George Rochberg, American Composer

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Chapter Four

Jewish Secularism as Ars Combinatoria: 1954–87

I am an anomaly in American music, a kind of freak. A “European American” or an “American European.” Because I’m Jewish?

—George Rochberg (1982)

Rochberg’s compositional indictment of modernism in the Third Symphony would find its literary translation two years later in “Humanism versus Science” (1970). The essay lamented the replacement of “singing and dancing in the traditional musical sense” with “conscious counting” and the desire of modernist composers to achieve a “frozen” aesthetic—“sound events designed in time” but lacking human pulse and personal cosmologies. His diagnosis of the situation again targeted a cultural fascination with “mathematics, logic, and science [that] have taken on the rational madness of their scientific confreres,” with music now reduced to a “new form of applied science, a kind of acoustical technology.” At the conclusion of the essay, Rochberg described musical composition as being held hostage, expressing a fear that “any sense of the human limits of music has been lost.” He concluded with a passage from The Physicists (1961) by the Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt: “I am poor King Solomon. Once I was immeasurably rich and wise and god-fearing. . . . But my wisdom destroyed my fear of God, and when I no longer feared God, my wisdom destroyed my riches. Now all cities are dead over which I ruled; the empire which was entrusted to me is empty . . . I am poor King Solomon.”¹ It is the lamentation of a modern-day scientist who realizes too late the human consequences of his creations.

King Solomon is also a Jewish figure, and his deliberate presence in Rochberg’s text points to another lesser explored subject-position in the composer’s biography: his identification as a secular Jew. In a letter to Anhalt, he
described his relationship to Judaism as a “war [he had felt] in [him]self since [he] was fifteen to seventeen [years old],” and it begged of him many complex existential questions. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Rochberg 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 . . . that quality which made it possible to survive [the modern era] and be a Jew.”

At times, he felt his “Jewishness” was an intrinsic part of his humanity, and at other times he felt it was an external label affixed to him. As he remarked to Anhalt, “The [personal] quandary is hardly lessened when I remind myself of what Sartre said: a Jew is anyone others call a Jew.”

The question of how to address and represent Rochberg’s Jewish identity is further complicated by the nature of modern Jewish secularism itself—a complex, rich, varied, and subjective mode of identification that has been characterized as “diverse and fractious” because of its lack of a “shared consensus . . . and mutual recognition” among those in its identity group. As Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar argue, “Jewish secularism contains conflicting ideologies; so its ranks encompass a variety of Jewish nationalists, assimilationists, cultural cosmopolitans, and political universalists. As a result, teasing out and differentiating the secular from the religious and even more the irreligious from the areligious among [secular] Jews is a difficult task.”

One must resist the urge to search for or unveil what David Biale refers to as a hidden Talmudic mentality or essence in the works of a “secular thinker who happened to be Jewish or came from Jewish origins.” It is important not to cast the net too liberally and argue, as Zohar Maor has, that “every secular move is, essentially, a religious one.”

But as the full corpus of his work demonstrates, Jewish ideas and events were often important catalysts for Rochberg’s ideas about the spiritual nature of art, a realization that both broadens and particularizes one’s understanding of his humanistic positions. Throughout his life, Rochberg found himself drawn to various Jewish religious sources but was never fully satisfied with any one mode of Jewish spirituality. As a result, he sought spiritual answers in part through his reactions—whether positive or negative—to a diverse and intercultural set of Jewish symbols and texts, and even in his deepest moments of spiritual disengagement, subtle references to Jewish heritage are perceptible in his work. Such surfacings recall Biale’s provocative suggestion, inspired by a reading of Psalm 122, 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.’” Similarly, Rochberg’s appropriations of Jewish texts could be read as distinctly expressive of his secular spiritual orientation, one that allowed him the intellectual and creative freedom to select from the wide corpus of Jewish thought those discarded pieces that might form
a new cornerstone for his art—a process not unlike his theory of ars combinatoria itself.

In one extensive oral history interview, Rochberg is asked to begin with his birth in Patterson, New Jersey—a proposition that provokes amusement from the composer. Beginning there seems ill advised, he suggests, given that one is born out of history into the present. Rochberg reveals his genealogical roots to be Russian generally, Ukrainian specifically, and Jewish inherently. Both his mother and father hailed from the small city of Uman (south of Kiev), which boasted one of the largest Jewish populations in prewar Ukraine. The first piece of information Rochberg presents about Uman—that “the Germans had captured [it] along with the rest of the Ukraine”—immediately recalls a devastating period of Jewish persecution, including the massacres at Babi Yar and Janowska. The fate of Uman’s Jewish population was similarly tragic. The town was overrun during the German offensive known as Operation Barbarossa in the summer of 1941, at which time the Nazis established a segregated Jewish ghetto that they all but liquidated on Yom Kippur that same year. On April 22, 1942, Uman’s remaining Jews were killed in a massacre near the village of Grodzevo, a genocidal act from which the population never recovered. In 1959, only 5 percent of Uman’s population identified as Jewish, a figure that contrasts soberly with the robust prewar figures.

Rochberg’s initial situation of his family history within the Jewish tragedy of World War II is curious given that his family fled the region prior to 1914, but it reflects his long-standing identification with the war and its traumatic aftermath. The subject of his parents themselves constitutes a more delicate and complicated emotional terrain in some regards, and so he returns to it after gentle prompting. Rochberg explains that both his parents—who did not know one another at the time—were compelled to leave Uman because they felt “uncomfortable [and] the future . . . did not look too bright for all kinds of reasons,” not least of which was a rising tide of anti-Semitism that had already led to several small-scale pogroms. Their migrations were not without grave risks; Rochberg’s father was a member of the Russian Army, and desertion would have been met with the severest of consequences, especially for Jewish soldiers. Ultimately, he managed to flee the country with the help of the Ukrainian underground by disguising himself as a peasant woman and moving across the border with a set of false papers. He found his way to Germany and ultimately immigrated to the United States, taking up residence in Brooklyn—where he met his wife through mutual friends.

But Rochberg’s narrative is ultimately less concerned with his parents and more interested in connecting his own self-identity to his Jewish roots. As he comments later, “Uman was famous for two things [in Jewish history]: pogroms and musicians,” a statement that calls forth a formative memory.
When I announced to my family at the age of fifteen that I was going to be a composer . . . my father apparently remembered what the status of musicians was in [Uman], and they called them *klezmer* or *klezmerine*. [He depicted them as] people who toodled on clarinets, scraped on fiddles, banged a drum, and played for weddings, funerals, whatever. That’s the way he imagined it, and I guess he just couldn’t tolerate it.¹⁵

The exchange not only captures the familial pressures placed on Rochberg as a first-generation American, but it also speaks to what he perceives as a broader connection with Jewish history. Here, his Jewish identity is intertwined with historical events and expressive musical identities rather than with “the common rubrics of liberal pluralist difference, including race, class, and gender” or “the overarching notion of religion.”¹⁶ For all of these reasons, Rochberg retains a connection to Uman—as a musical center for Jewish creativity and a site of humanistic suffering.

As the scholar Laura Levitt observes, “The vast majority of Eastern European Jews who came to [America] at the turn of the [twentieth] century were the least educated, the poorest, and the most desperate.”¹⁷ Rochberg paints his parents in a similar light, partly to distinguish himself from an overbearing father against whom he struggled throughout his life. “[My family] were not peoples of means,” he shares, “these were not people with family traditions in the sense of achievement preceding them.”¹⁸ He notes that his parents continued to speak Russian at home, often when “they absolutely didn’t want us to know what was going on,” and they instructed him and his siblings in basic Yiddish and Jewish cultural practices, thus marking the family’s ethnic difference within an American context.¹⁹ And yet, Rochberg’s evaluation of his parents presupposes modern criteria regarding success and American assimilation, in that immigrants often “had a very different sense of what it might mean to be modern as they entered the United States, [bringing] with them a mixture of pride, shame, nostalgia, and joy in the Yiddish culture and politics they left behind.”²⁰ For Rochberg’s parents, the traditional cultures they passed along to their children were distinctly Eastern European and Jewish. They were embedded in what Levitt refers to as “secularized Jewish rituals”: the food they ate, the songs they sang, and the candles they lit on Friday evenings for the Sabbath dinner.²¹ Even the way they celebrated their firm economic integration into American culture was expressed in what Rochberg describes as an “old, sort of European” gesture: his mother’s demand that they buy a piano, a moment that forever changed the course of Rochberg’s life.²²

This time of Rochberg’s youth correlates with an important historical moment—the “flourishing of Jewish attempts to create a public and synthetic American Jewish identity”—and for many Eastern European Jews, American “modernity meant liberation from the restraints of a more stringent religious way of life.”²³ As a result, many maintained only vague relationships with Jewish
religious traditions, instead embracing cultural practices that were “familiar and comforting” even as they held “many, even contradictory meanings for those who performed them.” As Rochberg recalls, the family was never very religious and tended toward more cultural identifications:

My father was an atheist, although I don’t think he would have admitted it. My mother was a very naïve, wonderfully warm, sympathetic person, who had a kind of natural connection with certain aspects of the Jewish religion. . . . But it was not a strong tradition in the family, and I fell away from it rather quickly. . . . [After] my bar mitzvah . . . I just gave it up. I had no reason to continue it that I could think of then.

And yet, Rochberg never felt entirely free from his Jewishness in his teenage years, noting that before he went to college he “almost instinctively stayed away from all non-Jews, so strong was this feeling of differentness and strangeness inbred in me by my parents’ [distrustful] attitude.” Later, in his own family, he and his wife, Gene, consciously rejected Judaism as a religious mode of worship, but they continued to cultivate Jewish cultural rituals as part of their secular lives. In one journal entry from 1952, the composer provides an intimate window into one such moment on the evening of Rosh Hashanah: “Tonight for dinner Paul made the Star of David on a piece of shirt cardboard using a deep blue with white border. Gene lit two candles. It was a beautiful dinner.”

In 1954, Rochberg produced two substantial vocal works on Jewish themes in which he embedded musical homages to Schoenberg: *Three Psalms* for a cappella mixed chorus and *David the Psalmist* for tenor and orchestra. Schoenberg had been the aesthetic model for Rochberg’s serial works, but the affinity also had roots in a shared cultural identity. In essays and letters, Rochberg often mentioned Schoenberg’s Jewishness and his understanding that the modernist’s conversion to Protestantism was a secularist strategy to avoid the “distinct social and professional drawbacks” that came with being Jewish in Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century. Rochberg interpreted works such as *Moses und Aron* (1932) as evidence of Schoenberg’s latent spirituality and his awareness of the tension between the divine and the worldly: “No single work conveys better Schoenberg’s passionate belief in an unknowable and invisible God [as well as] his hatred for all false gods and false idols. In his search for ultimately spiritual truths, Schoenberg regained a cosmic view of man’s place in the universe.” Rochberg found Schoenberg’s search for faith “profoundly moving” and identified specifically with his “struggle to regain his roots in Judaism, his deep need to raise a protective barrier against the godlessness and loss of values of his generation.” He also saw the composer as caught in a similar aesthetic schism, trapped between two versions of himself: one “compelled to leave behind whatever security [tonal] traditions offered [and the other] always longing for them.”
Accordingly, allusions to Schoenberg appear in the *Three Psalms*. Each psalm is derived from a source row with the potential for “mirror inversions,” Rochberg’s phrase for the practice of hexachordal combinatoriality he particularly admired in the work of Schoenberg. Collectively, the texts express the steadfast love of God, request His guidance and presence during difficult times, and praise His greatness in the heavens. Ringer was intimately involved in the composition of the *Three Psalms*, providing Rochberg with translations, transliterations, and accentuation patterns for the Hebrew text at the composer’s request. As he noted, the *Three Psalms* also bore a resemblance to the “declamatory type of choral writing developed by Schoenberg in his last completed work, *De Profundis* [op. 50b].” This assertion makes sense, given the parallel structure of Schoenberg’s op. 50a–c—another set of three a cappella choral works based on religious themes written in the twelve-tone method—and the fact that Rochberg’s sketchbooks reveal that he considered using the source row for *De Profundis* for his own settings. Ultimately, Rochberg discarded the idea, but its mere consideration suggests that he envisioned his *Three Psalms* as connected to Schoenberg’s work.

Instances of Jewish self-identification also appear in the dedications of the *Three Psalms*, which Rochberg used to connect specific movements to important figures in his personal life. The first setting of Psalm 23 was dedicated to his parents, who might well have identified with its descriptions of God’s eternal presence during dangerous journeys and safe arrivals in new, peaceful lands. The second movement bore the name of the composer Hugo Weisgall, who was also of Jewish and Eastern European descent, had studied with Rosario Scalero at the Curtis Institute, and was on the Theodore Presser Company’s roster of composers. Both Rochberg and Weisgall had served in the Third Army during World War II—Weisgall as an assistant military attaché directly assigned to General Patton—which might explain Rochberg’s decision to dedicate Psalm 43 to his friend; the text is a spiritual battle hymn demanding vindication of the just and righteous in the struggle against evil. The final setting is Psalm 150, which Rochberg dedicated to his elder brother Samuel (“Rock”), whom he often credited with stirring his initial interest in composition. Notably, the figure at the center of Psalm 150 emerges as a music composer, one who gathers together trumpets and lyres, stringed instruments, and cymbals to celebrate the glory and power of God.

Rochberg’s intertwining of sacred and secular figures in his *Three Psalms* may have been inspired by a crucial source Rochberg consulted before embarking on the project: Chemjo Vinaver’s *Anthology of Jewish Music* (1953), which contained the only published score of Schoenberg’s *De Profundis* at the time. In the volume, Schoenberg’s modern setting is somewhat of an anomaly, given that most of the other settings are transcriptions of traditional, folk, or liturgical music—much of it sourced from Ashkenazic repertoires. A similar
sacred-secular tension is captured in the artistry of the frontispiece, a drawing by the Jewish artist Marc Chagall. Ringer, who was intimately familiar with the volume, beautifully describes its symbolic significance:

In the forefront, [Chagall] placed the crowned head of King David, the “singer of Israel,” slightly bent forward, listening intently, eyes closed, to his own music. But he is not alone, nor is this all of him, for from his back, just below the shoulders, protrudes the much smaller figure of a caftan-clad Klezmer, a Jewish street-musician, attached to the Psalmist like a [conjunct] twin, playing his humble fiddle as he gazes across the roof-top outlines of an East European Shtetl.38

One cannot help but wonder whether Rochberg had been drawn to Chagall’s imagery: Did he identify with the difficulty of disentangling sacred and secular traditions, the feeling of being simultaneously conjoined with and estranged from Jewish history?39

The Three Psalms do not answer these questions directly, and neither do Rochberg’s journals, which jump (inconveniently for the historian) entirely over this period of creative work. But Rochberg’s David the Psalmist reveals him again to be fashioning a symbolic intertwining of sacred and secular topics from Jewish history. The composition consists of seven movements in which the tenor soloist performs three psalms attributed to King David as well as to the Shema Yisroel, the Jewish profession of faith.40 Rochberg structured the work around the Shema Yisroel, which he initially envisioned as a “ritornello” that would frame all three psalm settings (table 4.1).41 He composed two different dodecaphonic melodies for the Shema’s realization—one based on the row’s prime form and the other on its retrograde—which appear in movements one and five (P9) and three and seven (R9). Strategically, those texts that reflect Jewish suffering and fear—Psalms 6 and 57—are derived from a different row, but their musical and emotional otherness is surrounded by the comforting certainty of the Shema rows, resulting in two larger parallel units of music: movements 1–3 (A) and 5–7 (A’). Separating these structural units is Psalm 29, a confident song praising God for His divine omnipotence that uses a transposition of the Shema row (P5) for its musical realization. The result is a quasi-ternary form (ABA’) in which the musical material of the opening is reprised at the end after the intervening psalm setting.

The reiteration of the Shema Yisroel encases the poetic psalms, drawing them into concert with Jewish liturgical life. Moreover, Psalm 29 is recited regularly on the Sabbath, and one well-known midrash suggests that King David may have intended it as a model for the central daily prayer of rabbinic Judaism, commonly known as the eighteen benedictions.42 Thus, its appearance here alongside a central text of the Jewish liturgy could be read as a loose artistic representation of the Jewish service. But twentieth-century listeners might have
Table 4.1. Textual and hexachordal structures in *David the Psalmist* (1954)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Melodic content</th>
<th>Hexachords (Forte)</th>
<th>Ordered sets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>Shema Yisroel (I)</td>
<td>Row 1: $P_9$</td>
<td>6-20 + 6-20 “Ode to Napoleon” hexachord</td>
<td>$&lt;9T2165&gt;$</td>
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<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>Psalm 6</td>
<td>Row 2: $P_{11}$</td>
<td>6-Z44 + 6-Z19 “Schoenberg Signature” hexachord</td>
<td>$&lt;E87630&gt;$</td>
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<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>[instrumental version of Movement VII]</td>
<td>Row 1: $R_9$</td>
<td>6-20 + 6-20 “Ode to Napoleon” hexachord</td>
<td>$&lt;8734E0&gt;$</td>
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<td>$&lt;5612T9&gt;$</td>
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<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>Psalm 29</td>
<td>Row 1: $P_5$</td>
<td>6-20 + 6-20 “Ode to Napoleon” hexachord</td>
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<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>[instrumental version of Movement I]</td>
<td>Row 1: $P_9$</td>
<td>6-20 + 6-20 “Ode to Napoleon” hexachord</td>
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<tr>
<td>VI.</td>
<td>Psalm 57</td>
<td>Row 2: $R_{11}$</td>
<td>6-Z44 + 6-Z19 “Schoenberg Signature” hexachord</td>
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<tr>
<td>VII.</td>
<td>Shema Yisroel (II)</td>
<td>Row 1: $R_9$</td>
<td>6-20 + 6-20 “Ode to Napoleon” hexachord</td>
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detected another musical reference in Rochberg’s *David the Psalmist*—Arnold Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947), in which Schoenberg bears secondary witness to Jewish suffering during the Holocaust.\(^{43}\) Therein, the narrator relates the traumatic memory of his persecution in the Warsaw Ghetto, a memory that culminates in a men’s choir defiantly breaking forth into a sung dodecaphonic rendition of the Shema Yisroel. *David the Psalmist* might therefore also be read as referencing a more historical moment of Jewish suffering through its allusions to Schoenberg’s *Survivor*, thus presenting a more complex binding of moments from Jewish history.

The explicit homage to Schoenberg becomes more concrete when one considers the rows Rochberg selected for the piece. In the case of the four Shema settings as well as Psalm 29—the most overtly religious movements of the piece—Rochberg generates his rows from a single-source hexachord (6–20) famously associated with Schoenberg’s *Ode to Napoleon*, op. 41 (1942), a politically engaged piece of anti-fascist art written directly after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor.\(^{44}\) This musical allusion raises the historical specter of World War II within the work, given that the *Ode* sets a poem by Lord Byron that was intended as a protest against Hitler and his anti-Semitic crimes against humanity.\(^{45}\) Moreover, while sketching
the opening movement, Rochberg consulted the opening hexachord of *De Profundis* and rearranged its pitches to form a new ordered series that shared a common tetrachord <0561> with the heart of his Shema rows. Thus, embedded in Rochberg’s settings of the Shema Yisroel and Psalm 29 are intentional musical references to both Schoenberg’s late anti-fascist and spiritual corpus. The fact that Rochberg viewed Schoenberg in this vein—either as a figure of Jewish historical suffering or as a twentieth-century prophet—seems to be confirmed in the remaining settings of Psalms 6 and 57. In both, Rochberg sets their lamenting texts to variants of Schoenberg’s signature hexachord and its complement (6–Z44 and 6–Z19), thus directly referencing the Jewish modernist and his tragic mid-century struggle through musical symbolism.

Although Rochberg described *David the Psalmist* as holding a “special place in [his] heart as much for purely musical reasons as well as personal” ones, his interest in engaging with Jewish history in his compositional works continued only sporadically in the following years. He continued to play with the symbolic encoding of twelve-tone structures, including one instance in which he fashioned a hexachord from the word “ELOHIM,” the Hebrew name for God, for a possible fantasia (figure 4.1). But by the end of the decade, Rochberg had grown skeptical of such overtly “Jewish” symbols and began seeking more abstract cosmic manifestations of the divine. The decision was driven by an increasingly nihilistic and pessimistic outlook and deepened by a more personal tragedy: Paul’s death. His son’s suffering challenged Rochberg’s tenuous spiritual connection to Jewish rituals and faith, which he increasingly came to see as empty and meaningless. In 1963, he lashed out directly at God in a vivid diary entry: “God is dead and we live in an infinite misery. Job, you refused to curse God no matter what he did to you. A pleasant tale if I ever heard one. But we have no God anymore.”

As with any emotional divorce, however, his separation from Judaism was never final; it continued to surface throughout his lifetime in the guise of
Various philosophic questionings attached to other Jewish intellectual traditions. Three years after Paul’s death, Rochberg began to explore the mystical tradition of Kabbalah, an interest sparked by a series of conversations with Anhalt. In one letter written after the Six Day War of 1967, Anhalt confided intimately that he considered Rochberg part of a shared ancestral family. Rochberg movingly concurred, but on more mystical than ethnic terms: “We are brothers in mind and spirit based on a sense of human life and human art which reaches toward a larger vision of both, something cosmic in [the] ancient sense of the connection between man and the gods.”

His need for sincere human connection was acute; the struggle to cope with the weight of his son’s mortality and his own earthly existence had left him shattered, and Anhalt became a trusted confidant during this period.

In 1969, Anhalt recommended that Rochberg read the Zohar—regarded as a foundational text of Kabbalism—which he believed held many musical correspondences with Rochberg’s philosophy of *ars combinatoria*. Moshe Idel describes Kabbalism as an “overtly lingual type of mysticism [that] implicitly invests other sonoric activities with similar energetic qualities. It projects the energetic visions of language and music into the remote past in order to invigorate the present.” Notably, early Kabbalists such as the Rabbi Abraham Abulafia drew parallels between music and the mystical “technique of combination” to explain the prophetic experience, with the harmony between man and God described as akin to the sympathetic vibration between strings on two separate instruments (David’s *kinnôr* and a *nevel*) and the ecstatic act of communion likened to how music “gladdens the heart . . . by means of [revealing] the ‘hidden things which are found’”.

[Within the Kabbalah], music is seen . . . as influential. In the ecstatic Kabbalah, music induces a feeling of joy which contributes . . . to the occurrence of the prophecy; or, according to other, more philosophically oriented views, music is perceived as able to soften the soul and open it to a more spiritual type of perception. . . . Song [becomes] a spiritual energy, a way to respond to the divine with a human activity that affects the union between the two higher sefirot.

The noted scholar Gershom Scholem further explains that one challenge for the Kabbalist is to “perceive all kinds of gross natural objects” and “admit their images into [one’s] consciousness,” ultimately using them as an imaginative catalyst to “facilitate a new state of mystical consciousness.” The combinatorial results would ultimately “throw open the way to God.”

Rochberg had engaged Kabbalistic sources well before Anhalt’s recommendation, albeit in a strictly literary format: the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, whose aesthetic ideas were one of the primary inspirations for Rochberg’s *ars combinatoria*. Borges was well-versed in the Kabbalah, often weaving its ideas
into his stories and poems. As the scholar Jaime Alazraki describes, explicit references to Kabbalist literature surface throughout Borges’s literary endeavors, as in this passage from his poem “The Golem”:

El cabalista que ofició de numen
A la vasta criatura apodó Golem—
Estas verdades las refiere Scholem
En un docto lugar de su volumen

The Kabbalist from whom the creature took
Its inspiration called the weird thing Golem—
But all these matters are discussed by Scholem
In a most learned passage in his book.

Like Borges, Rochberg had read Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, and he seized on correlations between the mystical experience and his own creative process. Particularly attractive was Scholem’s description of Jewish mysticism as emphasizing a “certain communal way of living and believing” that transcended place and time. In the mind of the Kabbalist, God and the cosmos were transformed from fixed objects of dogmatic knowledge into sensations of trans-temporal experience and intuition.

These ideas—boldly underscored in his personal copy of Scholem’s book—appealed to Rochberg, who was concurrently theorizing a new form of musical humanism that would similarly reject the hyper-rationalized dogma of the high modernists. In envisioning this new attitude toward art, he described the act of musical composition as a mystical symbol in itself, one defined by what Scholem called an “ecstatic experience” in which one encountered “the absolute Being in the depths of one’s own soul.” Akin to the Kabbalists, Rochberg deeply believed that such “mystical tendencies, in spite of their strictly personal character, [could lead] to the formation of new social . . . communities” and thus, in Rochberg’s mind, to new levels of human consciousness and models for artistic behavior.

This tendency to “interpret human life and behavior as symbols of a deeper life, the conception of man as a micro-cosmos and of the living God as a macro-anthropos,” became a driving theme in Rochberg’s private writings. He wrote privately about how he experienced musical visions in dreams—what he saw as an antithetical process to rational thought—and drew distinct parallels between God’s creative power and his own ability to bring forth music from nothingness. 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 . . . We were not sent here, if we were sent at all, to create science, sociology . . . but to make over ourselves and therefore the world through spirit.

In his scholarly work, Scholem attempted to “connect the religious and the secular dialectically, to preserve their opposition to each other but nevertheless
show how the one generated the other,” and one might say the same thing about Rochberg’s theologizing. A work of twentieth-century art, in his mind, still took inspiration from a non-material spiritual ideal—a “soft” version of romanticism that included “all kinds of wonderful dream images of life”—but its expression was ultimately conditioned by the secular rejection of idealism, thus resulting in a profane “hard” romanticism. The result is “paradoxically an entirely secular, or human, creation, but one whose practitioners believe has its source in an unknowable, incomprehensible God.”

Variations on these mystical themes found direct translation in Rochberg’s essays, including “The Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Survival,” written in 1969. The essay opens with a litany of secular interlocutors: Beethoven and Ives (music), Albert Einstein and John von Neumann (science), Matthew Arnold and Susan Sontag (criticism), William Blake and Rainer Maria Rilke (poetry). But Rochberg closes the essay with a more mystical vision of the ideal creator as a premodern composer with a “profound relation to the cosmos” who believes in the “transcendent nature of private vision[s]” and seeks to reconnect humanity with the “alpha language of the central nervous system,” which Rochberg believed was a secondary derivative of the cosmos. Such a figure would not only rescue art from rationalism but would also return art to its earliest cosmological roots and thus reveal “how far we have wandered from home—and that it is time to try to get back, not to some historical past, but to an awareness of the mysterious creatures we are.” Such ideas became further associated with Jewish figures in a letter to Anhalt, in which 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.” Such metaphors reappeared in the 1970s, most prominently in “Humanism versus Science” (1970), in which he decried the elevation of the scientific rationalists to the status of “secular saints” who cast themselves as being as omniscient as God himself. A mystical and humanistic position, he averred, envisioned the universe instead as a more mysterious and ineffable source of cognition. He sensed a similar orientation in his compositions of the time, as he candidly shared with Anhalt shortly after the successful premiere of his Third String Quartet (1972): “I feel I have entered into an entirely new and different phase of existence but can hardly describe or depict it for you or myself. It affects my whole outlook on life and music . . . [and] has brought me to the center of my obsession with music—holy music—yet I feel totally inadequate to find the way to formulate in pattern and design and structure what grips me. . . . Perhaps in time it will emerge.”

In 1973, Rochberg composed two works that merged his nascent ideas about mysticism with non-Western sources of inspiration: *Imago Mundi* and *Ukiyo-E*. The works were inspired by a visit to Japan that summer, during which he and
Gene encountered what he described as “the old Japan of temples and shrines, *Noh* and *Kabuki*.\(^70\) The experience of *Noh* in particular made a deep impression on Rochberg, who described its gradual dramaturgy as a quasi-spiritual experience: “That dreamlike slowness cast a spell over me . . . it is closer to an otherworldly pace, a form of floating, motionless motion . . . [that] reaches into the core of existence itself.”\(^71\) As he shared with Anhalt, “the glimpse I had, especially of the old culture, made an indelible impression,” such that the “spirit of Japan entered me so strongly” and drew forth dream-like visions that ultimately became the basis for both works.\(^72\) In his autobiography, he described the process in overtly mystical terms: “[The Japanese-inspired works] are imagistic: personal, subjective evocations, each in its own way a dreaming consciousness’s internal picturing through musical images . . . moving freely in a fluid space (rather than time) unanchored from gravity . . . closer to floating than anything else imaginable.” In Rochberg’s mind, both compositions were less concerned with external realities than with internal revelations “wrought of nameless and nameable images.”\(^73\)

In the case of *Imago Mundi*, some of those “nameable images” appear in the guise of sonic allusions that connect the work to a broad range of musical and spiritual associations.\(^74\) Within the ethereal aesthetic of *gagaku* music—a genre associated with the Japanese court but also performed in sacred contexts—Rochberg seized on its suspended timbres and pentatonic modes, connecting them (whether consciously or not) to well-known canonical works.\(^75\) One hears evocations of Igor Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and its pagan celebration of the connection between human rituals and nature (notably the “Spring Round Dances” movement), as well as the reverberating nocturnal atmospheres of Béla Bartók’s *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* (especially the third movement).\(^76\) The inspiration for the first *Ukiyo-E*, however, was more traditionally imagistic in the mystical sense of the term; it appeared to Rochberg as a vision: “I saw [the] harp in front of me . . . slowly pulled it toward me until it rested in the crook of my neck and right shoulder, and began to hear the quality of the music I wanted. It’s as though I dreamed [it] into existence.”\(^77\) As art historian Jack R. Hillier notes, the method of painting known as *Ukiyo-E* was similarly impulsive in that it “did not draw from nature but stored images in the painter’s mind until the mood was upon him to paint,” brought on by “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”\(^78\) Rochberg appears to have been aware of the genre’s imagistic roots, a quality he connected to his own conception of “visual magic that converts the natural world and people into a sense of what may lie behind reality.” The result was an image of the world “not as static, fixed forms of ‘reality’ but as floating pictures of radiant qualities.”\(^79\)

While Rochberg notes that the two works intersect at the axis of cross-cultural imaging, they also point to the composer’s interest in mystical and metaphysical ideas, an interest he would pointedly tie to Kabbalistic thinkers in the
In 1977, Rochberg read Ringer’s latest musicological article, “Arnold Schoenberg and the Prophetic Image in Music.” Rochberg was fascinated by this new account of Schoenberg’s spirituality, including his connection to the “old masters of the kabbalah” and his desire to “draw the Divine into the earthly realm” and thus create “in the strong and courageous solitude of the mystic.” As Ringer argued and Rochberg believed, Schoenberg conceptualized art as “the prophetic conscience of modern man,” and while works like Moses und Aron had seemed preoccupied with the “relevance of biblical morality [and] law,” Ringer suggested that Schoenberg ultimately believed that “music conveys a prophetic message revealing a higher form of life.”

Increasingly, Rochberg had also come to see music as charged with unconscious psychic energy and transformative power, a mind-set further encouraged by his reading of the sociological work The Meaning of Things, coauthored by his then son-in-law, Eugene Halton. In his journal, Rochberg recorded his reactions to the study, which took the form of mystical musings about his earthly purpose. “We are put here to realize consciousness,” he wrote, “to perceive both the internal and the external, and to see the connection that binds them like two steel bands.” From these ideas, he derived renewed excitement and energy, the sense that he was “on the threshold of a new effort—to compose directly from my deepest experience and awareness, [my] deepest sense of the spirit that informs the universe.”

During this period, Rochberg steeped himself in a wide range of mystical literature, ranging from poetry and fiction to more historical studies. In 1982, the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge inspired his essay “The Marvelous in Art,” in which Rochberg suggested that modern audiences were hungry for a realm that pointed away from “the literal to the imagination, the primary energy that created and sustains the universe.” In a related passage, Rochberg argued against what he perceives as a false dichotomy—that of “corporeal” and “incorporeal”—and instead suggested that the language of human consciousness, including music, is merely another expression of world consciousness. Rochberg pursued this line of thinking after reading Walter Benjamin’s “On Language as Such, and on the Language of Man,” which he found particularly compelling for its assertion that “every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language.” “So in that sense,” 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.”

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?” His analysis was certainly perceptive, for regardless of whether Rochberg realized it at the time, both Coleridge and Benjamin were well-versed in the Kabbalah and its mystical envisioning of cosmos. As Tim
Fulford has uncovered, Coleridge had read core Kabbalistic texts and “owed much of this mystical thinking” to his Kabbalistic explorations. Benjamin also had ties to the Kabbalah through Scholem, who was one of his closest friends and intellectual advisers. But Rochberg’s focus was never exclusively or intentionally Kabbalistic, and as he cast his intellectual net wider, he necessarily began to engage with the broader phenomenon of mysticism in various cultures. A selection of titles he read in 1984 demonstrated his wide-ranging curiosity—Hans Jonas’s academic study, *The Gnostic Religion* (1958); Doris Lessing’s mystical novel, *Shikasta* (1979); Indries Shah’s scholarly volume, *The Sufis* (1964)—and 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.”

At the time Scholem published his magnum opus in 1941, the European situation had turned catastrophic, pushed to ideological extremes by fascism. Writing in the 1970s and 1980s, Rochberg similarly identified scientific rationalism—now manifested in the guise of materialism, academicism, and spiritual exhaustion—as the scapegoat behind the continued dehumanization of art. And yet Rochberg refused to see the situation as hopeless. In one passage from his 1985 essay “Can the Arts Survive Modernism,” he identified 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.

In the past, religion might have filled the gap for human beings, but Rochberg argued for an aesthetic alternative. As he mused in his journal, “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.” The creative bond connecting music, composer, and cosmos was a spiritual truth for Rochberg, who believed along with the Kabbalists that “man is a spiritual emanation in toto, mind as well as body,” a conviction that inspired him to fashion his own mystical creed: “Do I 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.”

The mid-1980s saw a shift in his focus, from mysticism to the more legalistic debate against iconic representations of God as laid out in the Second Commandment. In his next manuscript, “The Iconography of the Mind”
(1985–86), Rochberg described what he perceived as the false divide between Jewish iconodules and iconoclasts, noting that both shared the common belief that “an image was closely connected with its prototype.” This realization confirmed for him the undeniable spiritual power behind sacred images—a force that inspired either adulation or fear in the eyes of its beholder—and the relative closeness of the two positions. In the text, Rochberg mapped the two positions onto the two hemispheres of the brain, a neurological model for his philosophy of the mind. On the one side, he argued, there is the older instinctual brain that harbors a deep connection to the “interior world of human consciousness, a world of dreams and sleep, of images and pictures, of memories, of feelings, desires, and emotions.” On the opposite side, the more immature scientific brain “rules against subjectivity and its [iconic] states” and raises external reality to “unassailable primacy . . . through pre-determined, rationally sanctioned methods.”

At first, Rochberg characterized the two brains as locked in a “constant war” with one another, but he later attempted to reconcile the two sides as joint participants in an ultimate spiritual realization. Although he believed the central nervous system could function both as a neurological and a spiritual center, he valued the instinctual brain for its ability to access an “inner world of images” that bypassed the mind’s intellectual faculties and connected directly to the subconscious. Inspiration, he argued, need not always be a visual image—one might also experience it as sound or touch—but it must always be inwardly sensual in nature: “Before [they] can project their images onto the world around them [composers] must all develop their innate capacities to ‘see’ inwardly in their mind’s eyes.” The process was akin, in his mind, to the Hindi concept of maya, a term Rochberg translated as “illusion” but which also refers to the acts of “making and finding.”

Having explored the iconic mind, Rochberg devoted his next manuscript entirely to the subject of what he perceived as the iconoclastic threat against Jewish creativity. “The Second Commandment and Idolatry” (1987) traces the consequences of Moses’s explicit prohibition—“Thou shalt not make a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or in the earth beneath”—for artists working in the modern era. He warned that the prophet’s legalistic insistence on moral purposiveness “deanimated the world of natural phenomena” and implicitly sanctioned “the pursuit of rational thought” over all other modes of worship. Such a directive prized an analytical process of “instruction and commentary” above artistic modes of representation and figuration.

For Rochberg, the ritualization of iconoclasm had transformed Judaism into a more rigorous religion, by which he meant it had become less flexible and more unyielding in its promotion of rationalist thinking. In framing the Exodus narrative as they did, the iconoclasts had “created a God whose otherness...
consisted in utter detachment from the world of man and nature.” The impact of this divine objectification was not merely cosmological, he argued, but phenomenological: “The Israelite mind, thus forced in on itself, grew to see the phenomenal world as separate, outside representational limits. Not only was God the Other; nature too now became an ‘other’ realm, distinct as a creation of the supreme will of the Lord but separate and separated from man.” By widening the metaphysical gap between God and the universe, iconoclasm had prepared the way for rationalism, which ultimately caused images to become “rendered more objectively, and therefore more [prone] to rational comprehension and demystification.”

Rochberg asserted that this biblical path had ultimately resulted in the secular schism between humanism and science. Iconoclasm did not merely refuse the image; it disallowed “any further trafficking with the being and spirits whom the pagans knew.” The results were catastrophic, in his opinion; they made “men’s minds much poorer in content, allowing only a God and his laws.” As Rochberg elaborated in strikingly postmodern terms in his final essay on the topic, “Iconoclasm and Fear of the Image” (1987):

Rationalism seeks to produce closed systems or worlds, to put clearly defined and delimiting boundaries around them. The mental image, as much an emanation of mind as [of] the world, challenges these goals of reductionist, structuralist, foundationalist logics by its very nature. . . . Among other things, the mental image is unpredictable in emergence, imponderable to unambiguous meaning and understanding, and incalculable to logical analysis. Such qualities militate against certainty, closure, limits, and boundaries. Instead, they are more likely to produce ambiguity and its relativisms, while blurring boundaries or opening them up to indelible limits.

This final essay also demonstrates the maturation of Rochberg’s dichotomous thinking since “Humanism versus Science.” Toward the conclusion of the essay, he envisions a reconciliatory culture that would make sense of existence in the “fullest human terms, replete with the rational tools of logical-analytical thought” while also admitting “the uses of imagination [and] a revitalized and renewed sense of cosmic connectedness” to create “every conceivable variety of mental and material imagery.” As he conceded in the final strokes, the time had come to abandon his earlier dichotomous metaphors, for in the struggle between the image and the word “there can be no clear-cut victor because both are vital signs of human consciousness.”

This compromise was inspired in part by Rochberg’s increasing skepticism about the fracturing of human existence, especially at a time when his deepest inclinations were toward “wholeness, the oneness of man, of the universe, of what others call ‘God’ but I think of as ‘world consciousness.’” This change
in perspective could explain why Rochberg ultimately suppressed these essays, sharing them only with Anhalt, who invested them with further Kabbalistic significance. 112 “Our word-receptacles are inadequate means whereby to encapsulate the divine (read: cosmic, human, scientific, artistic) essence,” his friend replied. “No wonder they burst, and all that remain are the debris of sparks and the shards. . . . But a latter-date kabbalist said that all [the] sparks and the shards express the physical and metaphysical. The two are but two sides of what is given.”113

Rochberg responded in agreement, writing that he increasingly saw the separation of word and image as impractical, just as he found it impossible to separate the various parts of the self. 114 The conversation ultimately became a discussion about being Jewish in a secular age, with Rochberg wondering whether the iconoclasm of Moses and his followers had been a reflection of their own sense of cultural otherness: “Were [they]—and subsequently the Jews of Europe and America—‘alienated’ or ‘self-alienated?’” Rochberg felt the dilemma personally, adding that he wondered if “buried under layers and layers of secularized living” there existed a “kind of ‘genetic’ suffering that comes with being born a Jew.” 115 Anhalt admitted that he was also struggling with coming to terms with all sides of his Jewish past. “Instead of wanting to learn to become a better articulated Jew, in his Jewishness,” he wrote, “I want to do something else. I want to understand my very specific reality, which includes my Jewishness and being at peace with my entire past, even if that part includes a great disconcern for Jewishness. Much of my life consisted of interacting with non-Jews, and I like many of them, learned much from them; they were, are, and will remain parts of myself.”

The question Anhalt had raised—about retaining a “personal sense of Jewishness while living among non-Jews”—stirred Rochberg, who responded forcefully with his “abhorrence of the religion of Judaism, its narrow-chested, nationalistic legalisms, rituals, tribal echoes,” complaints he later abstracted to “all orthodox religions of whatever stripe.”117 But his provocations ultimately gave way to a more nuanced position that interwove both Jewish and secular sources:

I am religious, my life is dominated by a sense of the awesomeness of whatever powers fashioned this incredible universe and maintains it. I think more than anything I relate very strongly to the American poet Robinson Jeffers’s view: that “God” is unconcerned with man, and that man is only a small part of what is. . . . If we can discover what it is in our neurological makeup that determines our sleeping and waking hours, our passion for the arts, our ability—so natural—to love, our power to sustain this weak reed that we are against forces stronger than we are . . . we shall eventually learn much that [the] old sciences and humanities have been either unable to talk about or even show any serious interest in. 118
As the composer expressed to Anhalt in 1988, “I tend to think sometimes that [my Jewish heritage] has worked in curious ways, and I’m not sure I can define exactly what those ways are.”\textsuperscript{119} On one level, his perplexity reminds us of the complex intersectionality at the heart of human existence and experience, but it also reveals his ambivalence as a type of secularized freedom, one that allowed him to borrow freely from a broad range of Jewish and mystical traditions. Indeed, the manner in which Rochberg affixed Jewish ideas and symbols to his work shows him to be participating in what Lawrence A. Hoffmann calls a “more interesting tale of [Jewish] secularity, religion, and spirituality, coexisting in interesting ways.”\textsuperscript{120}

Such observations also offer a fresh perspective on Rochberg’s relationship to modernity, in that the secular Jewish identity he claimed for himself was in many ways the direct result of historical events of the twentieth century. In the case of Rochberg, his rejection of traditional religion was founded not only on deep ideological objections but also on his family’s social experience of modernism through the phenomena of secular education, urbanization, and migration. And yet it was through his firsthand engagement with contemporary Jewish history—most notably his experience as a soldier in World War II and his recognition of the Holocaust as a specifically modern and Jewish catastrophe—that he came to pointedly critique the same modern culture that had facilitated his own spiritual conversion. As such, Rochberg’s complicated and shifting relationship with Judaism underscores Biale’s firm belief that “religion and secularism in modernity are deeply implicated in each other,” with their “contemporary entanglement owing something to the way the secular emerged out of the religious, not so much its polar negation as its dialectical product.”\textsuperscript{121}

But as moments in Rochberg’s life reveal, the dialectic could also work the other way, with the religious emerging out of sources that appeared more secular in their orientation, such as literature, poetry, neuroscience, and even Japanese court music. As Rochberg once reflected, the “supreme philosophic/metaphysical question” at the heart of his conversations with Anhalt had always been “the problem of untying the knot of being Jewish and human all at the same time.” As he wrote in an unpublished essay about his friend:

What Jewishness is as a condition of being human, all too human, still eludes me. Still in the very nature of things I know I am Jewish. But certainly not for religious reasons. Nor for reasons of race. . . . Isty and I have written and talked much to each other about these matters. Like virtually all of the most important things that preoccupy human minds and hearts these are largely, if not entirely, unresolvable, mysterious, refractable.\textsuperscript{122}

Their letters had always contained intimate and self-reflective conversations about God and nature, art and man. As Rochberg shared, such conversations
functioned as a clarifying mirror in which “I not only see myself, but also the world I inhabit, reflections which make it possible for me to see more imaginatively that which is.”  

Anhalt responded in kind, likening their friendship to a reflective prism that revealed the “great richness, depth, and passions” of their souls.  

It was one of the greatest spiritual relationships of his life, as Rochberg lovingly shared in one of his most intimate closings: “So now we sit on the mountain top together and survey life and comment to each other on what we see (and hear), what we think meaningful (still) or not. . . . Mostly I’m struck (again) by the power of intuition. There’s still much to write, but I’ll leave it for my next letter.”