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Hassidic Idealism

Kurt Vonnegut and the Creator of the Universe

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In §1 of this essay, I explore a central doctrine of Kabbalistic Judaism, the doctrine of the *sefirot*. It gives rise to a problem strikingly similar to problems faced by Trinitarian Christians. Like Christians, the Kabbalists want to believe that God is both one, but, in some sense or other, many. How can that desire be reconciled with the demands of logic and of Jewish orthodoxy? In §2, I explain how the most recent ‘major trend’ of the Kabbalistic tradition,¹ namely, Eastern European Hassidism, adopted, alongside the doctrine of the *sefirot*, a strident and radical idealism. In §3 and §4, I develop some claims about the nature of fiction that help me, in §5, to generate a ‘Hassidic solution to the problem of the *sefirot*.’ The solution I propose is my own, drawing from intellectual history in a creative way. I hope to demonstrate that the radical idealism of Hassidism provides us with the resources to resolve the problems with the doctrine of the *sefirot* (and perhaps the problems with Trinitarianism too, although, clearly, that wasn’t their concern, or mine). Accordingly, this essay shouldn’t be mistaken merely as an exercise in intellectual history. In my own small way, I’m trying to advance the debate.

I hope this essay is of interest not only to religious readers, but also to anybody interested in the nature of fiction, given the claims about the nature of truth in a fiction developed along the way (people uninterested in theology can skip straight to §3).

1. The Problem with the *Sefirot*

Kabbalistic Judaism describes a dynamic process somehow unfolding within the Godhead. Peter Schäfer explains:

¹ This talk of ‘major trends’ is borrowed from Gershom Scholem (1946).

God remains one and one alone, but he possesses at the same time an incredibly rich inner life; his Godhead unfolds in potencies, energies, emanations (Heb. *Sefirot*²), which embody different aspects of God's essence continually interrelating with one another. (2000: 222)

The *sefirot* are something like divine energies, whatever that might mean. Schäfer is particularly interested in the doctrine that some of the *sefirot* are male and others female, and that some of them make love to each other. Two of the most prominent of the *sefirot* are God's strict justice (*Midat Hadin*) and his mercy (*Midat Harachamim*). These two personified attributes are key figures in early Rabbinic texts. Kabbalistic thought co-opted and hypostasized them (if they weren't already hypostasized) as two of the *sefirot*. It also adopted the notion that they *oppose* one another. In short: the *sefirot* interact.

According to Moshe Idel (1988: 136–53), the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, one of the earliest works of medieval Kabbala, viewed the *sefirot*, not yet named as such, in terms of *tools*, or powers, that God uses to create and govern the world, and in terms of vessels into which the divine spirit flows. A later school, under the influence of Isaac the Blind, started to view the *sefirot* as distinct parts of the essential structure of God; rather than mere tools at his disposal. The *sefirot* were at once supposed to be many, and yet *somehow*, paradoxically, *one*—so as not to conflict with God's simplicity. To quote Rabbi Isaac the Blind:

[A]ll the attributes, which seem as if they are separate, are not separated {at all} since {all of them} are one, as the{ir} beginning is, which unites everything “in one word”. (Idel 1988: 137)³

Yet another Kabbalistic school viewed them as non-essential, relational *attributes* of God, as he relates to the world. These different schools developed under different thinkers, but very often, especially as the tradition matures, one finds these conflicting conceptions rubbing shoulders within a single text. Witness the words of Abraham Herrera.

The *Sefiroth* are emanations from the primal simple unity; . . . mirrors of His truth, which share in his nature and essence . . . ; structures of his wisdom and representations of His will and desire; receptacles of His strength and instruments of his activity; . . . distributors of His grace and goodness; judges of His kingdom . . . and simultaneously the designations, attributes, and names of He who is the highest of all and who encompasses all. These ten names are indistinguishable; ten attributes of His sublime glory and greatness; ten fingers of His mighty hands, five of His right and five of His left; ten lights by which he radiates Himself; ten garments of glory, in which He is garbed; ten visions, in which He is seen; ten forms, in which He has formed everything; . . . ten lecterns, from which He teaches; ten thrones, from which he judges the nations; ten divisions of paradise . . . ten steps, on which he descends, and ten on which one ascends to Him; . . . ten lights, which illuminate all intelligences; ten kinds of fire, which consume all desires; ten kinds of glory, which rejoice all rational souls and intellects; ten words, by which the world was created;

² The word *sefirot* literally means *numbers*, but it seems fair to translate it idiomatically.

³ The Hebrew original of Isaac the Blind's *Commentary to Sefer Yetzira*, which Idel is quoting, can be found as an appendix to Scholem 1963.

ten spirits, by which the world is moved and kept alive; ten commandments; ten numbers, dimensions, and weights, by which all is counted, weighed, and measured.

(1666: 7, as translated by Scholem 1991: 40–1)

It's not clear how all of these metaphors can be true, simultaneously, of any single set of ten things. Rather, elements from all of the schools Idel lists (and more) often rub shoulders, in conflict with one another. The frustration of nailing down a single doctrine of the *sefirot* can be sensed quite palpably in the famous attack from Rabbi Shlomo ben Shimon Duran, the *Rashbash*:

[The Kabbalists] don't even know what these ten *sefirot* are; whether they are (1) descriptions [of one God] or (2) names [of ten entities] or (3) emanations that emanate from Him, may He be blessed. There is no room in logical space for a fourth option.⁴ (Duran 1998: Responsum 189)

The *Rashbash* has a problem with each option.

If they are distinct descriptions of the one God, how do they improve upon the thirteen attributes God *Himself* revealed to Moses (Exodus 34:6–7)? The *Rashbash* quotes the Kabbalists, who say that Moses didn't attain full knowledge of the *sefirot*. But Moses was the greatest prophet. So, either the *sefirot* aren't worth knowing, because the thirteen biblical attributes trump them, or the Kabbalists are heretical in asserting that they have attained a greater knowledge of God than the greatest prophet.

As the Kabbala evolved, the notion that the *sefirot* are nothing more than multiple descriptions of the same thing didn't really take hold. Option 1 isn't such a live option. If it was, how would the *sefirot* be able to interact—to make love and war, so to speak? But even regarding options 2 and 3, one could still ask why Moses didn't know of the *sefirot*. According to the Hassidic master Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the belief that the *sefirot* were concealed from Moses is *not* heretical. Jewish doctrine only dictates that Moses was the greatest *prophet*. According to R. Shneur Zalman, certain Kabbalists had a more profound understanding of divine matters, but not through *prophecy*. As the Talmud says, “A wise man is better than a prophet” (*Baba Batra* 12a). R. Shneur Zalman explains:

Because by his wisdom, he can apprehend exceedingly beyond the levels that can descend netherwards in a mode of revelation to the prophet in the vision of their prophecy. For only the lowest ranks [of divine wisdom] can descend and become revealed to them.

(Borukhovich 1993: Part IV, letter 19, as quoted by Shapiro 2004: 90)

The wise man uses the power of his intellect to climb up to a higher rung of the ladder of divine wisdom than would be able to descend downwards toward the prophet. Admittedly, this view is controversial, but it's not obviously heretical. Furthermore, the *sefirot* are not as innovative as they are sometimes presented as being. They can, in actual fact, be presented as a somewhat audacious fleshing out and hypostatizing of much more inchoate views that came before.

For example: R. Isaac the Blind gave seven of the *sefirot* (known as the lower *sefirot*) their names from a list of attributes appearing in I Chronicles 29:11 (see Dan

⁴ The translation is my own, as is the case with all texts in this essay, unless otherwise noted.

1986: 32)—giving a biblical anchor, however tendentious. The Rabbinic text, *Avot d'Rabi Natan*, talks about seven attributes serving before the lower throne—again, these were taken to be the lower *sefirot*. Emulating these attributes for yourself, we are told there, can give you knowledge of *God himself*. The Talmud (Hagiga 12a) talks about the ten “things” with which God created the world, and then lists the sorts of attributes hypostasized by the Kabbalists as ten *sefirot*. So, it’s not as if the *sefirot* came from nowhere. The wise men of the Kabbalistic tradition may have climbed up to a higher rung than that which descends to a prophet, but they got their leg up that ladder from the revealed tradition. Nothing here denigrates Moses’s prophetic power. The Kabbalists were standing on the shoulders of giants.

Given that most Kabbalists think in terms of options 2 or 3, the continuation of the Rashbash’s critique has much more bite. If the *sefirot* are names of distinct entities—be they part of some larger Godhead or not—then the doctrine posits a distinctively un-Jewish complexity within the nature of God, or, worse still, a panoply of warring and love-making pagan gods. Even if they’re all parts of a *single* God, the Rashbash thinks that the doctrine of the *sefirot* is analogous to Christianity, which “claims that there are three, whereas these people claim that there are ten” (Duran 1998: Responsum 189)! Alternatively, if you follow option 3, and say that the *sefirot* are emanations of God—powers or tools that he uses—then the *sefirot* are akin to angels. But Kabbalists *pray* to the *sefirot*, and praying to angels (however popular the practice may have been from time to time) is forbidden to Jews, “for all who pray to one of the angels is a heretic” (Duran 1998: Responsum 189).⁵

To summarize the Rashbash: Traditional Jewish theology rejects the puzzling Christian idea that the existence of three divine persons is somehow consistent with monotheism. The problem is only compounded if you’ve got *ten* divine entities—and the *sefirot* certainly seem to be distinct entities, since they can fight each other and make love to each other. The Kabbalists often urge that these distinct entities are all one, but the Christians also talk about how the three Divine persons are actually one God, and it’s always been something of a *puzzle* as to how that can be. If they are *parts* of God, one might think that worshipping less than God’s whole self is theologically problematic, and if they are *external* to God, the problem with worshipping them becomes worse. I call this family of concerns, ‘the problem with *sefirot*.’

⁵ There is a prayer standardly published in Jewish prayer books, as part of a penitential prayer service known as *selichot*, which appears to be addressed to angels; asking them to beseech God on our behalf. But, precisely for this reason, there is great controversy about this prayer. Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Bezalel, the Maharal of Prague, famously ruled that it isn’t appropriate to recite it (Loew 1961: ch. 12). For our purposes, prayers in which Jews seem to pray directly to God’s personified *attributes*, or to the *sefirot*, seem to be more pertinent. One such prayer made it into the standard prayer book for the Holiest Day of the year, *Yom Kippur*. So, it seems that many Jews today have the custom of praying to one of the *sefirot* (see Sacks 2012: 1167—the stanza beginning with the words “God’s Attribute of Compassion”). Although some controversy also attached to this prayer, it’s fair to say that it has attracted much less ire. Is this because praying to the *sefirot* is better than praying to angels? Not according to the Rashbash, on option 3!

2. Hassidic Idealism

Lurianic Kabbala introduced the doctrine of *tzimtzum*, or ‘contraction,’ into the Kabbalistic tradition. Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (1534–72) poses the following questions: How can there be a world if God is everywhere? Given God’s expansiveness, how could there be any room left over in which a world could exist? If God is ‘all in all,’ how can there be anything that *isn’t* God? How could God create a world from nothing, if there was no such thing as ‘nothing’ in the first place?⁶

Some of these questions seem confused. There’s no reason to think God is actually *located in space*, such that his omnipresence leaves no room for other things. He can be omnipresent in some derivative sense, without being *located* in space; so long as his power and/or knowledge *extends* to all regions. Even if omnipresence means God *is* actually wholly located in every region of space, contemporary philosophers might urge us to recognize that there’s no reason to think the universe can’t *share* its location with God (see Inman forthcoming).

Furthermore, the question about creation *ex nihilo* seems ill-posed. The whole point of the doctrine is that God’s creation didn’t *need* to start off with any raw materials, including a strange raw material called ‘nothing.’ Perhaps we can see more motivation behind some of the other questions on this list, and then reinterpret the above questions accordingly. For instance, one might imagine that God’s being a perfect being somehow makes the existence of other beings otiose. This might give rise to a conception of God’s existence as somehow all-encompassing and exhaustive: How could there be *room*, so to speak, for anything else?

We can now recapture some of the other questions. We’re not really worried that there’s no space for other things; rather, we’re worried that God’s perfection doesn’t allow anything to coexist with him. As the Talmud states, “Woe to the wicked person, and woe to his neighbor” (Sukkah 56b); if God has to exist alongside imperfect beings, wouldn’t that sully his perfection? The doctrine of *tzimtzum* was the Lurianic answer. The idea would be this: yes, God’s existence *was* too exhaustive and expansive, and his perfection so complete, that there was, if only in some non-spatial sense of the word, no ‘room’ for a world to exist. Accordingly, God limited himself. He somehow drew himself inwards, making himself, so to speak, less expansive, exhaustive, and perfect, in order that something else besides him could come to be. This Godless ‘space’ that he created, through the act of *tzimtzum*, was the *nothingness*, the metaphorical *vacuum* that allowed for creation *ex nihilo*.

You might think an omnipotent God couldn’t create a stone too heavy to lift; that omnipotence doesn’t demand that God be able to do the impossible; and that in the same spirit, an all-encompassing God simply wouldn’t *be able* to limit himself in this way. Accordingly, a number of Kabbalists reinterpreted Luria, and insisted that the

⁶ I owe this paraphrase of R. Luria’s thought process to his student Rabbi Chaim Vital (1782: I.1–2). This paraphrase was in turn paraphrased by Scholem (1946: 261)!

notion of *tzimtzum* shouldn't be taken literally.⁷ God didn't *really* contract himself. That isn't at all possible. But if *tzimtzum* is just a metaphor, what is it a metaphor for, and how does it respond to the questions *tzimtzum* was supposed to solve? Witness a classical Hassidic response to this question from R. Shneur Zalman:

Know this: "In the heavens above and on the earth below—there is nothing else [besides G-d]" (Deuteronomy 4:39). This means that even the material earth, which appears to be real in the eyes of all, is completely nonexistent and empty in relation to the Holy One, blessed be He. For God's name, "*Elohim*", conceals and contracts only from the perspective of the lower realms, but not from the perspective of the Holy One, blessed be He, since He and His Name "*Elohim*" are One. Therefore, even the earth and that which is below it are completely nonexistent and empty from the perspective of the Holy One, blessed be He. . . . [W]ith his attribute of *Gevurah* [restraint] and *Tzimtzum*, he hides and conceals the life-force which flows into the heavens and the earth, so that they and all their hosts should appear as if they were independently existing entities. The *Tzimtzum* and concealment is, however, only from the perspective of the lower realms, but from the perspective of the Holy One, blessed be He, everything before Him is considered as actually naught, just as the light of the sun in the sun. (Borukhovich 1993: II, 6)

As I have tried to paint this type of idealism elsewhere (Lebens 2015), it's as if God is telling a story or dreaming a dream. According to that story or dream, it's true to say that God created a space in which a world could exist, and, according to this story or dream, it's true to say that we all exist in that space. But of course, *outside* of the dream, or the story, it's not true that God actually created a space in which an independent universe could come to be. From God's perspective, it's just an illusion. This doctrine has sometimes come to be called 'acosmism.' I call it 'Hassidic idealism,' since the idea *isn't* that the world doesn't exist. This isn't really supposed to be a skeptical hypothesis at all. The idea is that for anything other than God to be *real* is for it to exist in the story that God is spinning in his mind. This is a radical form of idealism.

Hassidic Idealism isn't just found in the words of R. Shneur Zalman. It abounds in the works of the Izbicer Rebbe, Mordechai Yosef Leiner (see Lebens 2015), and his disciple, Rabbi Tzadok Hacoheh of Lublin, who describes the act of creation as "making it seem as if there are two things: the creator and the created" (Hacoheh 2005: 45), when in fact there is really only one thing: *the creator*. This could be mistaken for acosmism, but it's clear, in context, that 'Hassidic idealism' is really what's at stake. For R. Tzadok, the only thing that is real in and of itself, is God—all else is real, only to the extent that God is thinking of it.

It's clear to me that this doctrine traces back to the founder of Hassidism, the *Baal Shem Tov*, who told a parable in which the created world is presented as a series of obstacles, around a palace, which serve to keep God hidden from us. We learn at the end of the parable that the palace, its walls, and the obstacles in our way are all an illusion. As soon as you dip your toe into the moat around the palace, the whole edifice

⁷ For an argument that this was a reinterpretation, see Scholem (1946: 262).

evaporates.⁸ The created world, which gets between God and us, is, in some sense or other, an illusion. Even the distinction between you and God is an illusion. In the final analysis, outside the illusion, there is nothing but God. Once again, we needn't interpret this as acosmism. The idea isn't that the created world doesn't exist, but that it exists only in the mind of God. To dip your toe into the mind of God is to recognize that his reality somehow transcends and undergirds our own.

Hassidic idealism was most immediately an outgrowth of the debates that surrounded *tzimtzum*: on the one hand, there couldn't possibly be a creation without *tzimtzum*; on the other hand, God couldn't possibly contract himself in reality, and so many Hassidim concluded that he must have merely made it appear *as if* *tzimtzum* had occurred, and thus, merely made it appear *as if* a world had come into existence distinct from him.

If you don't find these philosophical considerations very compelling, I refer you to the more generic scriptural, liturgical, and theological considerations I brought to bear in favor of Hassidic idealism in Lebens (2015). Doubtless, those sorts of concerns also played a role in motivating the Hassidim. Ultimately, though, whether we adopt Hassidic idealism is not the point. My argument is merely this: Hassidism adopted the doctrine of the *sefirot*⁹ and thus, you'd imagine that they should be plagued by the problem with the *sefirot*. I shall argue that because the Hassidim were armed with their Hassidic idealism, they had the resources required to solve that problem (not that any of them ever did so). In other words, *if* you adopt Hassidic idealism, then the problem with the *sefirot* evaporates. Before I can construct this argument, in §5, we need to get some details on the table about the semantics of fiction. For that reason, the next two sections will lead us quite far away from the confines of Jewish theology.

3. To Be or Not to Be a Fictional Character

Take the following sentence:

S. Hamlet is a Danish Prince

S is true in Shakespeare's play. But, outside the play, it's false. Accordingly, it is somewhat natural to think that there is some sort of intensional operator, which we shall call

⁸ See Schwartz (1993: 330) for English translation of this parable, which appears in *Keter Shem Tov* and *Degel Machaneh Efrayim*.

⁹ Their Kabbalistic critics accused the Hassidim of emptying the doctrine of its ontological significance, recasting it, nominalistically, merely as a theory about the psychology of God and of man, created in his image. If so, the Hassidim don't obviously inherit the problem with the *sefirot*. But, as Idel puts it, the Hassidic masters were *not* denying *any* aspect of the classical doctrine of the *sefirot*, or reducing its ontological significance. They were just more interested in its psychological ramifications than its ontological ramifications: "Like [the Baal Shem Tov], R. Dov Baer [his most prominent disciple] did not deny the existence of the complex Lurianic theosophy, but was primarily interested in its immanence in this world and in man... none of [the Hassidic masters] would deny the objective existence of a transcendental theosophical structure" (Idel 1988: 151). Accordingly, I take it that they did adopt the classical doctrine of the *sefirot* and that they did inherit its problems, which they also had the resources to solve.

the *fictional operator*. It takes a sentence and says that that sentence is (at least) fictionally true. When we say that *S* is true, since Hamlet wasn't *really* a Danish prince, we mean that it's true under the scope of such an operator.

Imagine a new play telling the story about how Shakespeare pulled off a conspiracy, and how, actually, Hamlet *did* exist, and wasn't fictional at all. This play documents how Shakespeare changed a couple of important details in his portrayal of Hamlet's life, in order to cover his tracks. Let's call this new play, *Conspiracy*. It tells us that Hamlet *wasn't* a Danish prince after all. Instead, we're told that he was a tax collector from Shoreditch. When talking about the classical play, the sentence *S* is true, but when talking about *Conspiracy*, *S* is false. And, when talking about the classical play, the sentence 'Hamlet is from Shoreditch' is false. But, that sentence comes out true, when we're talking about *Conspiracy*. And thus, it becomes clear that our fictional operator needs to be indexed to a given fiction.

Let *F* be our sentential fictional-operator, and let's introduce a subscript letter to represent the fictional discourse the operator is indexed to. Let 'H' stand for the *Hamlet* fiction, and 'C' stand for the *Conspiracy* fiction. Accordingly, ' $F_H(S)$ ' says that it is true, relative to the *Hamlet* story, that Hamlet is a prince of Denmark. ' $F_C(\neg S)$ ' says that it is true, relative to the *Conspiracy* story, that Hamlet is *not* a prince of Denmark.

We can also make use of a non-fictional operator. You might think such an operator otiose. Whenever we're not engaged in fiction (i.e., in the majority of our everyday lives), we make assertions aimed at being true. It goes without saying that they're aimed at being *non-fictionally* true. The reason that such an operator might be useful is because of the ways it sometimes interacts with our fictional operator. Let *N* be our sentential non-fictional operator. To say that $N(S)$ is to say that *S* is true outside of any fiction.

Using these operators, we can define two rules of thumb that generally hold across works of fiction—although the rules admit of interesting exceptions:

$$(R1) \quad F_x(R) \rightarrow F_x(N(R))$$

$$(R2) \quad F_x(R) \rightarrow F_x(\neg F_x(R))$$

Rule 1 tells us that if it's fictionally true that *R*, relative to some fiction *x*, then it's also fictionally true, relative to that fiction, that *R* is *non-fictionally true*. An example: because Sherlock Holmes is a detective in the stories told by Conan Doyle, *relative* to those stories it is *non-fictionally true* that Sherlock Holmes is a detective. In those stories, he's *a non-fictional detective*. Similarly, Rule 2 tells us that if *R* is fictionally true, relative to some fiction *x*, then *within* that fiction, so to speak, it would be false to say that *R* is *fictionally true relative to fiction x*, since, within that fiction, *x isn't a fiction*. Standardly, you *can* have fictions within fictions, but they will generally be of the form $F_x(F_y(R))$, such that the internal fictional operator is indexed to a different fiction (namely, the fiction in the fiction—the fictional fiction).

As we'll see, even though these rules hold for *most* fictions, *some* fictions don't abide by either of them. Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1991), is just such a fiction. Toward the end of the novel, Vonnegut inserts himself as a character into the story. Authors are often characters in their own stories, but here, which is slightly less common (though by no means unheard of), Vonnegut inserts himself into the story as the author of the story that he finds himself in. "I was there", he reports, "to watch a confrontation between two human beings I had created: Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout" (1991: 192–3). Let's label some of these claims:

T. Kurt Vonnegut went to Midland City to witness a confrontation between Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout.

U. Kurt Vonnegut created Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout.

T, of course, isn't actually true. Vonnegut didn't go to Midland City since the Midland City described in *Breakfast of Champions* doesn't exist. And thus, we can safely say that $N(\neg T)$. But, *U* is true, or at least, *plausibly* true. Some would argue that fictional characters are Platonic entities existing eternally in Plato's heaven. Alternatively, one might seek to define a fictional character in terms of a set of individuals across possible worlds (Lewis 1978). On either of these accounts, characters are not *created* by authors, but merely discovered. On those accounts then, *U* is false. Alternatively, you might think that fictional characters don't exist in any shape or form, so they can neither be created *nor* discovered (Crane 2013). On that view too, *U* is false. And yet, there are certainly *plausible* accounts according to which fictional characters really are *created*, as so-called "impure abstracta" (Thomasson 1999; Kripke 2013). So, whilst *T* is obviously false, *U* is, at least, *plausible*. For those who think that fictional characters are created by their authors, it is true to say that $N(U)$.

But of course *T* isn't false in the story. Relative to the story told in *Breakfast of Champions*, it is true that Kurt Vonnegut visited Midland City. Calling this fiction *B*, we can say that $F_B(T)$. But, surely *U* is false in the story. We've been told about Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout's parents. Within the story, the biological creation of Hoover and Trout has been explained. In the story, it isn't true that they are fictional characters. In the story, it's true that they are human beings, with human parents. So what we have, in the sentence, "I was there to watch a confrontation between two human beings I had created: Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout," is a claim which is neither true in the fiction—since, in the fiction it isn't the case that Vonnegut created Hoover and Trout—nor true outside of the fiction—since, outside of the fiction, Vonnegut was never in the fictional Midland City.

In other words, the conjunction of *T* and *U* is false under either of our operators. ' $N(T \& U)$ ' is false, since ' $N(\neg T)$ ' is true, and ' $F_B(T \& U)$ ' is false too, since ' $F_B(\neg U)$ ' is true. Impossible things can happen in some stories. Tamar Szabó Gendler (2000) demonstrates this fact quite beautifully, as we'll see in §4. You might think that *Breakfast of Champions* is simply one of the Gendler-type stories in which illogical things happen, and contradictions are true. But that would be a conclusion that a conscientious reader

would only adopt as a last resort, since, unless we're explicitly told otherwise, authors *generally* try to make their stories logically coherent. At the very least, they try to hide any inconsistencies that may be lurking under the surface of the narratives, far from the open view of their readers.¹⁰

What's really going on is that Vonnegut is purposefully collapsing what are supposed to be distinct diegetic levels. The humor of such a sentence is bound up with a surreptitious switch between different levels of discourse. He isn't saying that $N(T \& U)$, nor is he saying that $F_B(T \& U)$. Instead, he surreptitiously switches operators midway through the sentence. He's really saying that $F_B(T) \& N(U)$.

You might dispute my reading. You might say that *even in the story* it's true that Vonnegut is the creator of these characters. In the story, Vonnegut is something of a God. Indeed, he says as much himself: "I was on a par with the Creator of the Universe there in the dark in the cocktail lounge" (Vonnegut 1991: 200). Just as a theist in this world will claim that she has two parents, but that she was also created by a God, it is presented as true, in the story of *Breakfast of Champions*, that Hoover and Trout had biological parents, but also that they were created by an all-powerful Vonnegut. When Vonnegut finally reveals himself to Trout, the scene is very much painted in the colors of a theophany. Vonnegut tells Trout the following: "I am a novelist, and I created you for use in my books" (Vonnegut 1991: 291).

On the basis of this, you could claim that T and U , whatever their actual truth values, are *both* true in the story. And since ' $F_B(U)$ ' is true after all, so is the claim that $F_B(T \& U)$. But, that doesn't seem right to me. It's still true, within the story, that Trout is a human being, made of flesh and blood. That much doesn't stop being true once Vonnegut has revealed to Trout that he's 'just' a character in his novels. It might be true in the fiction that Trout was created by *God*, if the theist is licensed to import her theism into the story,¹¹ but it isn't true in the fiction that Kilgore Trout is merely a fictional creation of a human author.

Imagine that God appeared to you in an overwhelming theophany. God says, "I have come to tell you that you are merely a figment of my imagination." You thereby come to believe that you are nothing more than a figment of God's imagination. Do you then stop believing that you're a human being, made up of flesh and blood?¹² Well, why would you? God isn't imagining that you're a table. God isn't imagining that you're a chair. God's imagining that you are a human being, and therefore, within the story that

¹⁰ Another route out of the puzzle—suggested by an anonymous referee—would be to say that 'Kilgore Trout' in sentence U doesn't actually co-refer with 'Kilgore Trout' in T , and that 'Dwayne Hoover' in U doesn't co-refer with 'Dwayne Hoover' in T . I hope to dismiss the idea that reference gets shifted by the application and removal of fictional operators in §4. Accordingly, I don't think that this is a live route out of the puzzle.

¹¹ For what it means to import into and export knowledge out of a fiction, see Gendler (2000).

¹² In what follows, I assume that 'you' within God's fiction has the same referent as 'you' outside of the fictional context. This assumption was flagged for me by an anonymous referee, but I maintain that the assumption is justified by the arguments I develop in §4, according to which reference isn't shifted merely via the application and removal of fictional operators.

he's imagining, it is *true* that you are a human being. That doesn't change upon your discovery that, outside of the story, you are merely fictional.

To find out that you are a fictional character, as Kilgore Trout discovers in the *Breakfast of Champions*, is to discover that what you had thought to be true *simpliciter* is merely true relative to the fiction you are part of. That is to say, to find out that you are living in a fiction is to find out that every sentence P that you had formerly taken to be non-fictionally true, might only actually be true relative to the fiction that you're living in. You needn't reject all of the things you thought you knew, out of hand, you merely need to apply a new operator to them—not the non-fictional operator, but the fictional operator. Your parents will still be your parents; your home will still be located where you think it is—within the fiction in which you now know you live.

As I have argued elsewhere (Lebens 2015), a fictional character should be primarily concerned with what's true relative to his or her fiction. The true sentences that should matter most to a fictional character should generally be the sentences that are true within the scope of the relevant fictional operator. For instance, Sherlock Holmes needn't be concerned that 221B Baker Street didn't exist in the years his stories were set, since despite being non-fictionally *true*, that claim is *false* relative to his story. But, had it been true *relative to his story*, then it would have been urgently relevant to him: he would have had to find new lodgings. When Vonnegut tells Trout that he is a fictional character, Trout still has more of a stake in whether it's raining right now, in the story, than in whether it's raining anywhere outside the story. If it's raining right now, in the story, Trout might want to open an umbrella.

Bearing all of this in mind: Trout hasn't been told that, *in the story*, he isn't a human being with human concerns; a mere creation of a human author. He isn't being told that $F_B(U)$. Rather, he's merely been told that what's true relative to his story isn't the final word on the metaphysics of the matter, since what's true relative to the story will often be false *simpliciter*. He's being told that even though ' $F_B(\neg U)$ ' is true, this isn't the final word on the matter, since ' $N(U)$ ' is also true. Again, Trout hasn't been told that it's false, *in the story*, that he's a human being. Instead, he's been offered a glimpse into some deeper reality than the one he lives his life within.

Even though Trout has a higher stake, in general, in fictional truths than in non-fictional truths, there are going to be exceptions. Trout's prayer to Vonnegut, at the end of the book, is simply this, "*Make me young, make me young, make me young!*" (1991: 295). Since, if it became non-fictionally true that Vonnegut, in actual fact, outside any story, decided that Trout was to be forever young, then it would immediately become true, relative to the fiction, that Trout was forever young. What's true in the fiction is wholly dependent upon what Vonnegut non-fictionally decides shall be true in the fiction. Trout's prayer is rational. Trout, realizes that he has a tremendous stake in his fiction-relative truths, hence his request to be made young, rather than to be made a compelling character. Trout's interest remains invested in his fictional life as a human being, and not in his non-fictional life as a fictional character. If God tells you that you're a figment of his imagination, what would your prayer be? "Make it non-fictionally

true that I'm a poignant character in your dream," or "within the story of your dream, give me health, wealth and happiness"?

And thus, I don't think it right to say that T and U are both true *within* the story. U is false within the story, but in the story, Trout discovers that what's true relative to his story, isn't always, even *in* the story, non-fictionally true. In other words, the *Breakfast of Champions* fiction breaks (R1). Let V be the sentence 'Kilgore Trout is a human being and not a fictional character.' Even though it's true that $F_B(V)$, *contra* (R1), this doesn't entail that $F_B(N(V))$. Indeed, what Kilgore Trout comes to learn, within the story itself, is that what's true relative to the fiction is not automatically to be taken, even within the story itself, as non-fictionally true. The story also violates (R2). Even though it's true that $F_B(V)$, *contra* (R2), this doesn't entail that $F_B(\neg F_B(V))$. On the contrary, what Kilgore Trout comes to learn, within the story itself, is that he is merely a character in that story; a story that he has a tremendous stake in.

What I hope to have demonstrated in this section is that to discover that you're a character in a story is also to discover that you're in a story that violates (R1) and (R2).

4. Clark Kent and Superman

Lois Lane doesn't know that Clark Kent is Superman. Let's imagine that she writes a story about Superman and Clark. In the story, they fight for Lois's affection. Let's call the story that Lois writes, 'L,' for *Loving Lois*. It seems to me that the following claim is true: $F_L(\text{Superman} \neq \text{Clark Kent})$. This claim doesn't conflict with the other true claim, which Lois doesn't know, namely: $N(\text{Superman} = \text{Clark Kent})$. Relative to the fiction, L , you'd be wrong to think that Superman and Clark Kent are the same person, even if, outside of that fiction, they *are* the same person.

I'm assuming a direct reference theory of names, such that, if the sentence is true, 'Superman = Clark Kent' expresses a proposition of the form $a = a$. And thus, I seem to be saying that, for a certain a , it's true that $F_L(a \neq a)$.¹³ But then, *Loving Lois* turns out to be a Gendler-type story, a story in which impossible things happen. Now, if you know that Superman and Clark Kent are one person, it might strike you that *Loving Lois* is a completely absurd story: how could Superman pick Clark Kent up, raising him above his own head, and throwing him out of a window, in a fit of jealous rage? A person can't raise himself over his own head. And yet, it's pretty easy for us to put ourselves in the position of a reader who doesn't know that Superman and Clark Kent are the same person, and thus, it's pretty easy for us to follow this story as not being at all absurd.

Gendler-type stories will generally strike their readers as strange. In her story, *Goldbach's Tower* (2000: 67–8), a group of mathematicians prove Goldbach's conjecture (that every even number is the sum of two primes). God disapproves of their audacity, and

¹³ Forget for the moment that F_L is a sentential operator, operating on sentences, rather than on propositions.

punishes them by making 12 no longer the sum of 7 and 5. A righteous mathematician prays to God for mercy. God decides that he'll restore 12 to being the sum of 7 and 5, only if 12 righteous mathematicians can be found. Unfortunately, they can find only 7 righteous mathematicians in one city, and 5 in another. Before God's edict, this would have been enough to overturn God's edict, since 5 and 7 used to be 12. The case comes before Solomon the Wise. They have enough righteous mathematicians to overturn God's edict, but only once God's edict is overturned. What should they do? Solomon reaches a judicious compromise: from here on in, 12 will be both the sum of 5 and 7 and not the sum of 5 and 7.

Gendler is right that we *can* follow a story like that. But surely it wears its absurdity on its sleeve more than *Loving Lois*. To say that *Loving Lois* is a Gendler-type story doesn't do justice to the fact that it reads like a pretty *normal* story. It's not a mind-bender in quite the same way as *Goldbach's Tower* is.

One way to respond would be to dump the direct reference theory. Accordingly, the sentence 'Superman \neq Clark Kent' doesn't express a proposition of the form $a \neq a$. On that view, it would express a proposition more like, *the name 'Superman' and the name 'Clark Kent' do not co-refer*. The proposition that $a \neq a$ is necessarily false. But the claim that two names happen not to co-refer is a contingent fact about a language. Dumping the direct reference theory can help us salvage *Loving Lois*. It isn't a Gendler-type story because the sentence 'Superman \neq Clark Kent' doesn't express any sort of impossibility. But indirect theories of reference are generally thought to be bad theories about how names work (see Kripke 1981).¹⁴

Another way to save *Loving Lois* from being classed as a Gendler-type story is to say that a name refers directly to its bearer, but under the scope of a fiction-operator its reference shifts. So, when I speak about Napoleon, my use of the name 'Napoleon' picks out its bearer, namely, the French general who was defeated at Waterloo. But, when I read a *fiction* about Napoleon, the name picks out a fictional character (whatever your metaphysics of fictional characters say that they might be)—albeit a fictional representation of Napoleon, but not Napoleon himself.

On this reading, 'Superman \neq Clark Kent' might express a proposition of the form $a \neq a$ when uttered outside of the scope of Lois's fictional operator. But her fiction creates (or discovers) two distinct fictional characters—one called 'Superman' and one called 'Clark.' She thinks that her two characters are representations of two different real people, when, in fact, they are actually two distinct representations of the same person; but they *are* distinct. In the context of her fiction, 'Superman \neq Clark Kent' expresses

¹⁴ Of course, the meta-linguistic take on 'Superman \neq Clark Kent' that I offer in this paragraph isn't the only way to understand this sentence upon the rejection of a direct reference theory. It's also true that non-direct theories of reference have come on somewhat since Kripke's attack on them (see Fara 2015). This isn't the place for a book-length treatise on the philosophy of names. And thus, in the meantime, I think it fair to say that direct reference theories are still the most popular among philosophers (not that this entails their truth). I also think it fair to say that even the most powerful contemporary non-direct theories have to face some serious criticisms (see Leckie 2013), which to my mind make the direct theories worthy of their continued popularity.

a proposition of the form $a \neq b$. That proposition is true both in the fiction and outside of it. Lois's story really is about two *distinct* characters, who just happen to be, unbeknownst to Lois, representations of the same non-fictional person.

This strategy comes at a cost. It's intuitive to say that a story about Napoleon is about the French general himself. The story *Anna Karenina* is about a fictional woman. A fiction about Napoleon, on the other hand, is about a *non-fictional* general. Our current strategy dictates that non-fictional people and entities are never the subjects of a fiction. When I walk down Baker Street, I think to myself how this is the very street Sherlock Holmes fictionally lived upon. On the current strategy, that thought isn't literally true. Rather, I'm walking down a road that is *represented* by a *fictional road*, and it's fictionally true that Sherlock Holmes lived upon *that* fictional road. When you say that your story is about Napoleon, you mean that it's about a *representation* of Napoleon. But, why should the claim 'a story is about Napoleon' have a different analysis from the claim 'a story is about Anna Karenina,' such that the first claim is only indirectly true, whereas the second is *directly* true?

I think we should accept that fiction operators don't shift the reference of names under their scope. If 'Superman \neq Clark Kent' expresses a proposition of the form $a \neq a$, it does so inside and outside a fiction operator. I therefore think that we should simply accept that *Loving Lois* is a Gendler-type story after all. Accordingly, we should urge that this category has to be divided into subcategories. We can explain why *Goldbach's Tower* strikes us as more of a mind-bender than *Loving Lois*. In both stories a restricted number of logically and metaphysically impossible propositions are fictionally true. But here's the salient difference: the story that *Loving Lois* tells us is epistemically possible, in a certain sense, even if it's logically and metaphysically *impossible*. *Goldbach's Tower* isn't even epistemically possible in the limited way that *Loving Lois* is.

It's generally regarded to be a consequence of direct reference theories (albeit a puzzling one) that there are *some* logical contradictions that a reasonable person can come to believe (see Kripke 1979). According to the direct reference theorist, the sentence 'Superman is strong and Clark Kent is not strong' expresses a proposition of the form a is strong and a is not strong—an outright contradiction. But, a reasonable person could still come to believe such a proposition, as long as they don't yet know that 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent' co-refer. Reasonable agents are often mistaken about identity statements. We sometimes think that $a = b$ only to discover that $a \neq b$, and vice versa. So even though it's true that true identity propositions are necessarily true, their falsehood often strikes us as epistemically possible, since we've often been wrong about identity statements in the past. So *Loving Lois* is a Gendler-type story, but it's less of a mind-bender than some because its tale is epistemically possible, and thus belongs to a weaker subcategory of Gendler-type stories.

When I say that *Loving Lois* is epistemically possible, I'm not saying that for all we know it could be the case that something isn't self-identical. Rather, I'm saying that for many identity claims, it can be a live epistemic option for us that we're wrong about

them. It might be the case that were Superman to read the story himself, it would strike him to be equally as bizarre as *Goldbach's Tower*, but that might just be because, for him, it *isn't* an epistemic possibility that Superman \neq Clark Kent.¹⁵ Epistemic possibility is agent relative, and thus whether a story is epistemically possible will also be agent relative. But we can still isolate a class of Gendler-type stories that we can call 'epistemically possible Gendler-tales,' even if that class is defined relative to agents.

I want to bring two conclusions forward from this section. (1) In a wide variety of epistemically possible Gendler-tales, a false identity or a false non-identity claim can be true, relative to the fiction, and (2) this gives us no reason to think that fictional operators are reference shifters.

5. Solving the Problem with the *Sefirot*

According to Hassidic idealism, the world we live in doesn't exist outside of God's mind. It's all some kind of illusion. And yet, we can still talk about what's true according to the illusion. For instance, it's true, according to the illusion, that we're human beings of flesh and blood, even if, outside of the illusion, it's true to say that we're merely figments of God's imagination. This talk of being true according to an illusion has the same structure as talking under the scope of a fictional operator. No harm is done to Hassidic idealism if we present its central claim as follows. The world, and its history, is a story God is telling. What's true relative to the story needn't be true outside of the story.

Just as Vonnegut is a character in *Breakfast of Champions*, as well as being its author, God is a character in the story of this world, as well as being its author. Fictional operators are not reference-shifting—so just as Vonnegut *himself* is a character in his story, God *himself* is a character in ours. We are God's characters, and, if you believe in the verisimilitude of religious experience, we experience him in our lives, just as Trout experienced Vonnegut. But perhaps we meet God as *more than one* character in our story, even though outside the fiction, he is *one* God.

We have already seen how the following two claims can be true:

1. $F_L(\text{Superman} \neq \text{Clark Kent})$
2. $N(\text{Superman} = \text{Clark Kent})$

Nothing rules out the possibility that a similar thing could be true about God. Call the story of our world 'W,' and call the ten *sefirot* 's1' through to 's10.' Why can't both of the following claims be true?

1. $F_W(s1, s2, s3, \dots, s10 \text{ are all distinct from one another})$
2. $N(s1=s2=s3 \dots =s10)$

We witness God as ten distinct characters in our story, even though in actual fact there is only one God. We witness his mercy, and his anger, and we witness the conflict

¹⁵ Thanks to Dean Zimmerman for this point.

between the two, and we witness them as independent forces. In actual fact there's only one thing there, even though it's fictionally true that there are ten.

Vonnegut appeared to Trout and told him that he was setting him free. It was understood by some readers that this was to be Vonnegut's last novel (see Lehmann-Haupt 1973), and thus, he came to set all of his characters free because he no longer had plans to use them in further works of fiction. Alternatively, he was merely retiring Trout, who had, until now, been a recurring character in Vonnegut's work. In actual fact, Vonnegut continued to write stories, *and* they continued to contain Trout. Perhaps Vonnegut was of two minds. Part of him had wanted to retire his recurring character, or even to give up writing fiction altogether, and part of him didn't. Imagine that he wanted to be a character in the story he was writing, and wanted to express, in the story, his conflicted feelings to Trout. So, with some audacity, I'm going to write a paragraph that didn't, but could have appeared in *Breakfast of Champions* (text in italics comes from the original (1991: 293), the rest is my own invention):

I wanted to set Trout free but there was a niggling voice in my head telling me that I wouldn't be able to. I simply had too many stories still to tell. I split myself into two different people. This way I'd be able to express myself better. Kurt Vonnegut-1 said to Trout: "*I am approaching my fiftieth birthday, Mr. Trout... I am cleansing and renewing myself for the very different sorts of years to come. Under similar spiritual conditions, Count Tolstoi freed his serfs, Thomas Jefferson freed his slaves. I am going to set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career.*"

"No you won't!" said Vonnegut-2, "I won't let you."

And at that very moment, the two Vonneguts started fighting right in front of Kilgore's astonished eyes.

Why can't an author insert himself into a novel as two people, *in the novel*, even though he's only one person *outside* of the novel? I see no reason why this shouldn't be possible. You could say that even in my shoddy rewrite of *Breakfast of Champions*, the two Vonneguts are still one person, despite my efforts to present them as two. And yet, they fight in front of Kilgore's very eyes, so they certainly do *seem* to be *two* rather than one. You might think that they are two distinct *avatars* of the one Vonnegut, but I don't see why we should be forced into saying that. Napoleon, and not an avatar of his, appears in fictions about him. Superman and Clark Kent are not avatars in *Loving Lois*. I don't see why Vonnegut-1 and Vonnegut-2 should be avatars. They are fictionally two, even though they are actually one.

If the Kabbalists are telling us that they experience God, through the tradition or through religious experience, as ten distinct entities, then maybe, in the story that God tells, he himself *is* ten distinct entities. Against the Rashbash, I would claim that this isn't polytheism, nor does it imply any real complexity in the Godhead as it exists beyond the fiction we live in. God might be ten distinct entities *within* the fiction, but in actual fact he is one. You might then claim I'm being disingenuous. I have already said that fictional characters have a greater stake in the truths of their fiction than in

what's true beyond their fiction. So, the Rashbash's charge can be rephrased. Hassidic idealism is claiming that *in the fiction* there are ten distinct divine entities; in the fiction, polytheism is true. The fact that God is one *beyond* our fiction doesn't save the Kabbalist if the fictional truths are the more important ones.

This criticism won't stick. §3 concluded that a story in which the characters discover that they are fictional characters is a story that doesn't abide by (R1) and (R2). Because (R1) is false, the fact that $F_w(s_1, s_2, s_3, \dots, s_{10})$ are all distinct from one another) is quite consistent with the claim that $F_w(N(s_1=s_2=s_3 \dots =s_{10}))$. In other words, even in the fiction itself, it's non-fictionally true that all of the *sefirot* are one. Those confusing passages in which the Kabbalists insist that despite being ten, the *sefirot* are really one, can now be rendered coherent. They could be recast as saying that according to the fiction we live in, there are ten *sefirot*, but also that, even according to the fiction we live in, it is non-fictionally the case that they are identical; and a mere *fiction* that God is many. The truths that are most relevant to *us* are the truths of the fiction we live in, but we know that the truth that is most relevant to *God* is the non-fictional truth, according to which God is one. We therefore know that monotheism, rather than polytheism, gets to the core of God's essence. And because the fictional operator doesn't shift reference, when you pray to one of the *sefirot*, you are praying to God who is all of the *sefirot*.¹⁶ Just as Trout has a stake in the non-fictional decisions of Vonnegut, *we* have a stake in the non-fictional decisions of the one and only God.

I have utilized Hassidic idealism to respond to the problem of the *sefirot*. I don't know of any Hassidic thinker who ever did such a thing explicitly (though there may be such a thinker).¹⁷ My only claim is that they had the philosophical resources to do so. What emerges from this picture is that the world we live in is actually an epistemically possible Gendler-tale. That means that certain impossible propositions *are* true in our actual world. If it's non-fictionally true that all of the *sefirot* are identical, then they are necessarily identical, and if they are not identical in the fiction in which we live, then our fiction is an impossible fiction.

Here's the thing: Jewish mysticism often makes the claim that logic and reason breaks down when trying to talk about God. This view simply explains why. In Gendler-type stories some contradictions *can* be true, just as it's true at the end of *Goldbach's Tower* that 12 is both the sum of 5 and 7 and not the sum of 5 and 7. That doesn't mean that contradictions have to *abound* in our world. They can be well contained. The true contradictions can be reserved for talk about God and nothing else, just as the only contradictions that are true in *Goldbach's Tower* have to do only with the numbers 5, 7, and 12. Gendler-type stories can *localize* impossibility because the fictional operator isn't closed under logical entailment. On this view, in our fiction, some impossibilities about God are true, but the rest of our world makes perfect sense.

¹⁶ This implies that the Rashbash is wrong to think that praying to the *sefirot* is no better than praying to angels.

¹⁷ Rabbi Eli Rubin has suggested to me that a similar line of thinking *has* been advocated by certain thinkers within the Lubavitch Hassidic tradition. I don't have the space to assess that intriguing claim here.

To rebut the Rashbash once more, I say that the view is resolutely monotheist because it recognizes that outside of our fiction God is one, and that even *within* our fiction it is non-fictionally true that God is one. Because we live in a story that violates (R2), it's even true to say, *in our fiction*, that it's merely *fictionally* true that God is ten; and we recognize that though we usually have a high stake in fictional truth, we have a very high stake in non-fictional theology. None of this need undermine the fact that we really, and veridically, experience one God as ten.

Incidentally, I think that a Christian who was also a Hassidic idealist, so to speak, would be able to give a metaphysical account of the Trinity along similar lines. The idea would be that God is identical to three characters in our story. This isn't to commit what the Christians take to be the heresy of modalism because those three characters *really* are distinct entities, in this fiction. They are not '*merely*' fictionally three when you realize that to be fictionally anything is what's most important most of the time; the Christian claims to experience God, veridically and accurately, in this world, as three distinct people. The Hassidic Christian can endorse that this occurs.

You might accuse the Christian Hassid of not allowing God to be *one* in the world in which we live—giving rise to tritheism—but that's also not right because our story violates (R1), so it's even true *in* the fiction that God is non-fictionally one. And thus, you have an account of what it could mean to claim that God is one and three. Of course, defending the Trinity is not my agenda, nor was it the agenda of the Hassidim, but it demonstrates the power of the philosophical resources I'm trying to deploy. According to the Rashbash, the problem of the *sefirot* was worse than the problem with the Trinity. It shouldn't surprise us if a response to the 'worse' problem can also solve the 'easier' one.¹⁸

I haven't tried to convince you that the doctrine of the *sefirot* is true. I also haven't tried to convince you that Hassidic idealism is true. I recognize that it throws up many new problems in its wake, and I recognize how incredible it sounds. I try to deflate many of those problems elsewhere (see Lebens 2015)—though I don't even endorse the view *there*. I *have* tried to argue for the following claim: if you are a Hassidic idealist,

¹⁸ Carl Mosser raises the concern that to avoid modalism you have to make sure that God, *in his very essence*, is Triune, and the model that I have suggested doesn't respect that fact. I'm not sure he's right, since my model could allow a Christian idealist to say that it's *fictionally* true that God is essentially Triune! The world then becomes an epistemically *impossible* Gendler-story. God is fictionally essentially triune; the three divine persons are fictionally distinct, but they are non-fictionally one, even in the fiction itself. Of course, much of this depends upon how the heresy of modalism is defined. Perhaps *some* Christians will find my solution on their behalf to be acceptable. As is often the case, even in Orthodox Christianity, a position is only heretical relative to a particular *interpretation* of the relevant councils and catechisms. I leave that up to them! Mosser is of the opinion that if this model *doesn't* help Trinitarian theology, it might *still* be of interest to Christians for other reasons. Gregory Palamas developed a distinction between God's essence and his energies. The essence is singular but the energies are plural. His critics accused him of polytheism, but he insisted that this is no polytheism because the energies relate to God's essence much as a sunbeam relates to the sun. Palamas's view eventually became the normative position for Eastern Orthodoxy. Perhaps what I say about the relationship between God and the *sefirot* will be of use to the Orthodox Christian wanting to defend Palamism and its distinction between God and his energies.

then you have the resources to respond to the problem of the *sefirot*.¹⁹ You can explain how God can be one, and perfectly simple, and yet also be ten. This all works if you are, guided by Hassidic idealism, willing to dissect that claim and apply different sorts of fictional and non-fictional operators to its different parts. Hassidic idealism invites incredulous stares. It's completely bizarre. That doesn't make it false. The problem of the *sefirot* is just one of the many issues in the philosophy of religion that this bizarre outlook can actually help us to resolve.²⁰

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¹⁹ Azzan Yadin-Israel raised the following question with me. Does my model make room for the important Kabbalistic tradition of theurgy, according to which human beings are able to cause things to happen, somehow, on high? As he put the concern, "Theurgy suggests an interpenetration and interdetermination of the human and divine rather than the ontological break usually posited by an author and a fictional character." I have two things to say to this. (1) The Hassidim *did* embrace a variety of theurgy, but it was less mechanistic than earlier forms in which the performance of a certain ritual was said to causally influence the *sefirot* in various ways. In Idel's words, Hassidic theology didn't reject theurgy out of hand, but "transposed it onto the spiritual-emotive plane"—we influence God because he *empathizes* with us (Idel 1988: 199). When we cry, he cries. "Anthropopathism, rather than anthropomorphism" (1988: 198) is the order of the day. Given this understanding of theurgy, one shouldn't underestimate the emotional power fictional characters can have over their authors. Vadim Blumin tells me that Tolstoy was said to have cried when he realized Anna Karenina was going to kill herself. Accordingly, perhaps my model leaves room for us to have a real *impact* upon the heavenly realm. Yadin-Israel worries that this sort of influence cannot really undergird the sort of interpenetration and interdetermination required for real theurgy of *any* variety. *We* can't really be influencing God if we're just figments of his imagination! Anna Karenina didn't make Tolstoy cry, Tolstoy made *himself* cry thinking about a story. I'm not sure that I agree, but it's certainly an issue worth thinking about. I think that, theurgy thought of as emotional rather than mechanistic, sits well with the author-character model. If Yadin-Israel's concern *isn't* satisfied by my first response, we can claim that (2) it is *fictionally* true that there *is* sufficient interpenetration and interdetermination for theurgy to work; even if it isn't non-fictionally the case; this interpenetration might nevertheless be part of the *story* that God's telling. And if theurgy is *fictionally* effective, then it really will be effective for us in the fiction!

²⁰ My thanks to the editors of this volume for their helpful comments and encouragement. I am also grateful to the anonymous referees for this essay. David Black, Rabbi Herzl Hefter, Carl Mosser, Rabbi Eli Rubin, Daniel Rubio, and Azzan Yadin-Israel either read earlier drafts or discussed many of the issues in this essay with me. I'm grateful to them all. Thanks also to Dean Zimmerman for conversation on some of the topics of this essay. Dean is a tremendous mentor, friend, and teacher, who is also the director of the Center for the Philosophy of Religion at Rutgers University, which supported my research for this essay.

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