Reflections: W. Benjamin,” unpublished (George Rochberg Collection, PSS).

15 George Rochberg, letter to Istvan Anhalt, January 15, 1985, in *Eagle Minds* (see note 1), pp. 155-57, esp. pp. 155-56.

16 Istvan Anhalt, letter to George Rochberg, April 13, 1985, *ibid.*, pp. 158-62, esp. p. 159.

17 Tim Fulford, “Coleridge, Kabbalah, and the Book of Daniel,” *Prose Studies*, 13 (1990), no. 3, pp. 63-77, esp. p. 63.

ing was never exclusively kabbalistic, as seen in a selection of titles he read in 1984: Hans Jonas's *The Gnostic Religion* (1958); Doris Lessing's novel, *Shikasta* (1979); and Idries Shah's *The Sufis* (1964). Such affinities supported his belief that "at their core all religions are the same": "Even if what we mean by 'God' is distantly related to what the Hebrews meant, I suspect both are ... echoes of what was once understood and felt when man lived in the cosmos."<sup>18</sup>

Rochberg's textual sources situated his ideas within a long history of mystical thinkers who had been grappling with man's increasing alienation from the universe. His philosophy of *ars combinatoria* had been directly inspired by the Argentinian poet Jorge Luis Borges, whose theory of literary correspondences had been inspired by the *Zohar* and its understanding of the "whole world [as] a *corpus symbolicum*" and the mystical artist one who "weaves these symbols."<sup>19</sup> He also joined other twentieth-century kabbalists such as Franz Kafka in identifying a metaphysical gap "characterized not only by [a] yearning for death, but also by its deep feeling of a rift between humans and the infinite."<sup>20</sup> Writing in the 1970s and 1980s, Rochberg targeted scientific rationalism as the scapegoat behind the continued dehumanization of art, and yet he refused to see the situation as hopeless. In one passage from "Can the Arts Survive Modernism?" (1985), he described the "metaphysical gap between individual human consciousness and [the] cosmos" as a terrorized victim of twentieth-century modernism:

Modernism tried to claim victory over the metaphysical gap, to declare it nonexistent, having overcome the weight of memory, history, the past, tradition. ... After eighty years, we see that what modernism actually did was to dismantle and destroy whatever bridges had been previously thrown across the gap and left an even wider and deeper void than ever before – and, now, filled with violence and terror and the dread of annihilation.<sup>21</sup>

Rochberg argued that art might fill the spiritual void: "Art, if anything, is closer to theology. That is, if you believe something to be true and it allows you to act at the highest level of your being."<sup>22</sup> For him, the creative bond between music, composer, and cosmos was a spiritual truth, and he believed along with the kabbalists that "man is a spiritual emanation in *toto*, mind as well as body," a conviction that inspired his own mystical creed: "Do I

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18 George Rochberg, journal entries, September 7, 1984, and August 12, 1984 (George Rochberg Collection, PSS).

19 Jaime Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah, and Other Essays on his Fiction and Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 263, and pp. 266-67.

20 Zohar Maor, "Mysticism, Regeneration and Jewish Rebirth: The Prague Circle in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Demographie – Demokratie – Geschichte: Deutschland und Israel*, ed. José Brunner (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), pp. 392-96, esp. p. 396.

21 George Rochberg, "Can the Arts Survive Modernism?," *Critical Inquiry*, 11 (1984), no. 2, pp. 317-40, esp. p. 337.

22 George Rochberg, journal entry, December 20, 1984 (George Rochberg Collection, PSS).

believe in God? Yes, but in my own way. Not the God of religion, but the God of creation in which we share. Not the God of rituals and prayers, but the God locked into the secret recesses of consciousness.”<sup>23</sup>

In his writings on Jewish secularism, David Biale has suggested that a “secular culture built upon the rejected foundations of a religious culture cannot escape its heritage: ‘the stone rejected by the builders becomes the cornerstone.’”<sup>24</sup> In the case of Rochberg, I argue that this was the case for him and many postwar Jewish intellectuals. The tragic contexts that defined his life begged many existential questions, and as a secular Jew he sought answers in a diverse and intercultural set of symbols and texts. And yet, after 1969, he confessed to a “growing need to confirm and reaffirm my Jewishness – not in the ordinary sociological sense [of] joining a congregation [...] but in the *spiritual sense*. Digging into the psyche to discover the connections with God or what we call ‘God’ [...] to find that quality [...] which made it possible to survive [the modern era] and *be a Jew*.”<sup>25</sup> I would argue that we might appropriately interpret Rochberg’s intentional and accidental engagements with kabbalism as distinctly expressive of his secular and Jewish orientations, in which he had the intellectual and creative freedom to select those symbols that resonated with his own personal beliefs – a process not unlike his theory of *ars combinatoria* itself.

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23 George Rochberg, journal entry, October 12, 1984 (George Rochberg Collection, PSS).

24 David Biale, “God’s Language and the Making of Secular Jewish Culture,” in *Jewish Secularity: The Search for Roots and the Challenges of Relevant Meaning*, ed. David Gordis and Zachary Heller (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012), pp. 55-68, esp. p. 57.

25 George Rochberg, letter to Istvan Anhalt, July 14, 1969, in *Eagle Minds* (see note 1), p. 74.