

Understanding Walter Benjamin's Theological-Political Fragment

Author(s): Eric Jacobson

Source: *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2001), pp. 205-247

Published by: Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40753285>

Accessed: 17-10-2015 02:20 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Jewish Studies Quarterly*

<http://www.jstor.org>

Understanding Walter Benjamin's *Theological-Political Fragment*

ERIC JACOBSON

Die Geschichte ist der Kampf zwischen den Begeisterten und den Trägern, den Zukünftigen und den Vergangenen, den Freien und Unfreien. Die Unfreien werden stets den Kanon ihrer Gesetze uns vorweisen können. Wir aber werden das Gesetz, unter dem wir stehen, noch nicht nennen können. Daß es Pflicht ist, fühlen wir.¹

In the early writings of Walter Benjamin, history is an unending battle between past and future, between the right of law and the right to establish law, between the history of the conquered and that of the conqueror, in which both past and present are governed by laws not their own. Accompanying a history of legal tyranny and subjugation, he submits there is a past which contains its own living law, a law insurmountable by worldly dictates, pertaining to historical occurrences and their hidden structure, which he seeks to protect here in this early formulation on the work of Gerhard Hauptmann. To reveal this obligation is apparently beyond the capacity of the critic in 1913. Yet after a lengthy period of theological and political reflection, the main currents of this law reemerge as a philosophy of history in the terse and rather thesis-like *Theological-Political Fragment* of 1921.

This theological and political "Fragment" begins where most tracts on history conclude. Yet the end of history here is not an end formed by an outburst of cumulative reason, nor by the might of a worldly empire whose sovereignty rests on the shoulders of the defeated,

¹ "History is the battle between the fervent and the lethargic, between those of the future and of the past, between the free and unfree. The unfree are continuously able to present to us the canon of their laws. Yet we are not able to name the law under which we stand. We feel this to be an obligation." "Gedanken über Gerhart Hauptmanns Festspiel." Walter Benjamin "Gedanken" bei Gerhart Hauptmanns Festspiel," in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band II.1, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991, 60. Henceforth *GS*.

but by the Messiah who completes all historical occurrence and repatriates all the downtrodden. It points to the conclusion of a temporal and spatial plane, meaning both an end to past and future as well as the division of this world from the next. The end of history connotes here a messianic understanding of the unfolding of worldly events, whose approach is juxtaposed to the empty resolution of history – represented in the history of the worldly victorious. A messianic understanding, termed mystical in Benjamin's text, strives to reveal an abstract representation of the divine kingdom in theological terms, or utopia in its anarchist counterpart. The question of human agency is at the center of his analysis concerning the relationship between the divine and profane worlds. The mediating tension between the two is understood as giving rise to a dynamic in which an event in one realm is shown to have an effect in the other. This dynamic is then characterized in the form of a messianic drama, where the nature and actions of the individual takes shape with the decline of all spatial and temporal parameters. The focus of the tragic hero is thus the redemptive act, viewed as worldly activity which inadvertently establishes the conditions of eternity.

Before presenting an in-depth account of the elements which constitute this messianic conception of history, let us turn briefly to the text and the controversy which surrounds it. The following is a complete reproduction:

Theologisch-politisches Fragment [Adorno's Title, 1955]

Erst der Messias selbst vollendet alles historische Geschehen, und zwar in dem Sinne, daß er dessen Beziehung auf das Messianische selbst erst erlöst, vollendet, schafft. Darum kann nichts Historisches von sich aus sich auf Messianisches beziehen wollen. Darum ist das Reich Gottes nicht das Telos der historischen Dynamis; es kann nicht zum Ziel gesetzt werden. Historisch gesehen ist es nicht Ziel, sondern Ende. Darum kann die Ordnung des Profanen nicht am Gedanken des Gottesreiches aufgebaut werden, darum hat die Theokratie keinen politischen sondern allein einen religiösen Sinn. Die politische Bedeutung der Theokratie mit aller Intensität gelegnet zu haben ist das größte Verdienst von Blochs "Geist der Utopie".

Die Ordnung des Profanen hat sich aufzurichten an der Idee des Glücks. Die Beziehung dieser Ordnung auf das Messianische ist eines der wesentlichen Lehrstücke der Geschichtsphilosophie. Und zwar ist von ihr aus eine mystische Geschichtsauffassung bedingt, deren Problem in einem Bilde sich darlegen läßt. Wenn eine Pfeilrichtung das Ziel, in welchem die Dynamik des Profanen wirkt, bezeichnet, eine andere die Richtung der messianischen Intensität, so strebt freilich das Glückssuchen der freien Menschheit von jener messianischen Richtung fort, aber wie eine Kraft durch ihren Weg eine andere auf entgegengesetzt gerichtetem Wege zu befördern vermag, so

auch die profane Ordnung des Profanen das Kommen des messianischen Reiches. Das Profane also ist zwar keine Kategorie des Reichs, aber eine Kategorie, und zwar der zutreffendsten eine, seines leisesten Nahens. Denn im Glück aber erstrebt alles Irdische seinen Untergang, nur im Glück ist ihm der Untergang zu finden bestimmt. – Während freilich die unmittelbare messianische Intensität des Herzens, des innern einzelnen Menschen durch Unglück, im Sinne des Leidens hindurchgeht. Der geistlichen *restitutio in integrum*, welche in die Unsterblichkeit einführt, entspricht eine weltliche, die in die Ewigkeit eines Unterganges führt und der Rhythmus dieses ewig vergehenden, in seiner Totalität vergehenden, in seiner räumlichen, aber auch zeitlichen Totalität vergehenden Weltlichen, der Rhythmus der messianischen Natur, ist Glück. Denn messianisch ist die Natur aus ihrer ewigen und totalen Vergängnis.

Diese zu erstreben, auch für diejenigen Stufen des Menschen, welche Natur sind, ist die Aufgabe der Weltpolitik, deren Methode Nihilismus zu heißen hat [GS II:203].

Translation of the Theological-Political Fragment

First the Messiah completes all historical occurrence, whose relation to the messianic (in this sense) he himself first redeems, completes and creates. Therefore nothing historical can intend to refer to the messianic from itself out of itself. For this reason, the kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set toward a goal. Historically seen, it is not goal but end. Thus the order of the profane cannot be built on the idea of the kingdom of God; theocracy, therefore, has no political, but only religious significance. To have repudiated the political meaning of theocracy with all intensity is the greatest service of Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia*.

The order of the profane has to be established on the idea of happiness. The relation of this order to the messianic is one of the essential elements in the teachings of historical philosophy. It is the precondition of a mystical conception of history, whose problem permits itself to be represented in an image. If one directional arrow marks the goal in which the dynamic of the profane takes effect and another, the direction of messianic intensity, then clearly the pursuit of happiness of free humanity strives away from every messianic direction. But just as a force is capable, through its direction, of promoting another in the opposite direction, so too is the profane order of the profane in the coming of the messianic kingdom. The profane, therefore, is not a category of the kingdom but a category – that is, one of the most appropriate – of its most quiet nearing. For in happiness everything earthly strives for its decline and only in happiness is the decline determined to find it. While clearly the unmeditated messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner, individual person, passes through tragedy, in the sense of suffering. To the spiritual *restitutio in integrum*, which introduces immortality, corresponds a worldliness that ushers in the eternity of the decline and the rhythm of this eternal passing-away, passing-away in its totality – worldliness passing-away in its spatial but also temporal totality – the rhythm of messianic

nature is happiness. For messianic is nature from its eternal and total transience.

To strive for this, even for those stages of humanity which are nature, is the task of world politics whose method is called nihilism.²

Benjamin's *Theological-Political Fragment* presents a discrete framework to evaluate his early political and theological theory of history and messianic concept of redemption in the context of the early writings.³ In 1920–1921, the years in which this sketch of a theological politics is suspected to have been written, the gaping wounds of the carnivorous First World War had yet to heal, followed by the eruption of the short-lived revolutions and general strikes in Munich and Berlin. The array of support for the war, from Social Democrats to the intellectual and political leadership of the Jewish community, most notably Martin Buber, contributed to an atmosphere of despair regarding the notions of allegiance, moral fortitude and political agency. The growing influence of Soviet Marxism after the Russian Revolution also added to a state of confusion concerning ends and means.

Most readers have been inclined to interpret historical events as having had a considerable effect on Benjamin's political writings.⁴ The

² Note on the translation: Several points in this text makes a natural rendering rather impossible and when feasible as a translation, only with substantial clarification. Surely the first translator was aware of these problems (*Reflections*, Schocken: 1976) but remained unable to address the ambiguity of several phrases. For instance, the conjugational phrase "Darum" which appears four times in the first paragraph seems unable to be rendered easily in English, keeping the programmatic, rhythmic and cumulative effect of the original without introducing a monotonous tone. In the second paragraph, I have also tried to preserve the superlative within the genitive phrase "seines leistungsmäßigsten Nahens," which was lost in the Schocken version. Finally, the term "Glück" with its corresponding "Unglück" presents a problem to any translator. While the former may be rendered as happiness, it would be grounds for misunderstanding to render the latter misfortune, for while the term misfortune does convey the "unhappiness" of an event, it unwillingly also introduces the notion of fortune. Thus I have chosen the term tragedy, which seems to best express the meaning of "Unglück" in the context of Benjamin's early work, a point which I devote considerable attention to in this essay.

³ For two contrary opinions, see Michael W. Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*, Ithaca, NY, 1987, 59 and Jürgen Nieraad who places the "Fragment" largely in the context of the later writings in "Walter Benjamins Glück im Untergang: Zum Verhältnis von Messianischem und Profanem," *German Quarterly* 63, 1990, 222–232. See also Marion Picker, "Darstellung als Entsprechung. Die Idee, das Wort 'Glück' in Walter Benjamins 'Theologisch-Politischem Fragment'," in: *Undarstellbares im Dialog: Facetten einer deutsch-französischen Auseinandersetzung*, Thomas Bedorf et al. (eds.), Amsterdam-Atlanta, 1997, 117–126, who develops a literary-theological interpretation, while leaving the philological questions aside.

⁴ One could cite a dozen sources for the claim, e. g., that the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" from 1940 was written, in part, in response to the Hitler-Stalin pact.

“Fragment” seems no less the case. The curious oddity of this miniscule text, however, is the fact that naming this period has proven highly contentious. The “Fragment” was given its title by Adorno in the first edition of Benjamin’s writings in 1955 and has retained a place of controversy ever since. According to Adorno, he and his wife met Benjamin for the last time at the end of 1937/1938 in San Remo, Italy. Benjamin reportedly read them the text aloud, referring to it on that occasion as the “Newest of the New.” Adorno dated the text 1937 accordingly.⁵ Yet Scholem believed something quite different:

Ich halte es für unbezweifelbar, daß diese Seiten 1920–1921 im Zusammenhang mit der “Kritik der Gewalt” geschrieben wurden und noch keine Beziehung zu marxistischen Auffassungen unterhalten. Sie stellen einen metaphysischen Anarchismus dar, der den Ideen des Autors vor 1924 entsprach. Adorno datiert sie aus dem Jahr 1937 [...] Meine Antwort darauf ist, daß es sich um einen Witz handelt, um zu wissen, ob Adorno einen mystisch-anarchistischen Text für einen kürzlich geschriebenen marxistischen Versuch nehmen würde. Benjamin pflegte übrigens solche Experimente anzustellen.⁶

Beyond a commitment to historical accuracy, Scholem’s skepticism concerning the dating of the text had apparently much to do with the eager audience which sought to believe in an unbroken passage of the messianic idea into Marxism in 1937. Scholem, however, saw the text as being rather characteristic of an earlier period where Benjamin’s inclination toward articulating a “Philosophie des Judentums”⁷ and a metaphysical

⁵ There is also some evidence concerning the type of paper used in the manuscript which would correspond to the earlier period, but these findings cannot be considered conclusive. See *GS* II:946–9.

⁶ “I am rest assured that these pages were written in 1920–1921 in conjunction with the *Critique of Violence* and do not entertain any relationship with Marxism at the time. It exhibits a metaphysical anarchism which corresponded to the author’s ideas before 1924. Adorno dates the text from 1937. My response is that the date is a trick, in order to see if Adorno would mistake a mystical-anarchist text for a recently composed Marxist one. Benjamin, by the way, engaged from time to time in such experiments.” Taken from a letter from Scholem to the French editor of Benjamin’s work, dated November 11, 1970, (Walter Benjamin, *Mythe et Violence*, Paris 1971, 149). Originally in Irving Wohlfarth, “Immer radikal, niemals konsequent: in *Antike und Moderne. Walter Benjamin's Passagen*, ed. Norbert W. Bolz and Richard Faber, Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1986, 130. It is unfortunately not included in the published collection of Scholem’s letters.

⁷ See Scholem’s account of this statement in Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, I. Halbband 1913–1917, Karlfried Gründer and Friedrich Niewöhner (eds.), Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995, 391. Henceforth *Tagebücher* I. Scholem reproduces this journal entry in his *Walter Benjamin – Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975, 45. Henceforth *Freundschaft*.

anarchism loomed large upon his intellectual horizon. If one is to consider some of the formative literature of the early period, namely Ernst Bloch's *Geist der Utopie* (1919) and Franz Rosenzweig's *Stern der Erlösung* (1921) in relationship to the "Fragment," it does appear possible to place the text in the context of the early writings.⁸ In this respect, the focus of the following essay is to rework the *Theological-Political Fragment* back into the fabric of the early years, in order to allow the central categories of Benjamin's early political theology to come to the fore. These terms and categories will then serve as points of reference for further speculation, beginning with the concept of redemption in the idea of the Messiah.

The messianic state: does the Messiah initiate or consummate?

Denn es ist so, wie der Baalschem sagt, daß erst dann der Messias kommen kann, wenn sich alle Gäste an den Tisch gesetzt haben; dieser aber ist zunächst der Tisch der Arbeit und dann erst der Tisch des Herrn – die Organisation der Erde besitzt im Geheimnis des Reichs ihre unmittelbar einwirkende, unmittelbar deduzierende Metaphysik.

Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie* ⁹

⁸ To charter this course between the *Geist der Utopie* and several years of independent theological and political thought appears to have been the task, later cartographed and guided by the *Stern der Erlösung*. The relationship between Benjamin and Bloch, unlike Benjamin's single encounter with Rosenzweig in December 1922, was extensive and complex. It lies beyond the realm of the discussion here to attempt to explicate the myriad of overlapping affinities, influences, perhaps even rivalries between these two thinkers, which has already received scholarly attention. The importance of Bloch's book for Benjamin, however, as indicated in the reference in the text itself, points to a key influence which no interpretation of the "Fragment" can ignore. With regard to Rosenzweig, the influence is somewhat more determinable. In a letter to Scholem dated November 8, 1921, Benjamin writes of just completing a first reading of Rosenzweig's book, yet wanting to reserve judgment before a second round [Benjamin, *Briefe* I: 242]. The emphasis on evaluating the work and its structure raises the possibility that the "Fragment" was partly a first attempt at a close analysis of Rosenzweig in the context of his own theological speculations, which date from an earlier period. The importance of Rosenzweig for the "Fragment" was also recognized by Michael Löwy in his *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian thought in Central Europe*, London: Athlone, 1992, 101–102.

⁹ "It is therefore as the Baalschem says, that the Messiah is only capable of coming after all the guests are seated at the table. This table is firstly the table of labor, and only then the table of the Lord – the organization of the earth possesses its own unmediating effect and unmediating deductive metaphysics in the secrets of the kingdom." Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1st edition 1918, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971, also *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16. Page numbers follow each citation as *GdU*:411. I later discovered this passage marked in Scholem's edition from 1918, Scholem Library Jerusalem, No. 16253.

The Messiah consummating the messianic process as a conceptual tradition can be seen in many different sources, periods and schools of thought in Judaism.¹⁰ Whether in *Sefer Zerubbabel*, which features a Messiah consummating redemption in an ultimate battle,¹¹ or in the "Treatise on the Left Emanation" of Jacob ha'Kohen, in which the Messiah is again featured as a warrior set to extinguish the satanic embodiment of evil, the Messiah stands alone in the task of redemption. In both apocalyptic dramas, the Messiah enters as hero, Satan naturally as his opposer and history, the stage upon which the plot unfolds.¹² Humanity, however, plays no particular role in these two early narratives of redemptive activity. In either form, the Messiah "completes all historical occurrence" in solo. His actions are not dependent on worldly activity, but concentrated purely on conquering evil.

We witness a radical transition of this idea in the 16th century with the emergence of Lurianic Kabbalah. The notion of the consummation of redemption takes on an entirely new meaning here, one in which humanity now plays a very active role in its own redemption, even, one might say, in the redemption of God.¹³ The necessity of collective participation in redemption through worldly activity is indeed the hallmark of this new theory. The central position that the Messiah plays in

¹⁰ Eliezer Schweid, for example, defines the messianic idea as following four distinct and perhaps cumulative phases: (1) the onset of evil, (2) the necessity of suffering leading to an end, (3) prophetic visions of redemption, and (4) the restitution of a Davidic kingdom as redemption. See his "Jewish Messianism: Metamorphoses of an Ideal," in: *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements*, ed. M. Saperstein, New York: New York University Press, 1992, 61.

¹¹ For expository purposes, a few representative (but in no way exhaustive) post-biblical examples are given here. On *Sefer Zerubbabel* (ca. 7th century) in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 16. p. 1002ff; I. Levi in *REJ* 68, 1915, 129–60.

¹² On the "Treatise on the Emanation on the Left" see *The Early Kabbalah*, ed. Joseph Dan, New York: Paulist Press, 1986, 36, 151–183. In the *Zohar*, we find both a Messiah in rags and ha'Kohen's critical influence, in which the Messiah as warrior intervenes to stop human history, to the degree that human history is imbued with suffering and evil, and releases a meta-history from its imprisonment in falsehood.

¹³ See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1974, 244–286. In Nathan of Gaza, we see a strategic merger of the two ideas: humanity prepares prehistory, it can work to redeem the shards of divine light which have been broken off into sparks, yet only the Messiah can perform the final capturing of the last sparks which, when redeemed from their fallen state, bring on a redemption prepared for in every other way by human agency. On Sabbati Zevi, see Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 1974, 287–324, and his "Redemption through Sin," in: *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 1971, as well as his *Sabbati Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973. Perhaps the most interesting and creative development of Scholem's work on Zvi are to be found in the late, and as of yet, untranslated novels of the Japanese author Kenzaburo Oe, particularly *Cyûgaeri*, Tokyo: 1999.

the first two narratives becomes all but secondary here. What is important in Lurianic theory is the role of humanity in initiating the messianic age. The standard dimensions of Jewish Messianism – a Messiah without features, yet one performing distinct, predestinated historical acts – are naturally not lost to the people of Safad. Yet the role of human agency takes on new importance, heralding a revolutionary interpretation of redemption which has profoundly influenced the messianic idea in Judaism up to the present.

I present this summary of two particular stands of messianic thinking here, along with the opening allusion to the Baalshem found in Bloch's *Geist der Utopie*, to illustrate a central problem with which the "Fragment" begins: whether redemption is initiated prior to or only after the arrival of the Messiah. This difference is clearly essential to a messianic conception of history, for, in the latter, redemption is inaugurated by the Messiah alone, in whose hands all historical responsibility therefore rests. In the former, however, redemption is induced by the redemptive acts of the individual in the world. Although a participatory interpretation of redemption is the concern of the later portion of the "Fragment," as we shall see, the two conceptions of redemption remain largely unresolved. Nevertheless, the problem itself is undoubtedly the focus of Benjamin's speculations.

The order of redemption is therefore central to Benjamin's messianic idea. Yet whatever one might think of the author's early ambition to construct a philosophy of Judaism as Scholem reports, it is incumbent upon us to evaluate Benjamin's messianic idea within the context of Judaism if for no other reason than the statement that the kingdom of God cannot be established on earth, but only through a redemption which simultaneously occurs both in history and beyond it. Here we are compelled to distinguish Benjamin's ideas from those of Christian Messianism and theocracy. There are no references in the "Fragment," nor in the early writing, to a second messianic event linked to a first, to Jesus as the Messiah and the son of God, nor to any of the elements which constitute the basic tenants of Christian faith and distinguish it from Judaism.¹⁴ Belief in the authenticity of the Messiah as a means of individual ascension or salvation is not the focus of Benjamin's Messianism but rather the final conclusion of worldly suffering in a collec-

¹⁴ Benjamin's interest in the early Christians, expressed elsewhere in the early writings, does not lend support to the idea of the viewing his Messianism in a post-Judaic context. It is far more probable that Benjamin sought to read the early Christians in their Judaic element. This becomes readily apparent if one compares Benjamin's to Bloch's approach to Christianity in the *Geist der Utopie*. See footnote 74 in this essay.

tive and permanent end of history. Thus with the notion of the Messiah as consummator, expressed in the statement: "First the Messiah completes all historical occurrence," we turn our attention to theoretical components of Benjamin's Messianism in the context of Jewish tradition.¹⁵

Focusing now more specifically on Benjamin's notion of completion, we see the Messiah's actions directed to a final conclusion of history, in which the last remnants of bad actions are made good again. This is what is meant by the idea of all historical past being redeemed – the divine reparation of all actions in the world which went awry. These past events are historical for they were formed in the world. Rather than being forgotten, they are returned to their original state of wholeness.¹⁶

In this way, the idea of redemption ending historical time, since predicated by history itself, can be understood within the broader notion of historical completion. The end of historical time, however, is not to be confused with the end of history in a Hegelian sense. History's completion is here expressed not as "goal but end."¹⁷ While time generates various irreconcilable moments in history, redemption is its only complete and thus true end, rather than a goal set for it as a telos in history. Seen from a negative perspective, neither an earthly kingdom of God, the worker's state, nor bourgeois democracy can be pronounced as the end of a historical telos for Benjamin. Only an understanding which approaches history as events which face their end, unmitigated by any external, worldly preconditions, reflects a messianic conception in his view. An end which is placed in relationship to the creative act is an end which harbors no worldly telos, no self-generation, no intention, no motor of history – it is merely the inverse of beginning. Toward creation, it appears messianic, for it alone completes creation. A determinate end, which is understood in relation to creation and which is constituted as messianic, is therefore an end in redemption.¹⁸ When "be-

¹⁵ The Judaic dimension of Benjamin's thought is still bitterly contested in Germany today. The sometimes almost racial tone of the debate is a further indication that the effects of the Shoah on intellectual life are hardly a thing of the past.

¹⁶ This is the nature of messianic creation, which returns to its origins in the process of redemption, completes the remains, and constitutes itself at the same time, as it would be in an undivided divine realm.

¹⁷ As Benjamin states elsewhere in an early fragment: "Geschichte hat ein Ende aber kein Ziel" [GS VI:94].

¹⁸ Franz Rosenzweig, in his *Stern der Erlösung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988, formulates a similar conception of divine completion: "So wird er [Gott] bis zum Ende. Alles was geschieht, ist an ihm Werden [...] so ist jenes Werden Gottes für ihn kein Sichverändern, kein Wachsen, kein Zunehmen, sondern er ist von Anfang an und ist in jedem Augenblick und ist immer im Kommen [...]. "Gott ist ewig" bedeutet

ginning” can no longer remain indeterminate and, to be beginning, is distinguished from the moment in which it is no longer development but standstill, in which everything related to the state of “beginning” returns to itself, only then is there a “Vollendung des Werkes” in the sense of completion.¹⁹ Everything which is incomplete when redemption commences, springing forth from creation but still hanging on to its beginning, is returned back into itself.²⁰

A model to conceptualize the notion of a redemptive end in relation to creation can be found in *Der Stern der Erlösung* in the idea of the work of art.²¹ In the profane world, only the work of art is able to approximate a closed, finished state of completion and therefore to grasp the principle of end in its necessity and categorical integrity. End is categorical and historical, but as it reaches the aesthetic realm, it achieves the possibility to arrive as such and be complete. Through its inherent transformative dynamic, the work of art in the realm of the profane is able to comprehend the redemptive category of what Rosenzweig calls “das Fertigwerden.” By this, he seeks to show how the end of history can be understood in relation to a work of art. It occurs. Its self-differentiation appears no longer at the beginning but at the same time always contains the meaning of coming to a complete and final condition.²² Bloch also conceives of an end in the context of creation, such that a full and complete end in the *Geist der Utopie* is situated within worldly time, between past and future: “So hat also die Welt wie einen Anfang so ein Ende in der Zeit,” he writes, “weil sie nur als Prozeß greifbar ist, weil allein Geschichte die auftreffende, wesentliche Meth-

also: für ihn ist die Ewigkeit seine Voll-endung.” [*SdE* §264 (Citations refer to the paragraph, rather than the page number)]. Everything which takes place in Him is “be-coming,” says Rosenzweig; no growth as such, but simply impending arrival, his existence as “coming.” His eternity has no beginning and no end, which as categories can no longer maintain themselves as essentially different.

¹⁹ In his dissertation on the idea and the critique of art, Benjamin formulates the role of criticism as the “Vollendung des Werkes” itself [*GS* I:108]. Completion here is understood as an action of creation. But since a critique is a human endeavor, this notion of completion, if meant to uphold the category we have before us here, can only be seen as anticipatory and not final.

²⁰ See a Franz Rosenzweig, *Stern der Erlösung*, op cit., henceforth *SdE*; here §236.

²¹ Within the heart of this complex imagery, one may be tempted to see a reformulated Lurianic structure, which undoubtedly had meaningful impact on both Rosenzweig and Bloch as well as Benjamin. With regard to Rosenzweig, see particularly *SdE* §236.

²² Rosenzweig terms this a “gehaltvoller beseelter Zusammenhang” which is able to arrive at “ein in ästhetischem Sinn Fertiges, Anschließendes” [*SdE* §238].

ode der Welterkenntnis bildet [...].” [GdU:437]²³ Bloch emphasizes here the lasting aspect of historical occurrence, the notion of which itself necessitates a concept of history.²⁴

Of interest here is not historical occurrence itself, locked in the mortality of passing away, but clearly an approach to history and the historical events of the powerful. These can never be the “telos” of the dynamic of history, says Benjamin, which themselves can never lead to the “Gottesreich.” [Fragment] Such a conception of history, needless to say its application, is precisely at odds with the view presented in the “Fragment.” Here “das Reichgottes [...] kann nicht zum Ziel gesetzt werden,” just as the notion of justice which, in being relegated to the divine, also cannot be set as a goal.²⁵ The kingdom of God is not an aim of the worldly realm because it is not an act but a state; if it can be sought, it surely cannot be targeted. Thus as a state of being and not as a goal, it is possible for a full and complete end to be reached. For this reason, everything which pertains to history cannot be paralleled by the ahistorical, i. e., that which is beyond the realm of worldly events. The order of the profane and worldly experience cannot be structured on events in the divine world, events with which no notion of time can be associated. Since no distinction between thought and action extends to the divine, no historical occurrence can likewise be established on the idea of the kingdom of God as an aspect of progress. With this distinction, the divine and profane realms are initially determined as discrete and radically separate realities.

Thus Benjamin’s opening remarks concern the role of the Messiah in fermenting the end of history. Whether the role of the Messiah is to consummate a new dimension or to conclude this historical process, it is situated both in an ongoing tension in his own work and in Jewish Messianism as a whole. This discussion is then transferred to the debate

²³ “In this way, the world has a beginning as well as an end in time, as it is only conceivable as a process, for only history forms the [most] appropriate and essential method of world-knowledge.”

²⁴ Evil, which stands at the end of a messianic conception of history, also waits at the end of Bloch’s historical process. He also refers here approvingly to Maimonides’ critique of Aristotle’s second proof of the eternity of the world and formulates a notion of time which is not merely the history of progress but rather knowledge of the world as history. However, Maimonides’ real views on the matter may not be so clear. See, for example, Daniel Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy 1180–1240*, Leiden: Brill, 1965.

²⁵ On this point, see the discussion in the third section on justice in E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*. (Ph.D Dissertation, Free University of Berlin, 1999, to be published by Columbia University Press, 2002).

on human agency as we shall see shortly. The focus so far has been the relevance of Benjamin's comments on the meaning of the Messiah and the messianic event. Now if only the Messiah "vollendet alles historisches Geschehen," such that the end of history is predicated exclusively on messianic arrival, a question naturally arises as to the state of the messianic event. This is juxtaposed to the fact that, as we read, upon the concept of a kingdom of God, the order of the profane cannot be built. This means that a worldly determination of the notion of redemptive praxis has no place in the schema of a divine kingdom, a state in which God is the ultimate measure of all being. To be sure, the profane is not completely independent of the divine but at the same time cannot be entirely wedded to it, for this would attribute the ability to determine divine events within the profane. A link between the two realms is indeed elaborated at a later point, but for the moment, the profane is here a condition and the construction of agency in this world; the aspects of worldly engagement are conceived independently of the idea of a divine kingdom, for the former is as inherently phenomenal as the latter, categorical. Moreover, the concept of a divine kingdom is grounded on the principle that revelation without divine intention contravenes the first postulate of the theory of attributes, that God is all-knowing, which situates the divine realm far from sensory experience. Therefore, the construction of worldly agency must be kept critically separate from what the telos of history would inevitably bring under the dictates of the notion of progress. This does not imply a disengagement from history; it only calls for categorical independence in the construction of an approach to politics.

It is for this reason that theocracy has no *political* meaning.²⁶ Theocracy constitutes the ideal of a divine world which, in contrast to the world of the living, can only remain a categorical reflection. As such, it cannot be a fulfillment of politics which stands antithetical to theology, or one which is void of historical agency in the sense of a mystical

²⁶ In this respect, Jacob Taubes's article on the "Fragment" makes the unfortunate claim that only Jewish theocracy is political, whereas (early) Christian theocracy is able to take on purely religious dimensions. He appears to resurrect the old ghost of Christianity as a "spiritual" religion versus a Jewish "religion of the book" in order to construct an haphazard critique of Scholem's notion of the Jewish messianic idea taking place in history. Out of this myriad of competing themes, he comes to the wayward conclusion that Benjamin was a modern version of Marcion, although the reader is hard-pressed for a reason. Jacob Taubes, "Walter Benjamin – ein moderner Marcionit? Scholems Benjamin-Interpretation religionsgeschichtlich überprüft," in: *Antike und Moderne. Zu Walter Benjamins Passagen*, Norbert Bolz and Richard Faber (eds.), Würzburg: Königshaus and Neumann, 1986, 138–147, esp. 139–140.

theology. Only in the realm of a categorical absolute, can a theocratic state be postulated, says Benjamin. This realm would take its independence from theology, which stands free to conceive of the constitution of the world from the perspective of its hidden messianic dimension. Such an approach is therefore presupposed by a methodology of historical understanding beyond history, a historical philosophy that postulates a messianic dimension of history through the prism of its redemptive end. This concept of history connotes the formulation of a non-historically determined dynamic, independent of any teleological prescription or any precise unyielding development, but nevertheless imbued with the necessary contours of being, i. e., a beginning and an end. Agency is a moment of intervention into this dynamic which is ultimately able to cancel this division and allow the end to rectify the beginning.

Theocracy as politics has therefore to be seen as something extraneous to Benjamin's analysis: the political categories of theology, if not to fall into falsehood, must remain absolute. Rather than as a political notion, theocracy is to be understood as a divine category which is only meaningfully contemplated in the context of the Messiah. This would appear to lead us to the "great service" of Bloch's *Geist der Utopie* that Benjamin praises in the "Fragment" as a "repudiation" of theocratic politics. With such a definitive statement, any reader would find it hard to believe that no clear discussion of theocracy as such is to be found in the *Geist der Utopie*, leading some to interpret Benjamin's comments as a somewhat disguised critique of Zionism via Bloch.²⁷ However, if a critique of Zionism can be found in the *Geist der Utopie*, it would express the very opposite: condemnation not of theocratic zealotry but the aspirations of the parvenu. In his chapter on the Jews, Bloch criticizes Zionism for denying the "power of being chosen" and seeking the assimilation of the Jews into a Balkanized national state, no different from the rest.²⁸

By the time Benjamin read the *Geist der Utopie*, his views on Zionism were surely well formed. In this sense, it is true that little seems to have changed in terms of his clear rejection of "practical" Zionism in 1912, where he expressed his lifelong conviction, however much at times dis-

²⁷ See Irving Wohlfarth, "Immer radikal, niemals konsequent," op cit., 118.

²⁸ Bloch's writes that a distinct but nevertheless concentrated effort among German Jewry toward Judaism "hat derart viel gelernt, sowohl von den Antisemiten, die jeder stolze Jude an Schmerz und Haß tausendfach überbietet, wie auch von den Strebungen eines staatlich festgelegten Zionismus; dessen Schaden freilich ist, daß er die gesamte Kraft des Auserwähltseins leugnet und derart mit dem Begriff des Nationalstaats, wie er im neunzehnten Jahrhundert ephemere genug kursierte, aus Judäa eine Art von asiatischem Balkanstaat machen möchte" [*GdU*:320].

traught, that Judaism has found its home in European culture.²⁹ His later decision to learn Hebrew, even acquiring a stipend through the first president of the Hebrew University, Yehuda Magnes (which he later spurned to the embarrassment of Scholem), actually does not deny his earlier views.³⁰ Scholem however fundamentally disagreed with Benjamin's rejection of Zionism and later in life may have even seen Benjamin's isolated and ultimately devastated European existence as a model for a form of Jewish alienation which he bitterly deemed self-imposed.³¹

Yet in itself, without any further indication in this regard, the introduction of the concept of theocracy here cannot be taken as a hidden critique of Zionism, which, as a religious or potentially theocratic movement, is largely a phenomenon of the last few decades. Nor can it be understood merely as a statement on the necessity of pure thought. The search for a messianic conception of history gives rise to a more fundamental problem: no discussion of political theology is complete without a concept of theocracy, not only in the accidental sense of the contemporary resurgence of theocracy the world over, but for reasons inherent to the messianic idea itself. As in other religious movements with a political dimension, theocracy has therefore to be seen as an essential component of Jewish Messianism. It is the notion of a state which is executed in law but grounded in the covenant with God, existing as a form of rule but also as a means of organization. Josephus, who is believed to have first coined the phrase in relation to other Greek terms for political forms (democracy, oligarchy, hierarchy), sought a term to capture not only the form of religious structure of the Israelites, but one which could describe their social organization.³²

²⁹ GS II:837–8. Letter of October 10, 1912 to Ludwig Strauß. The exchange is now printed in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (eds.), vol. I, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995, 61–88. See also the discussion in Momme Brodersen, *Spinne im eigenen Netz*, Zürich: Elster Verlag, 1990, 52–56.

³⁰ We can only speculate as to Benjamin's true intentions concerning the move to Palestine in the 1930s. Had he gone, he would not have been the first to emigrate to Palestine while still entirely wedded to Europe linguistically, culturally, and foremost politically.

³¹ See the interview with Gershom Scholem in *Unease in Zion*, ed. Ehud Ben Ezer, New York: Quadrangle Press, 1974, 265–267. In this respect, the vigorous exchange between Benjamin and Scholem in the later years must be examined not only from the perspective of Scholem's criticisms of Benjamin's attempt to merge his earlier political ideas with elements of Marxism as a rejection of Jewish theology but also as a loosening of his commitment to anarchism.

³² See the articles by Bernhard Lang, "Theokratie" and Hubert Cancik, "Theokratie und Priesterherrschaft," in: *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie*, Jakob Taubes (ed.), vol. 3, "Theokratie," München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987, 11–15, 65–76.

Some may argue that the Torah proscribes that the covenant with God supersedes legal obligation as do the prophets who limit the power of kings, yet a conception of Messianism without the restoration or completion of the Davidic dynasty is hardly possible. Even if the post-biblical ideas of theocracy, beginning with Talmudic and Midrashic traditions, do not always strictly emphasize the house of David conquering the kingdom, it is difficult to conceive of Judaic redemption outside of a monarchical structure, the centralized, political theocracy of the Davidic kingdom as primary “Judean ideology.”³³ In Benjamin’s “Fragment,” the question of theocracy can also be read in terms of a political structure carried over into a “religious” domain. If it is to remain an element of political theology, then the category of theocracy implicitly poses the question: can there be a conception of Messianism without theocracy; i. e., is there such a thing as a theocracy which is truly utopian, free from domination and hierarchy? An anarchist kingdom of God?³⁴

The Division of the Holy and Profane

The division of the profane from its opposite is clear: it is a category entirely separate from the kingdom. Despite its antinomian relation to the divine, the profane is the essential category of the immanence of the messianic age and its nearing. Its approach is quieter than all else, more silent than all that has been silenced in its alienation. The approaching of the kingdom should not here be understood as quietistic for it is not passive toward this coming, not indifferent, but cataclysmic, essential, necessary. It has been lodged where it is least expected in this world. It remains in existence, nonetheless, taking root in the profanity of its exile.

³³ See R. A. Horsley, “Popular Messianic Movements around the time of Jesus,” in: *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements*, M. Saperstein (ed.), New York University Press, 1992, 87; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, Cambridge University Press, 1973; Jakob Taubes (ed.), *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie*, vol. 3, “Theokratie,” München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987; “Staatsrecht,” in: *Jüdisches Lexikon*, vol. IV:2, 1930, 618–623.

³⁴ In Scholem’s description of the period in Bern, he defines his discussions on politics with Benjamin as concerning a “theocratic anarchism:” “Wir sprachen auch viel über Politik und Sozialismus, über den wir, wie über den Stand des Menschen bei seiner eventuellen Realisierung, große Bedenken hatten. Noch immer lief es bei uns auf theokratischen Anarchismus als die sinnvollste Antwort auf die Politik hinaus.” [*Freundschaft*:108] We may understand theocracy as a necessary dimension of Messianism and anarchism as the most “sensible” political position [see also Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, New York: Schocken Books, 1976, 33, henceforth *JJC*, where he makes such a statement on anarchism]. Benjamin’s rejection of “political” or historical theocracy would favor here an abstract role for this “theocratic anarchism.”

In Benjamin's text on Hölderlin, we find a juxtaposition of the divine and profane such that the immortality of the living confronts the eternity of the divine: "Die Himmlischen sind zu Zeichen des unendlichen Lebens geworden, das aber gegen ihn begrenzt ist." [GS II:125]³⁵ Why, one might ask, does Benjamin reinstitute a radical partition between the divine and profane centuries after philosophy asserted its collapse? An answer to this question first requires the explication of the nature of the dichotomy. Where the juxtaposition is dualistic, there can be no ultimate unity of the holy and profane in redemption; where it is dialectical, it is here constituted to be messianic.³⁶ If the dualistic realms of heaven and earth would seek the neutralization of messianic tendencies, then to postulate a final abrogation of all previously necessary divisions could therefore be seen as integral to a dialectical theology. Rosenzweig's understanding of this division is essential to his own notion of its ultimate negation, not as a destruction but as a final reunification of "das Reich Gottes und das Reich der Welt."³⁷ He links the two realms en route to redemption, in which revelation is directed solely toward humanity, having no existence in-itself but purely for-itself.³⁸ Redemption is here the completion of the world through its fulfillment in the world. Unlike creation, which occurs spatially, and revelation, which occurs temporally, redemption ends both spatial and temporal parameters. It cannot therefore merely exist but rather must come into being through its own link to the world. This portal, through which redemption makes its entrance and is therefore perceivable in the world, is

³⁵ "The heavenly ones have become signs of infinite life, which, however, is limited by it." Hölderlin, *Selected Writings* vol. 1, 35 [modified translation].

³⁶ In Scholem's own comments on the role of dialectics in his early conception of political theology, we find the curious statement that he was not to learn as much "from Hegel or the Marxists, but from my own experiences and from pondering the labyrinths of Zionism as I was trying to implement it" [JJC:36]. Should this comment lend support to a view which would question the use of dialectical theory in the historiography of the Kabbalah, is worthy of further exploration.

³⁷ "The kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world." Rather, Rosenzweig continues, "Das Reich Gottes setzt sich durch in der Welt, indem es die Welt durchsetzt. Von der Welt aus ist ohnehin, wie zum Zeichen dieser Unvergleichbarkeit, nur ein Teil des kommenden Gottesreichs überhaupt wahrnehmbar, nämlich nur der Mittelteil, der "Dual" der Nächstenliebe" [SdE §232].

³⁸ It is my inclination here to view the parallel of concepts and categories as an indication of Benjamin's affinity with Rosenzweig, in regard to ideas he himself had worked out nearly seven years prior to the publication of the *Stern der Erlösung*, particularly in his essay on Hölderlin. Bloch's own consideration of this problem may have also contributed to Benjamin's understanding. Nevertheless, it is therefore important to note here the use of language, categorical similarity and the formal juxtaposition of the categories in the "Fragment," which may reveal an indebtedness to Rosenzweig.

achieved through human activity. For Rosenzweig, this activity is *die Nächstenliebe*.³⁹

A similar division between the divine and profane can also be found in Bloch, where history is conceived in its final abrogation through the rejoining of the worldly and heavenly realms.⁴⁰ In Bloch, the holy represents a “überwelte Sphäre, eine utopische Wirklichkeit oder eine noch nicht erreichte, wohl aber geltende Realität der Idee,” an “übersinnliche,” “überempirische Welt” which exists for the “utopische-absoluten Subjekt,” in contrast to a “sinnliche,” “untere empirische Welt.”⁴¹ The world above represents the ‘not-yet-existing’ and in this sense fully reflects the abstract, not-yet-attainable conception of the divine in Benjamin. The world above, which, although mediated by the profane, is seen from its end in redemption and therefore is only expressed as a “kingdom in-between.” [GdU:430] Its categorical integrity of being “above” and not “below” is metaphorical and can immediately be disputed, for it does not exist for us in our worldly selves but is intended to serve as a realm of ideas. What is not under question is the firm separation between theology as a form of critical understanding and politics in its materialist realization. Thus the use of the concept of kingdom can never be understood as the will to establish God’s kingdom on earth. The question therefore turns to the perception of the divine in the profane.

We have thus far seen a bifurcated conception of history, resting on a conception of temporal and spatial existence and the methodology of its apprehension. This conception, polarized by the tension between a profane world and a messianic, is one which Benjamin describes as “one of the essential elements in the teachings of historical philosophy,” which is the precondition of “a mystical conception of history, whose problem permits itself to be represented in an image.” We begin therefore with

³⁹ Profane activity contains within it a magnetic tension for Rosenzweig, to which *die Nächstenliebe* is drawn. See especially *SdE* §144.

⁴⁰ This is indeed the element of secularization which Benjamin also sought to introduce but in a markedly different way.

⁴¹ “A supra-worldly sphere, a utopian reality or a not-yet-established but fully functioning reality of the idea . . . a supra-sensory, supra-empirical world” which exists for the “utopian-absolute subject” in contrast to a “sensory” and “sub-empirical world” [GdU:276]. Here the two realms are mediated through their tension: “So wird schon die Geschichte in zwei Räume geteilt; in einen unteren, irdischen und einen oberen, unsichtbaren, zwischen denen sich dieser Rotationswechsel der zwei Gruppen und Zeiten vollzieht, sofern in dem oberen Raum als dem Raum der Abgeschiedenen, als dem Zwischenreich zwischen Hier und Dort, die Geschichte oder Typologie des nächsten Zeitraums jeweils ihre wesentliche kausale Prägung erhält” [GdU:430].

a positive statement on mysticism representing a historical philosophy contingent upon the tension between agency and the messianic, and revealing a messianic index within profane activity. This mystical conception can only be represented in an image, which permits its representation only insofar as the falsehood of images itself is retained. Just as no idol is permitted by God to stand before Him, the divine kingdom is not to be revealed through imitation, through words or symbols which allow passage into the divine realm through mere mimicry.⁴² However, although the image is an impoverished representation, it is the only form able to capture this messianic understanding. In “Das Leben der Studenten,” we also see a reference to the conception of history as only understandable and possible as an “Abbild eines höchsten, metaphysischen, Standes [...]” [GS II:75].⁴³ In this sense, the representation of a messianic history is mediated by the image-seeking divine representation.⁴⁴ The image is like a mirror: it presents metaphysical truth within history but only in an inverted form. It is captured by a weak, profane capacity but nevertheless is able to express a fragment of the divine in “dissonance.” We see this elsewhere in the early writings in speculation concerning metaphysical truth locked within the image:

Jede Bilddissonanz, der in äußerstem Nachdruck eine lautliche anklingt, [hat] die Funktion, die innewohnende geistige Zeitordnung der Freude sinnbar, lautbar zu machen, in der Kette eines unendlich erstreckten Geschehens, das den unendlichen Möglichkeiten des Reimes entspricht. So rief die Dissonanz im Bilde des Wahren und des Teppichs die Beschreitbarkeit als einende Beziehung der Ordnungen hervor, wie die “Gelegenheit” die geistig-zeitliche Identität (die Wahrheit) der Lage bedeutete. Diese Dissonanzen heben im dichterischen Gefüge die aller räumlichen Beziehung einwohnende zeitliche Identität und damit die absolut bestimmende Natur des

⁴² As with the rest of this elusive “Fragment,” the author does not allude to what aspect of image-forming he deems problematic. Nevertheless, it is possible that our author did have in mind the problem of the concept of image in connection with the corporeality of God.

⁴³ “... an image of the highest, metaphysical state,” *The Life of Students*, *Selective Writings*, vol. I, 37.

⁴⁴ If this image is a divine image in representation, its dissonance is its expression of “damaged immediacy,” as Benjamin articulates the present condition of language in his essay from 1916. Its immediacy, however, poses a problem, for God is naturally far greater than the things he created. Thus human language falls shy of being able to express the nature of God, and merely lends itself to its conception. This is to say that through this dynamic, the divine kingdom only finds its true form when it is faced by its linguistic limit in historical agency. This agency takes form at the same time that it is fundamentally and inherently formless.

geistigen Daseins innerhalb der identischen Erstreckung hervor [GS II:117].⁴⁵

In the excerpt above, taken from “Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin,” we read of an image which resonates with sound, associated here with verse and rime. Dissonance arises out of a harmonic image of truth in its externalized expression, carrying with it a divine purpose: revelation concerning the underlying structure of time so that time no longer appears as a lineal string of barbarism but as a table of events which are bound to redemption, the “temporal order of happiness.” It is here that we can see his discussion with Scholem playing a role in the notion of historical events being countable without necessarily being numerical.⁴⁶ In this text, dissonance of the image reveals its identity as truth in spatial existence, determining itself and nature in the context of the underlying identity of time. In this imagery, the concept of words being read as images is akin to the notion of image in Jewish scholarship, which often must contend with the problem of Hebrew being the language of both God and man. Here time is measured not in terms of past events, nor simply in a negative relationship of the present to the future, but from the point of perfection to the past, the present being just a moment in between.

The theological problem of the image is already present in Genesis, where we find humanity created in the image of God, not however in his essence, which is pure truth.⁴⁷ If the notion of the image is to be seen as speculation on Benjamin’s part concerning the perception of the truth of God in the profane, he would indeed be touching on a central concern of theology, needless to say a fundamental problem in Jewish theology, in regard to the corporeality of truth.⁴⁸ Accordingly, a discussion of the

⁴⁵ “Dissonance of the image, which given the most radical emphasis suggests a tonal dissonance, has the function of making the inherent intellectual ordering of joy in time perceptible, audible, in the chain of an infinitely extended event corresponding to the infinite possibilities of rhyme. Thus, the dissonance in the image of the true and of the carpet evokes the ability to be stridden upon as the unifying relation of the orders, just as “opportunity” signified the intellectual-temporal identity (the truth) of the situation. Within the poetic structure, these dissonances bring into relief the temporal identity inherent in every spatial relation and hence the absolutely determining nature of intellectual existence within the identical extension,” *Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin*, *Selective Writings*, vol. I, 29.

⁴⁶ See Scholem *Tagebücher* I:390, 401, *Freundschaft*: 45 as well as Benjamin *GS* VI:90, 682, and the discussion in section three of E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane*, op. cit, chapter. 2.

⁴⁷ Cf. *betzelem* in Gen. 1:26 and *rosh devarecha emet* in Ps. 119:160.

⁴⁸ We can see this tradition dating back to the inconceivable measurements of God in the text “Shiur Komah” and the abhorrence it was to face by its most rationalist readers. See Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*, Frankfurt am

importance of the representation of God and His image are present in both *Stern der Erlösung* and *Geist der Utopie*.⁴⁹ But perhaps the best known treatment of this problem is to be found in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.⁵⁰

The division of form from content here is paralleled by a discussion of myth and divine manifestation in the context of justice, where revelation upsets the order of mythical forces.⁵¹ The purity of the divine, and the "damaged immediacy" [GS II:153] of its worldly perception, as Benjamin suggests, appears in many ways to be what Rosenzweig had in mind when he referred to the question of whether God, and more specifically God's countenance or *Antlitz*, can be expressed in an image:

Wir sprechen in Bildern. Aber die Bilder sind nicht willkürlich. Es gibt notwendige und zufällige Bilder. Die Unverkehrbarkeit der Wahrheit läßt sich nur in dem Bilde eines Lebendigen aussprechen. Denn im Lebendigen allein ist schon von Natur und vor aller Setzung und Satzung ein Oben und Unten ausgezeichnet [...]⁵²

Rosenzweig concludes that in order for an image to exist, a division between projection and reception must be presupposed, i. e., projection from up high, perception from below. The compelling truth of the image expresses itself in its existence but only by the fact that it is necessarily received by the living. The image here mediates the pure truth of God, and while the divine requires no mediation, truth capable of expression by the living is the earthly side of God's countenance.⁵³ In reception, and in the capability for apprehension, the means is created by which

Main: Suhrkamp, 2000, 68–70; id., *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995, chapter I; Joseph Dan, *Ancient Jewish Mysticism*, Tel Aviv, 1989, 48–58, M. S. Cohen, *The Shiur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism*, Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1983.

⁴⁹ *SdE* §455,45], *GdU*:347.

⁵⁰ Maimonides begins his tractate with an exegetical exposition of the terms image (*tzelem*), likeness (*demuth*), and form (*to'ar*). See the first chapter of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago 1963. Benjamin makes reference to Maimonides in his article for the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, "Juden in der deutschen Kultur" [GS II:807]. The article, however, cannot be considered authoritative due to the irrevocable altering of the text. See GS II:1521.

⁵¹ See the discussion in Chapter 7, Section 2 on language and on justice and violence in Section 3, Chapter 6 in E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane*, op. cit.

⁵² *SdE* §456. "We speak in images. But the images are not arbitrary. There are essential images and coincidental ones. The irreversibility of the truth can only be enunciated in the image of a living being. For among the living, an Above and a Below are already designated by nature prior to all theory or regulation". He continues: "weil es in der Wahrheit Oben und Unten gibt, deshalb dürfen nicht bloß, sondern müssen wir sie das Antlitz Gottes heißen." In Maimonides' terms, this means to have a natural and not merely a general form.

we are able to see the truth of God, His true history, so to speak, in the apprehension of the revealed image, which is indeed beyond worldly life and what Rosenzweig calls “die Schau auf der Höhe der erlösten Überwelt.” [SdE §459]⁵⁴ In the “Fragment,” the image appears to have a distinctly “mystical” task in history – mystical, for it seeks a unseen realm in the profane, placed there by divine providence. The divine plan governs the terms of the beginning and the means of the end. It is a measure of God’s truth and therefore finds its profane expression in a limited form, in the idea of an image.

The messianic intensity of happiness

The concept of happiness is the basis of the structure of agency. As part of the preformation of the messianic age, its pursuit is constituted by its worldliness and thereby introduces a counter-force into redemption.⁵⁵ Like the juxtaposition of profane and holy, the two concepts of happiness are postulated in opposition to each other. Happiness which runs counter to the direction of messianic redemption is happiness conceived of as self-indulgent pleasure. Pleasure, as such, is not rejected categorically, as in a rather orthodox pursuit of redemption, but rather is situated as a counter-messianic force.⁵⁶ The difference between the two forms of happiness may also lie in the difference between happiness itself

⁵³ Like Maimonides, Rosenzweig follows that it is “nicht Gott, aber Gottes Wahrheit ward mir zum Spiegel.” For each element of holiness which we are permitted to view, forms “in der Welt selber ein Stück Überwelt, ein Leben jenseits des Lebens” [SdE §459].

⁵⁴ “The view on high of the redeemed world-above,” *Star of Redemption*, 422 [modified translation].

⁵⁵ Bloch refers to a “menschliche glücksuchende Wille” in reference to Marx’s notion of a humanity which is not “completely rotten” and whose moral will is able to be determined by a “Wille als revolutionäres Klasseninteresse bereits durch die einfache Tatsache der Gemeinschaft des Wollens.” *Geist der Utopie*, 2nd ed., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 300. This will is explained in the first edition of *Geist der Utopie* as the will to be free from the alienation of production. “Der Mann, der immer nur Teile zu bearbeiten hat und niemals das Glück der ganzen und Fertigproduktion genießen kann” [GdU:20].

⁵⁶ Benjamin’s critical views toward the pleasure-seeking aspect of modern society appear several times in the early writings. In “Dialog über die Religiosität der Gegenwart,” we find reference to the idea of a unity in bourgeois pleasure and progress: “Was hat aller Fortschritt, alle Weltlichkeit mit Religion zu tun, wenn sie uns nicht eine freudige Ruhe geben? [...] Wir sind gehetzt von Lebensfreude. Es ist unsere verdammte Pflicht und Schuldigkeit, sie zu fühlen. Kunst, Verkehr, Luxus, alles ist verpflichtend” [GS II:18]. I will be returning to this point in the section on tragedy in this essay.

and its pursuit, whereas its pursuit could take the negative form of an over-determined and misguided will. It must be said, however, that the *Glückssuchen* is somewhat different categorically, although perhaps not conceptually, from the *Streben nach Glück*, which is generally associated with the pursuit of happiness. However, that the category of happiness takes up the position uniquely reserved for the Antichrist suggests a more integral role for a negative happiness in Benjamin's conception of redemption. But how, one might ask, could the "pursuit of happiness of free humanity" be seen as representing the Antichrist of the messianic dialectic? In this sense, we find Benjamin here seeking to uncover an inherent structure which emits redemptive forces in *this* world, leading to the next. As he writes in this text: "But just as a force is capable, through its direction, of promoting another in the opposite direction, so, too, is the profane order of the profane in the coming of the messianic kingdom."

Like an object that is circumscribed by everything it is not and is therefore able to generate its opposite, which already exists implicitly within itself by moving fully through itself, so is the "profane order of the profane" conceived as praxis in the world, capable of forwarding the coming of the messianic kingdom. In this sense, both the terms "Gottes Reiches" and "des messianischen Reiches" are bound to the notion of an image. They are only an approximations due to the impoverishment of expression and not solely because the telos of the dynamic of history has no goal which we can name. Language, in its own internal exile of "damaged immediacy," is constitutionally unable to fully convey the messianic age or assist as a means of its coming, save for a realm of language preserved for the pure "judging word." It itself must be renewed by the age in which it finds its true meaning.⁵⁷ The concept of the profane order of the profane points therefore to worldly realms, not the least of which is language. Profane is repeated here twice to emphasize the context of this order: it is based on the living, sensuous conditions of the world and its juxtaposition to the divine kingdom. While praxis as form is agency, the body which it structures is the profane, worldly pursuit of proprietary and consumptive happiness, existing in fundamental opposition to the next world. But in being by its nature the opposite and by standing in direct relationship to the messianic, it acts to forward the conditions by which a redemptive age could be ushered in. Therefore,

⁵⁷ GS II:134,154. I deal with these ideas more thoroughly in the context of Benjamin's concept of language. See the second section "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen," in: E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane*, op cit.

the profane order of the profane stands in distinct relationship to the idea of evil.⁵⁸

Although this negative category in the form of a negative happiness stands in contrast to redemption, it is postulated independently. It would therefore be an evil bearing no necessary, causal connection to the nature of God.⁵⁹ "Free humanity" is a distinctly negative freedom which seeks the hedonistic aspects of the world in relation to the course of redemption. In generating further degrees of self-alienation, this "seeking" releases its opposite, liberating the pursuit of happiness from its link to a bourgeois conception of history which finds its end in consumption. The profane unleashes within itself, i. e., within the world, those elements of freedom which would contravene the course of redemption. The evil element stands as its opposite and therefore partly as the grounds for its existence. Under these presuppositions, evil becomes all but necessary in the coming of the messianic age. Such reasoning, which aims to show the world as it exists and to separate it from the concept of the next world or the world as it should exist, is the work of historical philosophy, whose aim is not to justify or prescribe a predetermined goal in its development but to understand the dynamic of the world in its unfolding.⁶⁰

All events in this world have a relationship both to the profane and to the coming of redemption. Activity in *this* world which may appear commonplace, *ungesegnet* or profane is simultaneously the essential cor-

⁵⁸ Benjamin had a long-standing interest in evil, Satan and demonic forces, an interest which perhaps should not be taken as a form of occultism but rather, as I argue here, a necessary component of Messianism. On the devil, see *GS* II:101 and Scholem's reflections on Benjamin's intrigue with the demonic in *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992, 46–49, as well as Giorgio Agamben's essay "Walter Benjamin und das Dämonische. Glück und geschichtliche Erlösung im Denken Benjamins," in: *Walter Benjamin 1892–1940. Zum 100. Geburtstag*, Uwe Steiner (ed.), Bern, 1992, 182–216.

⁵⁹ On the difference in intension between the divine and profane, see the related theme of "Selbstzweck" and "göttliche Selbstzweck" in the "Dialog über die Religiosität der Gegenwart" [*GS* II:17].

⁶⁰ Benjamin's "Glücksuchen der Freien Menschheit" here can be compared to Rosenzweig's formulation of free will with regard to "redemption-intentions." Rosenzweig's free will is determinate in relation to God's complete freedom. The non-coercive free act of love which is applied to the neighbor is the pursuit of happiness in the anarchic sense. This pursuit is an event which takes place in the world, but at the same time evokes the coming of the next, for, in Rosenzweig's structure, redemption is not beyond human participation. In this sense, he bears a Lurianic legacy. See Moshe Idel's article in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, Paul Mendes-Flohr (ed.), University Press of New England, 1988, on some kabbalistic features. A broader explication of the Lurianic elements embedded in the corpus of the *Stern der Erlösung* is still, however, needed.

nerstone “from which the *next* world is itself built.” [SdE §328] Worldly affairs are conducted with a force that entails the introduction of a realm of sanctity into the world of things.⁶¹ The search for happiness of free humanity appears to be directed in the opposite direction as that of the divine. In actuality, however, the gravitational force of motion toward the earth is the same force that lays the foundation for its worldly abrogation, its “Vergängnis zur Ewigkeit,”⁶² says Rosenzweig, overcoming a division which “penetrates the whole of life.”⁶³

The idea of an eternal passing-away becomes an essential moment in the effect which the profane has on the divine. Happiness is here the force which points the way, as Benjamin writes in the “Fragment:”

“Denn im Glück aber erstrebt alles Irdische seinen Untergang, nur im Glück ist ihm der Untergang zu finden bestimmt.” [GS II:204]

The idea of happiness, upon which the order of the profane is established, corresponds to everything earthly, which is by nature everything belonging to the profane in the process of passing. It strives for its own abrogation as does nature and only in happiness, in the formation of the limits of agency and evil, is this passing-away constituted to find the last and true prefiguring of messianic redemption. The unmeditated messianic “intensity” of this act, which is paralleled by the spirit of revolutionary transformation, seizing each person and stirs a longing for a totally different world, a redeemed world, is forced into a state of unhappiness, not unlike the idea of the Messiah which the Sabbatians ascribed to their anointed one: “When the Messiah is fighting evil at its core,” writes Joseph Dan on perhaps the most dynamic Messiah of the last 300 years, Sabbati Zvi, “his external melancholy is the result; when he approaches the divine world with the redeemed sparks, he is exalted, happy, in a

⁶¹ In Rosenzweig, worldliness is “de-thingified” or “enchanted” (entdinglicht) as everything entering the *Jewish* world contains a twofold meaning: “einmal auf “diese” und dann auf die “kommende” Welt [...]. In “dieser” Welt dient es zum gemeinen Gebrauch, kaum anders als ob es ungesegnet geblieben wäre, aber gleichzeitig ist es jetzt einer der Steine geworden, aus denen sich die “kommende” Welt erbaut [...]. Diese Spaltung durchdringt das ganze Leben, als Gegensatz von Heilig und Gemein, Sabbat und Werktag, “Thora und Weg der Erde”, Leben im Geist und Geschäft [...] und wie der Segen alles Gemeine erfaßt und nicht mehr gemein bleiben läßt, sondern alles heiligt, so werden auch des ewigen Lebens der künftigen Welt [...]” [SdE §328].

⁶² “Decline toward eternity”.

⁶³ SdE §328. We find this juxtaposition in Benjamin in the sense of the holy and worldly standing in direct relationship to each other through human activity. For holiness to be existent in Rosenzweig’s system, the division here is necessary, being resolved only in the moment of redemption. Just as the blessed ultimately absorbs into itself everything external, leaving nothing simply profane but rather forms holiness, “so too will it be in the eternal life of the coming world.”

state of enlightenment.”⁶⁴ Since the early Christians attributed great meaning to the suffering of Isaiah’s Israelite, the category has remained one of the cardinal signs of the messianic activity.⁶⁵ *Unglück* in this case, however, is not merely a state but an event, or an event which opens up a state in its relationship to the tragic hero and is perhaps best understood here as tragedy rather than the more inconsequential misfortune. In the case of Zewi, it is the moment when he is engaged in the ultimate form of the Lurianic redemption of sparks, which are inaccessible to the normative and collective activities of redemption. Melancholia is the condition which sets in. But *Unglück* has another, more important meaning for Benjamin, one which links him to the concept of antiquity in his time: the hero of Greek tragic drama and his *Untergang*.

The direction of all human activity toward the transformation of the profane is the condition by which everything worldly can take its leave; a condition, for example, which forms the cornerstone of redemption in Rosenzweig’s system.⁶⁶ In Benjamin, it is clear that the world must pass away but its passing can only be achieved through happiness. This happiness is at once constituted to be worldly and, at the same time, messianic, in the sense of being directed toward messianic activity. In this respect, the focus of this development, based on happiness, turns to the motor of redemption. Benjamin’s response to the question of agency concerns the problematic unity of the collective and individual in what he calls the striving “des innern einzelnen Menschen:” the inner solitary person who passes through “Unglück, im Sinne des Leidens,” which is here understood not merely as misfortune or unhappiness but rather tragedy in the sense of suffering. Similarly, in “Das Leben der Studenten,” Benjamin speaks of original “Strebungen des inneren Menschen” which have been replaced by a more narrowly defined, pedestrian form of social service [GS II:78]. That figure which embodies the “unmediated messianic intensity of the heart,” the intensity of passion of the solitary individual, suggests another distinct figure of ancient literature, distinct in this case from the Messiah, which requires that we turn our attention shortly to Athens rather than Jerusalem. Interest in the idea of the tragic hero was common among several literary, political and theologically oriented German-speaking Jews in the period preceding and

⁶⁴ Joseph Dan, *Gershom Scholem*, New York: New York University Press, 1986, 292. A more readily known example is the suffering of the devoted Job.

⁶⁵ Isaiah 53.

⁶⁶ See *SdE* §145–6, 191–8.

following the First World War.⁶⁷ Rosenzweig, Bloch, Lukács, and Benjamin were all concerned with the relationship between tragedy and the messianic structure of the solitary individual – but at the same time, the inner quality of every individual – who passes through a pre-determined series of historical events was seen in light of the suffering Messiah.⁶⁸ The connection to the character-less Messiah and the messianic, anticipatory activity of the single person in his or her relation to the world lies within the concept of the decline of the hero.

Tragic devotion

Nietzsche's contribution to the understanding of this recurring figure of ancient literature was surely to have influenced the concept of tragedy in Benjamin's period. In *The Birth Of Tragedy*, Greek drama is characterized as presenting a concept of individuation in which the hero determines his existence by acquiring knowledge of himself, understood as tragic knowledge. Tragic knowledge, in fact, is deemed a relative of the fall from grace. The tragic hero of Greek mythology is said to be the "Aryan" brother of the "Semitic" tree of knowledge. The tragic hero suffers in his acquisition or transmission of knowledge and undergoes a form of punishment. Through this act, he has not only determined his existence, in the sense of existing spatially as well as temporally, but has also reached into the heavens as a mortal, thus transgressing the division between the divine and earthly worlds. This transgression, which is deemed a demonic force, imparts at the same time immortality.⁶⁹ Nietzsche, for his part however, ultimately rejects the tragic hero, symbolized in Socrates' death, with its moral calling and dialectical optimism. Benjamin introduces the figure of the Messiah at this juncture.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ See, for example, Anson Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism," in: *New German Critique*, 1985, no. 34–36, 78–124; Christoph Schulte, "Messias und Identität. Zum Messianismus im Werk einiger Deutsch-Jüdischer Denker," in: *Bruch und Kontinuität*, E. Goodman-Thau and M. Daxner (eds.), Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994.

⁶⁸ It is important here to note that although his ideas are directed toward the individual, Benjamin's politics cannot be reduced to a brand of individualism. See the critical remarks on individualism in *GS* II:25.

⁶⁹ This concept was received quite differently by Benjamin, Bloch and Rosenzweig. As a model for the rebirth of tragedy, Rosenzweig rejects it out of hand; for Benjamin, the divinity of the poet/artist is problematic; for Bloch, it is accepted and incorporated in the secularizing task of the *Geist der Utopie*.

⁷⁰ This appears to have been the consensus of both Rosenzweig and Bloch as well.

Rosenzweig's notion of the tragic hero and Benjamin's clearly converge in the later *Trauerspiel* book.⁷¹ A short presentation of Rosenzweig's concept at this point may assist us in forming a better picture of Benjamin's own approach.⁷² Rosenzweig presents his idea of tragedy in the context of character:

In der Tragödie wird leicht der Anschein erweckt, als müßte der Untergang des Einzelnen irgend ein gestörtes Gleichgewicht der Dinge wiederherstellen. Aber dieser Anschein beruht nur auf dem Widerspruch zwischen dem tragischen Charakter und der dramatischen Fabel; das Drama der Kunstwerk braucht beide Hälften dieses Widerspruchs, um zu bestehen; aber das eigentlich Tragische wird dadurch verwischt. Der Held als solcher muß nur untergehen, weil der Untergang ihm die höchste Verhelsing, nämlich die geschlossenste Verselbstung seines Selbst ermöglicht. Er verlangt nach der Einsamkeit des Untergangs, weil es keine größere Einsamkeit gibt als diese. Deshalb stirbt der Held eigentlich auch nicht. Der Tod sperrt ihm gewissermaßen nur die Temporalien der Individualität. Der zum heldischen Selbst geronnene Charakter ist unsterblich [*SdE* §70].⁷³

The necessity of the fall of the individual was a predetermined given of classical drama which sought to restore a sense of balance to the natural world, writes Rosenzweig. But in the constitution of the hero's character within the unfolding of his fate, we witness a profound break with the

⁷¹ See Moses, Stephane, "Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig," in: *Walter Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, Gary Smith (ed.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 228–246.

⁷² In the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin brings together his own earlier reflections of fate and character with Rosenzweig's concept of the decline of the tragic hero to introduce the notion of *Trauerspiel* as religious tragedy. Only through the drama of the martyr is the *Trauerspiel* as "heilige (Tragödie)" believable. "Im sterbenden Sokrates," he writes, "ist das Märtyrerdrama als Parodie der Tragödie entsprungen" [I:292]. Indeed, this is not the first discussion of the figure of Socrates in Benjamin. Here Socrates represents the immortality of the character of the hero. He freely chooses fate, rather than allowing the despotism of the events leading to his death to succeed in his involuntary capitulation to fate, and in this way no longer remains a victim of arbitrary forces. This paradox points to the end of tragedy as such. See also "Sokrates" [*GS* II:129], written around June 1916.

⁷³ "Tragedy readily creates the impression that the demise of the individual necessarily restores some kind of equilibrium to things. But this impression is based only on the contradiction between the tragic character and the dramatic argument. As a work of art, the drama needs both halves of this contradiction in order to survive, but the actual tragic element is thereby obscured. The hero as such has to decline, only because his decline makes possible his ultimate heroization, namely, the most isolated "selfication" of his self. He yearns for the solitude of his decline, because there is no greater solitude than this. Accordingly, the hero does not actually die after all. Death only cuts him off, as it were, from the temporal features of individuality. Character transmitted to the heroic self is immortal," *Star of Redemption*, 78–9 [modified translation].

tragic element altogether. Although the hero must fall or “go under,” he achieves the highest state of heroism and the self-definition of his own character. This is then defined as immortality. There is no greater isolation than this going under, that is, achieving an afterlife in this world, as there is no commonality between mortals and gods. He shares commonality with neither the divine nor profane, which therefore forms one aspect of his suffering. In this sense, the hero does not actually perish in his fall, or at least a part of him lives on, i. e., his character, which is only able to arrive at immortality through a confrontation with fate, with the “temporality of individuality” and with the nature of passing-away. Indeed, the tragic hero wins his own character both in its “temporal and spatial totality,” as expressed in the “Fragment,” and thereby marks his end in worldly affairs. The individualistic aspects of the self, his personality, are determined by this tragic confrontation such that character becomes immortal as the individual passes away into the undifferentiated nature of good and evil.⁷⁴

The first appearance of Benjamin’s formulations of the categories of tragedy and obligation, fate and character occurs in the summer of 1916, directly preceding his essay on language.⁷⁵ “Die tiefere Erfassung des Tragischen,” writes Benjamin in a piece entitled “Trauerspiel und Tragödie”, “hat vielleicht nicht nur und nicht sowohl von der Kunst als von der Geschichte auszugehen” [GS II:133].⁷⁶ Here the concept of tragedy is already connected to the idea of history. The individual stands at the center of this relationship:

Die Zeit der Geschichte geht an bestimmten und hervorragenden Punkten ihres Verlaufs in die tragische Zeit über: und zwar in den Aktionen der

⁷⁴ As in Rosenzweig, we also find recourse to “heilige Tragödie” in Bloch. But unlike Benjamin, Bloch’s notion emphasizes the idea of Jesus as Messiah, son of Joseph, in what amounts to a mystical and sometimes rather ahistorical materialist theology in the use of Kabbalah and Talmud: “Zudem haben viele anerkannte jüdische Lehrer die Erwähnung und weissagende Beschreibung des Gottesknechts im Deuterocesaja auf den Messias bezogen, in guter Übereinstimmung mit der Haggada, die sehr wohl einen leidenden Messias kennt, wenn auch unter der Einschränkung, daß man den leidenden, den Sohn Josefs, durchgängig von dem herrschendem Messias als dem Sohn Davids unterschied” [GdU:326]. Had he applied himself to the blood-soaked question of Jesus as Messiah more thoroughly, he might have seen that he was not the first to apply Jesus to the idea of the two Messiahs. Indeed, in his well-known *Vikvah*, which reports the transcripts of the forced disputation of Barcelona (1263), Nachmanides rebukes the necessity of Jesus having been either of the two Messiahs. See Hyam Maccoby (ed.), *Judaism on Trial. Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, 42f.

⁷⁵ “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen,” November 1916.

⁷⁶ “To obtain a deeper understanding of the tragic, we should perhaps look not just at art but also at history,” *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy, *Selective Writings*, vol. I, 54.

großen Individuen. Zwischen Größe im Sinn der Geschichte und Tragik besteht ein wesensnotwendiger Zusammenhang – der sich freilich nicht in Identität auflösen läßt [GS II:133].⁷⁷

Tragedy, rather than being than a static and closed “kingdom” of art, forges a point of transition in history. Time is clearly differentiated from history in its ability to go beyond tragedy in the actions of “great people.” These individuals then form a shared character in the collective effect of their actions, not in mythic, archetypal forms which are unintentionally filled with real individuals. In history, messianic significance is attributed to time, remaining “unendlich in jeder Richtung und unerfüllt in jedem Augenblick.” He continues:

Die Zeit ist für das empirische Geschehen nur eine Form, aber was wichtiger ist, eine als Form unerfüllte. Das Geschehnis erfüllt die formale Natur der Zeit in der es liegt nicht. Denn es ist ja nicht so zu denken, daß Zeit nichts anders sei als das Maß, mit dem die Dauer einer mechanischen Veränderung gemessen wird. Diese Zeit ist freilich eine relativ leere Form, deren Ausfüllung zu denken keinen Sinn bietet [GS II:134].⁷⁸

As a mere device for counting empirical events in their passing, time remains empty and unfulfilled, for the “bestimmte Kraft der historischen Zeit”⁷⁹ is neither fully collected nor fully contained by the events themselves. Historical time may be countable, he tells Scholem once, but not necessarily numerical. There is however an event which “im Sinne der Geschichte vollkommen sei”⁸⁰ and quantitatively indeterminate in what is truly a different idea of time: “Diese Idee der erfüllten Zeit heißt in der Bibel als deren beherrschende historische Idee: die messianische Zeit” [GS II:134].⁸¹

Messianic time is conceived not as individual but collective time. This determination, we are told, differentiates “die tragische Zeit von der messianischen” [GS II:134],⁸² posing the same problem as the difference

⁷⁷ “At specific and crucial points in its trajectory, historical time passes over into tragic time; such points occur in the actions of great individuals. There is an essential connection between the ideas of greatness in history and those in tragedy – although the two are not identical,” *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy, *Selective Writings*, vol. I, 54.

⁷⁸ “For empirical events time is nothing but a form, but, what is more important, as a form it is unfulfilled. The event does not fulfill the formal nature of the time in which it takes place. For we should not think of time as merely the measure that records the duration of a mechanical change. Although such time is indeed a relatively empty form, to think of its being filled makes no sense.”

⁷⁹ “Determining force of historical time”.

⁸⁰ “Perfect in historical terms”.

⁸¹ “This idea of fulfilled time is the dominant historical idea of the bible; it is the idea of messianic time.”

⁸² “Tragic time and messianic time”.

between individual and godly fulfillment of time. In tragedy, the hero dies, for in fulfilled time “keiner zu leben vermag.”⁸³ The hero “stirbt an Unsterblichkeit,”⁸⁴ which Benjamin here describes as the “Ursprung der tragischen Helden” and “der tragischen Schuld,” where hubris forms the “eigentliche Ausdruck der Schuld” of the hero [GS II:135]. Hebbel’s notion of the “Individuation als der Urschuld,” with which Benjamin here confers, conceives of evil in the fall from grace, where knowledge served to differentiate Adam and ultimately cause his suffering. Only in his decline, does the hero discover his responsibility and, for this reason, departs in his own “going-under.” This *Untergang* – a decline of the individual in confrontation with fate – appears to be out of the hero’s control at first glance and therefore takes the paradoxical form of his “völlige Passivität.” Benjamin continues in the same strain:

Denn nicht selten sind es die völligen Ruhepausen, gleichsam der Schlaf des Helden, in dem sich das Verhängnis seiner Zeit erfüllt, und gleichermaßen tritt die Bedeutung der erfüllten Zeit im tragischen Schicksal in den großen Momenten der Passivität hervor; im tragischen Entschluß, im retardierenden Moment, in der Katastrophe [GS II:135].⁸⁵

In tragic drama, actual tragedy occurs when the hero meets his fate which has already been decided for him. Unable to know or to understand this decision, he appears vain and passive, despite all his efforts. His death, however, is not actually passive; seen religiously, courage is the measure of his devotion. Here the passive moment does not alter the rather active conception of the hero’s passing.⁸⁶ Benjamin writes else-

⁸³ “No one can live in fulfilled time”.

⁸⁴ “He dies of immortality”.

⁸⁵ “For it is not unusual for the fateful climax of the hero’s time to reach its moment of fulfillment during moments of utter tranquillity – during his sleep, as it were. And in the same way the meaning of the fulfilled time of a tragic fate emerges in the great moments of passivity: in the tragic decision, the retarding point of action, and in the catastrophe,” *Trauerspiel and Tragedy, Selective Writings*, vol. I, 55–56.

⁸⁶ In *Geist der Utopie*, we see a very similar concept of the tragic hero forming himself out of his own choice in the face of a predetermined destiny. Drawing on Lukács, Bloch writes: “Alles ist ja schon vorher auf das Ende gerichtet gewesen, nicht als Unglück oder Strafe [...] Sondern das tragische Sterben ist das Vorrecht der Größe [...] So kann der tragische Tod nach dieser Betrachtung nicht anders definiert werden als der durchaus von hier geschehende, zurückkehrende, immanente, durchaus unmythische Zwang zur Form, zum Horos, zur Gestalt und dem endgültigen Terminus des Ichs” [GdU:68]. In tragic death, what appears as tragedy or punishment becomes the triumphal march of victory. The death of the tragic hero for Bloch: “ist nicht weniger, nicht anders real als die Heiligenlegende, wenn auch durch charakteristische utopische Gegenstands- und Sphärengrade von dieser verschieden, und so wird die letzthinige Beziehung des tragischen Problems auf den Tod Christi als dem Inhalt der pauli-

where that "Mut ist Hingabe an die Gefahr, welche die Welt bedroht."⁸⁷ He continues:

Mut ist das Lebensgefühl des Menschen, der sich der Gefahr preisgibt, dadurch sie in seinem Tode zur Gefahr der Welt erweitert und überwindet zugleich. Die Größe der Gefahr entspringt im Mutigen – erst indem sie ihn trifft, in seiner ganzen Hingabe an sie, trifft sie die Welt. In seinem Tode aber ist sie überwunden, hat die Welt erreicht, der sie nicht mehr droht [GS II:123].⁸⁸

The devotion of the individual to the world, despite its continuous threat, inhabits the same paradoxical realm as the tragic hero. Only in passing-away is tragic fate overcome. It is, in part, because of this paradox that the dramatic powers of tragedy have slowly come unwound. The "Zeitcharakter" of tragedy, meaning the fate of the tragic hero in relation to the messianic act which takes place in history, he writes, "ist in der dramatischen Form erschöpft und gestaltet" [GS II:137].⁸⁹ So, too, is the role of death as a dramatic device in the *Trauerspiel*:

nischen 'Gnadendramatik' in der religiösen Sphäre unausweichlich. Denn der Held geht nicht unter, weil er wesentlich geworden ist, sondern weil er wesentlich geworden ist, geht er unter; erst dieses macht das ernsthafte zu sich selber Gekommensein zum Heroismus, zur Kategorie des gewaltigen Schicksals und der Tragödie, die den Menschen erhebt, den sie zermalmt, indem sie ihn zermalmt" [GdU:77]. In his death, the tragic hero again reaches his own essence as finished; Bloch stresses that his essentiality causes his passing. For our purposes, it is the relationship between form and decline which finds affinity with Benjamin's notion of the individual. Here the figure of the hero secures his character in his *Untergang*, as does the individual who is able to destroy the tragedy which pulverizes him. This is what Bloch calls the "eine – vom Charakter stammende – Absichtlichkeit im Schicksal der Einzelnen" [GdU:351]. In the face of tragedy, that portion of the individual which has the possibility of becoming fixed, is completed, and springs heroically into tragedy out of free will. This final leap, not into faith but fate, is the propulsion of the hero out of the realm of drama, out of the malignancy of time and through the gates of redemption: "wenn Luft und Boden entzogen werden und alle Räume des physischen Vorbei [...] dann stehen wir nackt vor Gott, halb, lau, unklar und doch "vollendet", im Sinn der tragischen Situation vollendet, wengleich aus ganz anderen Wünschen, Zusammenhängen und Zeitmaßen zerschlagen als aus denen unseres Werks und seiner dem Satan mühevoll abgerungenen Zeit" [GdU:439].

⁸⁷ "Courage is the devotion to the danger which threatens the world".

⁸⁸ "Courage is the sensibility of the individual who subjects himself to danger, in order that, through his death, this danger will become that of the world and, at the same time, overcome. The greatness of danger emerges from the courageous – only by striking through his utter dedication to it, does danger strike the world. In his death, however, danger is overcome; it reaches the world and no longer threatens it" [modified translation], *Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin, Selective Writings*, vol. I, 33–4.

⁸⁹ "The temporal character is shaped and exhausted in its dramatic form," *Trauerspiel and Tragedy, Selective Writings*, vol. I, 57 [modified translation].

Es gilt das Gesetz eines höhern Lebens im dem beschränkten Raum des Erdendaseins, und alle spielen, bis der Tod das Spiel beendet, um in einer andern Welt die größere Wiederholung des gleichen Spiels fortzutreiben [GS II:136].⁹⁰

Trauerspiel is only able to present the law of a higher, eternal life – and thereby of good messianic “living” – in the limited sense of the earthly realm. Death puts an end to its unfolding in the profane so that it may repeat itself in a higher form. But the *Trauerspiel* cannot put on this eternal performance before God and the angels alone, for it is not the “Bild eines höheren Lebens, sondern nichts als das eine von zwei Spiegelbildern, und seine Fortsetzung ist nicht minder schemenhaft als selbst. Die Toten werden Gespenster” [GS II:136].⁹¹

Drama does not actually fulfill time, however much it has been able to reflect the idea of redemption. The *Trauerspiel* is no divine image; the dead are merely ghosts, not the reincarnated sages whose reappearance is perhaps the most important sign of the beginning of messianic time. “Die Idee seiner Auflösung,” of *Trauerspiel* in this other-worldly sense, no longer lies “innerhalb des dramatischen Bezirks” [GS II:137].⁹² For Benjamin, the final distinction between *Trauerspiel* and tragedy therefore lies merely in a metaphorical realm, for while the dramatic rite is closed in itself and can make no transition to that which is beyond itself – the *Untergang* of the individual in his or her messianic act is a part of the filled-time of redemption [GS II:134]. *Trauerspiel* itself may still find a redemptive place in music, he concludes, pointing to this sense of place as a “feeling” in the text “Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie.” Yet in order to transcend its limitations, *Trauerspiel* is forced to leave the realm of performance and be understood as a transformative rather than merely descriptive, not simply to “pass-away” as fallen historical occurrence but to unleash the conditions of immortality: “Das Spiel muß aber die Erlösung finden, und für das Trauerspiel ist das erlösende Mysterium die Musik; die Wiedergeburt der Gefühle in einer übersinnlichen Natur” [GS II:139].⁹³

⁹⁰ “The law governing a higher life prevails in the limited realm of earthly existence, and all performances, until death puts an end to the act, so as to repeat the same act, albeit on a grander scale, in another world” [modified translation].

⁹¹ “The image of a higher existence but only with one of two mirror-images, and its continuation is not less schematic than itself. The dead become ghosts”.

⁹² “The idea of its resolution no longer dwells within the realm of drama itself,” *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy, *Selective Writings*, vol. I, 57.

⁹³ “The performance must find redemption, and for *Trauerspiel* that redemptive mystery is music – the rebirth of the feelings in a supra-sensuous nature,” Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy, *Selective Writings*, vol. I, 61.

Thus the tragic model of human devotion is left behind in the sphere of *Trauerspiel*, while the meaning of the hero confronting fate is carried over further into speculation concerning the inner constitution of the individual. In Benjamin's piece from 1919 on "Fate and Character,"⁹⁴ he begins with the question of whether the character of a given individual can be known in terms of its relationship to worldly events, as in the case of the fate of the tragic hero [GS II:171]. If the response to particular events can be understood, then, as with the dramatic form, the fate of the individual may also be understood. In the ability to view character and fate as intimately intertwined and not limited merely to the body, as is the case with character predictions drawn from horoscope and astrology, "die Möglichkeit einer Vorhersagung des Schicksals rationell begreiflich zu machen"⁹⁵ would be at hand [GS II:172]. It would also be possible to speak about a core of character which, if not completely predictable, says Benjamin, would be knowable to the degree that the external world is knowable. Character is not formed simply by will alone, for humanity and world here are mutually transformative and self-mediating. Following Nietzsche's principle that character entails an eternally recurring experience, Benjamin's concludes that if the character of an individual is constant, so is his fate.

This first conclusion is then juxtaposed to the necessity of maintaining the spheres of both categories separate, so as not to usurp "die Hoheit oberer Sphären und Begriffe."⁹⁶ In this sense, Benjamin likens character to ethics and fate to religion. In these realms, where an erroneous concept has been lodged, exposition and repudiation are necessary:

Dieser Irrtum ist mit Beziehung auf den Begriff des Schicksals durch dessen Verbindung mit dem Begriff der Schuld veranlaßt. So wird, um den typischen Fall zu nennen, das schicksalhafte Unglück als die Antwort Gottes oder der Götter auf religiöse Verschuldung angesehen [GS II:173].⁹⁷

⁹⁴ His interest in this relationship begins in 1916, but it is not until the *Trauerspiel* work of 1923–26 that these notions are fully explicated, there finding expression in direct connection to the *Stern der Erlösung*. See GS I:418. Stéphane Moses first mentions this connection but gives a different interpretation. See his "Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig," in: *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, op cit., 228–246, and S. Moses, *Der Engel der Geschichte*, Frankfurt on the Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1994.

⁹⁵ "The possibility of making a prediction of fate rationally comprehensible".

⁹⁶ "The authority of higher spheres and concepts".

⁹⁷ "This fallacy arises, as regards to the concept of fate, through association with that of guilt. Thus, to mention a typical case, fateful tragedy [Unglück], seen as the response of God or the gods to the attribution of religious guilt," Fate and Character, *Selective Writings*, vol. I, 202–3 [modified translation].

Schuld here is understood as a form of guilt in which an eternal punishment is applied to an eternal crime. Fate is then associated with tragedy as punishment, i. e., as *Verschuldung*, to make one responsible for a crime. One example of this is Greek tragedy, another, Jewish “responsibility” for holy tragedy.⁹⁸ This erroneous concept, Benjamin concludes, has to be understood in part as related to an undeveloped concept of fate and responsibility.

In der griechischen klassischen Ausgestaltung des Schicksalsgedankens wird das Glück, das einem Menschen zuteil wird, ganz und gar nicht als die Bestätigung seines unschuldigen Lebenswandels aufgefaßt, sondern als die Versuchung zu schwerster Verschuldung, zur Hybris [GS II:174].⁹⁹

Das Glück in this sense is not happiness bestowed in avoidance of responsibility, not aimless wandering, but rather the quest for the most difficult responsibility of all: challenging of the arbitrariness of the gods¹⁰⁰ and the course of history upon which they have decided. It is not imposed but chosen. The relationship between fate and happiness is essential, for it is happiness which is able to release “den Glücklichen aus der Verkettung der Schicksale und aus dem Netz des eignen.”¹⁰¹ Happiness is therefore not permanently in opposition to tragedy but rather something which is able to point beyond the relation between responsibility and tragedy, toward a messianic return to innocence. It is therefore a final category, one in which the distinction between God and humanity loses its clarity – what Benjamin understands as the meaning of Hölderlin’s “Schicksallos.” *Glück* brings humanity out of the confrontation with fate as if returned to a state of innocence in a release from the responsibility for sin. Rather than irresponsibility, i. e., in the avoidance

⁹⁸ On the following page, Benjamin states that this understanding of responsibility cannot be seen as being religious at all. The reference here is undoubtedly to Christian dogma on the origins of evil and the Jews. See the discussion in the third section of E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane*, op cit, chapter I.

⁹⁹ “In the classical Greek development of the idea of fate, happiness granted to a person is understood not at all as a confirmation of an irresponsible wandering though life but as a temptation to the most grievous attribution of guilt, hubris,” Fate and Character, *Selective Writings*, vol. I, 202–3 [modified translation].

¹⁰⁰ The reference here to the gods could easily refer to a single God, leading one to the assumption that it seeks to either hide or legitimize Jewish mystical ideas, brought to the project through the Greeks. Whether this is to be understood as legitimation or concealment depends on the standpoint of the reader. This is also applicable to the reference to the early Christians and the Genesis conception of word and deed. See GS II:74 and the section on immortality in this essay.

¹⁰¹ “Thosa happy from the embroilment of fate (itself) and from the web of his one’s own fate,” Fate and Character, *Selective Writings*, vol. I, 203 [modified translation].

of sin, the natural state of happiness, freed from a false application of sin, leads to the restitution of a returned enchantment of humanity with nature and with its language.¹⁰²

The worldly restitution of immortality

As with the notion of happiness, Benjamin formulates two versions of immortality: in the form of the eternity of the messianic hero in his “going-under” and a bad infinity of empty time. In the individual’s position to the world, he or she is bound by the conditions of timelessness: time is bountiful but meaningless in light of the eternal. It is only in the movement toward the first form of eternity that unfathomable death no longer remains the medium through which all activity is measured. In the “Metaphysik der Jugend,” this is articulated with one foot resting on the Aristotelian proofs of the eternity of the universe:

Es stellt mit hoffnungslosem Ernst die Frage, in welcher Zeit der Mensch lebt. Daß er in keiner Zeit leben haben die Denkenden immer gewußt. Die Unsterblichkeit der Gedanken und Taten verbannt ihn in Zeitlosigkeit, in deren Mitte lauert der unbegreifliche Tod. Zeitlebens umspannt ihn Leere der Zeit und dennoch Unsterblichkeit nicht [GS II:96].¹⁰³

In Benjamin, as well as in the authors surrounding the “Fragment” (Bloch, Rosenzweig), we have seen how the character of the fallen hero becomes eternal.¹⁰⁴ From this, we have been able to deduce that in the same way as character becomes divorced from the organic, all human life seeks immortality through redemption. Moreover, just as the next world must indeed be constituted in direct contrast to this world, our natural world must be *vergänglich*, that is, able to pass-away, as the eternal world must be *un-vergänglich*, i. e., inorganic. This is the principle

¹⁰² “Das Glück und Seligkeit führen also ebenso aus der Sphäre des Schicksals heraus wie die Unschuld” [GS II:174].

¹⁰³ “With hopeless earnestness it poses the question: In what time does man live? The thinkers have always known that he does not live in any time at all. The immortality of thoughts and deeds banishes him to a timeless realm at whose heart an inscrutable death lies in wait. Throughout his life the emptiness of time surrounds him, but not immortality,” The Metaphysics of Youth, *Selective Writings*, vol. I, 37.

¹⁰⁴ We see this terminology in Rosenzweig: “Denn wenn wir sonst nochts von Ewigkeit wissen, dies ist sicher: daß sie das Un-vergängliche ist. Dieser Bestimmung durch ein unendliches Nun muß also das zur Ewigkeit geschaffene Heute zuvörderst entsprechen” [SdE §304]. In Rosenzweig’s concept of redemption, time becomes an infinite Now. It is no longer a “Leerlauf” of progress but the filled time of the moment, where all past events have been resolved and its historical end becomes the future as now-time.

of their opposition which we saw in the paired identity of the holy and profane structures. These tightly-wounded contraries correspond to the human and immortal worlds.

The divine inorganic is therefore the reference point for the *nicht-Vergänglichkeit*. Death itself is a stranger to both God or gods; it defines a completely worldly condition in which nature is the atmosphere surrounding all living beings. God, however, is inorganic. As the source of nature, He is beyond its *Vergänglichkeit*. If holy is the category of immortality, worldly is the essence of humanity. But rather than a determination of being which takes center stage in Rosenzweig, the underlying notion of death in the “Fragment” expresses an orientation far less existential and more metaphysical: all natural things die, and not merely in a final stage, but are in a constant state of decay, of passing.¹⁰⁵ However, with regard to the notion that the difference between the holy and profane is precisely immortality in the inability to be organic, Rosenzweig formulates a similar notion of the “Nichtsterbenkönnen” (immortality) of the individual.¹⁰⁶ This is the constitution of the fallen hero whose self as character becomes “unsterblich” (immortal).

¹⁰⁵ Rosenzweig makes several categorical distinctions in this regard, centered on what he ultimately considers the groundwork of all philosophy, which for him is none other than death. He writes: “Vergänglichkeit, die Gott und Götter fremde, der Welt das bestürzende Erlebnis ihrer eigenen, sich allzeit erneuernden Kraft, ist dem Menschen die immerwährende Atmosphäre, die ihn umgibt, die er mit jedem Zug seines Atems einsaugt und ausstößt. Der Mensch ist vergänglich, Vergänglichsein ist sein Wesen, wie es das Wesen Gottes ist, unsterblich und unbedingt, das Wesen der Welt, allgemein und notwendig zu sein” [*SdE* § 55].

¹⁰⁶ Rosenzweig turns to the Platonic doctrine of the soul and posits the first contradiction to the principle of immortality which is set in direct correlation to the character of the tragic hero. In the psychology of the ancients, the psyche is that part of the notion of immortality which is truly “Nichtsterbenkönnen,” says Rosenzweig [*SdE* § 71]. It is something which, although part of nature, is eternal. In this way, it is found divided in ancient philosophy from its corporeality – the soul contains the self. Rosenzweig judges this to be problematic precisely for the fact that the soul, although entwined in nature, is always capable of transmigration; not death, not messianic end, but eternal travel. Yet this is an immortality of a single dimension, whereas redemptive immortality requires “eine Unsterblichkeit ohne Wandel und Wanderung,” beyond an “Unbeschränktheit seines vergänglichen Wesens” of the self [*SdE* § 71]. This, in turn, posits a false dichotomy between body and soul, he goes on to say, which proves unable to resolve the transformation of the profane into the holy. A reformulation of the paired relationship in which the two are fully mediated – not merely as soul wandering but the end of wandering altogether – could then provide a conception of the unity of character of the tragic hero and the principle of the eternity of the soul: “Würde das Selbst zur Seele in diesem Sinn, dann wäre ihm auch Unsterblichkeit in einem neuen Sinn gewiß, und der gespenstische Gedanke der Seelenwanderung verlöre seine Kraft.” [*SdE* § 71]

The question of how humans achieve immortality, a necessary condition of a redemptive age, is a central dimension of Benjamin's theology. He is apparently aware of this already in 1912 when he puts forward the question of whether "Die Religion garantiert uns ein Ewiges"¹⁰⁷ [*GS* II:20] and again in the "Metaphysik der Jugend," where he returns to eternity as a central category of religion.¹⁰⁸ Bloch also raises the question of the immortal elements of the body which separate themselves and become eternal through the organization of the earthly world, which contains within itself the germ-cell of its completion and perfection. The focal point for this transition from the organic to the inorganic, and thereby the restitution of all past forms of life, both animate and inanimate, is the *restitutio in integrum*, from which Benjamin may take his cue. In the *Geist der Utopie*, Bloch writes:

Das seelische Leben schwingt zwar über den Leib hinaus, es gibt ein seelisches Keimplasma und die transphysiologische Unsterblichkeit wird vom Verlust des Leibes nicht betroffen. Aber daß das seelische Leben auch über die Vernichtung der Welt hinausschwingt, dazu muß es im tiefsten Sinn "fertig" geworden sein und seine Taue mit Glück um die Pfosten der jenseitigen Landungstelle geworfen haben, soll nicht auch das seelische Keimplasma in den Abgrund des ewigen Todes gerissen, und das Ziel, auf das es bei der Organisierung des Erdenlebens vor allem ankommt, das ewige Leben, die auch transkosmologische Unsterblichkeit, die alleinige Realität des Seelenreichs, die *Restitutio in integrum* aus dem Labyrinth der Welt – durch Satans Erbarmen verfehlt werden.¹⁰⁹

Bloch's conception of a trans-cosmological immortality with its spatial dimension is implicit (or at least implicitly possible) within the constitution of the worldly sphere – the active restructuring of the profane within the context of the cohesive reality of the kingdom of the souls.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ "Religion guaranties us an eternity".

¹⁰⁸ "Der Gegenstand der Religion ist Unendlichkeit" (1913–14) [*GS* II:97].

¹⁰⁹ *GdU*:442. The "soul-full" life is understood as being constituted to "swing" out of the body. It contains an implicit core of trans-physiological immortality which is ultimately not affected by the loss of body as such. But to move beyond the abrogation of the world, the soul must be complete and un-torn by the "abyss of eternal death," which is only possible if the "soul-full" core of life is able to extend itself to reach the pole, the "point of landing beyond," which arrives at its goal of eternal life through the organization of the earthly world, able to lose its particularities and become "trans-cosmic" in its immortality, in the return of all things to their place out of the "labyrinth of the world," and not wrongly steered to the inheritance of evil.

¹¹⁰ One cannot help but notice that the concept of soul here, both in Bloch and in Rosenzweig, bears some similarity to the Maimonidian rational core of the individual, which achieves its trans-physiological, trans-cosmological form, not from moral activity in the world, which we know is the greater materialist understanding of *restitutio in integrum* in Bloch, but through acquisition of abstract knowledge. However much Bloch actually departs from Maimonides' rather central, anti-messianic tenets, the

This he identifies with the *restitutio in integrum*. This term can also be considered in relation to that which he elsewhere articulates as “das absolute Zentrum der Realität: die Geburt und Einsetzung aller Dinge und Wesen in ihr Eigentum” [*GdU*:430].¹¹¹ The *restitutio in integrum* finds one other expression in der *Geist der Utopie*, in a passage where the “holy mother” Mary gently illuminates “the brothers” in the importance of earthly concerns.¹¹²

In Benjamin, we read of a spiritual *restitutio in integrum* which is represented by the worldliness of the profane. The addition of the word “spiritual” to this phrase indicates a marked contrast to the greater materialist meaning of Bloch’s *restitutio in integrum*.¹¹³ Rather than merely the return of all things to their original status of possession, Benjamin here emphasizes something other than a purely materialist component of the final return of all things to their true historical right. If there is an impulse toward secularization in Benjamin, the emphasis here is on the opposite.¹¹⁴ In turning back for a moment to the “Metaphysik der Jugend,” we find an earlier elaboration of the relationship between eternity and the restoration of things:

Aber diesem, der Geburt der unsterblichen Zeit, geschieht Zeit nicht mehr. Das Zeitlose widerfährt ihm, in ihm sind alle Dinge versammelt, ihm bei. Allmächtig lebt es im Abstand, im Abstand (dem Schweigen des Tagebuches) widerfährt dem Ich seine eigene, die reine Zeit. Im Abstand ist es in sich selbst gesammelt, kein Ding drängt sich in sein unsterbliches Beieinander. Hier schöpft es Kraft, den Dingen zu widerfahren, sie in sich zu reißen, sein Schicksal zu verkennen [*GS II*:98].¹¹⁵

immortal core which is constituted as independent of worldly affairs, i. e., transcendent of them, and the necessity to avoid evil in the pursuit of immortality, clearly parallels Benjamin.

¹¹¹ “The absolute center of reality: the birth and placement of all things and beings in their possession”.

¹¹² Here the emphasis on redemption is individual in contrast to a messianic conception which would be collective in constitution. See *GdU*:42.

¹¹³ Regarding the inheritance of the term, see also the comments of M. Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, op cit., 102.

¹¹⁴ Irving Wohlfahrt presents a different view of secularization in his essay “Haarscharf an der Grenze zwischen Religion und Nihilismus”. Zum Motiv des Zimzum bei Gershom Scholem,” in: *Gershom Scholem. Zwischen den Disziplinen*, P. Schäfer and G. Smith (eds.), Frankfurt on the Main: Suhrkamp, 1995, 176–257.

¹¹⁵ “But in this, the birth of immortal time, time is no longer. The self experiences timelessness, all things are assembled in it. It lives all-powerful in distance; in distance (the diary’s silence), the “I” experiences its own, pure time. In distance it gathers itself; no thing pushes its way into its immortal juxtaposition of events. Here it draws the

The “birth of immortal time” does not actually take place in time.¹¹⁶ Timelessness, in this sense, is what lends a messianic element to the temporality of all past event. If there is to be an ingathering outside of the realm of time, then it would be difficult to suppose that this collection of objects is to have merely a physical, materialist meaning. The ingathering of the self (the individual or perhaps individuals) occurs at a distance from the divine kingdom; it does so as an experience of the divine from afar, and is thus linked to the notion of image. This ingathering then takes the form of the medium with a divine quality, in which this newly constituted self creates a force that enables the experience of the things in pure time again, beyond fate as such. “Kein Ding, keinen Menschen,” Benjamin writes in “Die religiöse Stellung der neuen Jugend, darf [die Jugend] verwerfen, denn in jedem (in der Litfaßsäule und im Verbrecher) kann das Symbol oder der Heilige erstehen” [*GS* II:73].¹¹⁷ In Benjamin’s hopeful conception of the religious conviction of the youth movement, the relation between things and people is spiritualized, such that word and deed are seen as one:

Viele Züge mag man diese Jugend mit den ersten Christen teilen, denen auch die Welt so überfließend schien von Heiligem, das in jedem erstehen konnte, daß es ihnen das Wort und die Tat benahm [*GS* II:74].¹¹⁸

In the experience of the early Christians, says Benjamin, a residue of the earliest notion of divine language was alive.¹¹⁹ Such a language, in which

strength to impinge on things, to absorb them, to its own fate,” *Metaphysics of Youth, Selective Writings*, vol. I, 12 [modified translation].

¹¹⁶ The praise of God, explains Rosenzweig, lends further validity to the quest for immortality as a necessary part of the transformation to the messianic age. “Die Wir” which he borrows from “Aber wir, wir loben Gott von nun an bis in Ewigkeit” [Ps. 115:18], “ist ewig; vor diesem Triumphgeschrei der Ewigkeit stützt der Tod ins Nichts. Das Leben wird unsterblich im ewigen Lobgesang der Erlösung” [*SdE* §253]. In this formulation, there is no completion of God’s plan without entering into the divine, where human eternity, which was “gepflanzt in den Boden der Schöpfung” [*SdE* §265], eventually makes its appearance in the final day of redemption. Death no longer holds substance; the concept of evil itself has lost its meaning. For as with the immortality of God and the divine realm, so must humanity be constituted in redemption.

¹¹⁷ “No thing or human being . . . should be discarded by the young, for in everything (in the advertisement-pillar and the criminal) can the symbol or the holy take hold”.

¹¹⁸ “There are many things which these youths share with the first Christians, for whom the world appeared so overflowing with holiness, that it could emerge in everything, that, in their eyes, engaged the word and act”.

¹¹⁹ Benjamin’s appreciation of the early Christian doctrine of worldly activity and the social calling of Christian anarchists like Leo Tolstoy often found expression in his early writings. In “Das Leben der Studenten,” Benjamin mentions the challenge made by the early Christians to the division of *civitas* and *dei*, civil and religious, profane and holy: “Die [frühen] Christen gaben die mögliche Lösung für die *civitas* *dei*: Sie verwar-

word and deed were one and the same, is to be found in a linguistic conception of genestic creation, where the creation of things and people were both consecrated by a divine utterance, in which a divine insignia was transferred to all created beings. Therefore, even corrupt objects and human forms have a redeemable quality which compel their preservation. Here the ingathering “in sich” and a *restitutio in integrum* find some common ground if a spiritual (i. e., less secularizing) emphasis is added to the latter.

Bloch interprets immortality in terms of human history transcending history. Humanity does not pass into the divine to achieve immortality by dissolution but remains a “full house,” solid and enlightened, as everything natural takes its course. In his concept of tragedy, the hero achieves his own destiny in the very moment when he overcomes the determining force of fate. This is achieved by a tragic hero who overcomes his isolation and achieves his purpose in redemption. In this sense, he posits a retreating God, essentially a secularized Lurianic *zimzum*, illustrated by the metaphor of God exiting the state of history.¹²⁰ God here is no longer the unmoved mover but merely a spectator: the inorganic is ultimately bound not to the gods but to science.¹²¹ Only if humanity remains intact while the rest of the world falls and passes

fen die Einzelheit in Beiden” [GS II:84]. This is the direct opposite of Nietzsche who criticizes the Christians for failing in “die Kunst des diesseitigen Trostes.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Geburt der Tragödie*, vol. I, Köln: Könnemann, 1994, 17.

¹²⁰ The tragic hero for Bloch is undoubtedly the enlightener Prometheus, but a Prometheus whose drama unfolds under the direction of Isaak Luria. In this sense, Bloch’s expressionistic statements such as “denn wir tragen den Funken des Endes durch den Gang” [GdU:382] and “der Funke ihres Endes” (die Idee) [GdU:387] must be understood within the context of an attempt to secularize the activist and collectivist structure of Lurianic Kabbalah. This can most clearly be seen in his reworking of the drama of redemption, a scenario marked by God’s failure with thoroughly Lurianic consequences: “erst wenn wir ganz gottlos geworden sind, werden wir wieder eine Tragödie haben [...] Gott muß die Bühne verlassen (denn, so fügen wir hinzu, er ist nicht, er gilt, es soll nicht als Gott sein), doch Zuschauer muß er noch bleiben: das ist wie die noch einzig mögliche neue Frömmigkeit, so auch die historische, die utopische Möglichkeit tragischer Zeitalter” [GdU:69].

¹²¹ “Inkognito des einzelnen kann nur vor sich selber, ja letztthin nur am Ende der Tage vor Gott enthüllt werden, wie sich Gott selbst enthüllt” [GdU:347]. The individual transcends his isolation in the final revelation of God. The anonymity of the individual is matched by God’s exile. Unity is not with God proper but with humanity: “worauf ja auch die Auferstehung aller Toten im einfachen Unsterblichkeitsdogma hinweist, am letzten Ereignis der Geschichte subjektiv existent zu sein. Alles könnte vergehen, aber das Haus der Menschheit muß vollzählig erhalten bleiben und erleuchtet stehen, damit dereinst, wenn draußen der Untergang rast, Gott darin wohnen und uns helfen kann – und solches führt aus der Seelenwanderung heraus auf den Sinn der echten sozialen, historischen und kulturellen Ideologie” [GdU:429; my emphasis].

away, can God return from exile to take up residence. The transmigration of the souls and its *restitutio in integrum* would then have a social, historical, cultural – in a word, a materialist meaning. Its distinctly “spiritual” dimension is lost.

Benjamin may have partially anticipated this discussion in his “Dialog über die Religiosität der Gegenwart” to the degree that he recognized religion as being based on “ein inniges Streben nach Vereinigung mit Gott.”¹²² Unlike Bloch, he introduces the social and historical, even material dimensions of a redemptive restitution without necessarily postulating the annihilation of the divine. Here Benjamin seeks to conceive of this restitution in a way which would not render the divine-profane structure completely arbitrary. For him, it is precisely the negation of the profane rather than an inner abolition of the divine which opens the portal to redemption.

Nihilism

Diese zu erstreben, auch für diejenigen Stufen des Menschen, welche Natur sind, ist die Aufgabe der Weltpolitik, deren Methode Nihilismus zu heißen hat [Fragment].

Vergänglichkeit is the force behind the dialectics of existence which is its “eternal state of decline:” everything is in a state of passing, evolving, declining – the Heraclitian concept of time upon which the dialectic is grounded.¹²³ This also represents the internal process of nature. Nature in its *Vergehen* is its rhythm, that is, the pace at which it generates negation.¹²⁴ The totality of nature, an outline thereof, is the knowledge of messianic redemption; it is a state of existence beyond the passing of nature. “Ganz im Gegensatz zur ‘Flüchtigen Zeit’ zu dem ‘Vergänglichen,’” comments Benjamin on a poem by Hölderlin (Chiron), ‘ist in der Neufassung dieser Zeile das Beharrende, die Dauer in der Gestalt

¹²² “A inner striving toward unification with God” [GS II:22]. In this sense, his earlier mixing of redeemer and redeemed [GS II:100–101] and attributing divine qualities to the poet [GS II:110–114] gave way, I believe, to a more nuanced understanding of immortality, particularly in the concept of tragedy.

¹²³ In “Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin,” Benjamin in fact quotes a fragment of Heraclitus to this effect: “Im Wachen sehen wir zwar den Tod, im Schläfe aber den Schlaf” [GS II:120].

¹²⁴ The term “Rhythmus” seems to describe the understanding of a dynamic motion, of essentially objects in passing, without seeking to overly determine them by linking them to time as such. We find repeated usage of the term in the early writings. See, for example, GS II:18,87,100,103,104,111,113.

der Zeit und der Menschen entwickelt worden" [GS II:119].¹²⁵ The eternity of redemptive time remains constant; it is only the image which changes. Achieving a point beyond passing, i. e., immortality, is therefore messianic happiness. This concept of happiness is then the unity of the holy and profane. It is the conception of the transcendence of the division of theory and praxis, mental and manual labor. "To strive for this," which again suggests a unity in the concept of human agency, is the task of world politics. To understand the rhythm of messianic nature leads to a striving. This striving is a praxis in itself. But just as it is a praxis of program, it is a praxis of nihilism, meaning a retreat from worldly participation in favor of an abstract and categorical realm of messianic reflection, embodied in a "mystical" understanding of history. If there is a historical program which could be said to follow this early political theology, it is perhaps best captured by the opening paragraph of "Das Leben der Studenten" where "Den immanenten Zustand der Vollkommenheit rein zum absoluten zu gestalten, ihn sichtbar und herrschend in der Gegenwart zu machen, ist die geschichtliche Aufgabe" [GS II:75].

The historical task is none other than to witness the immanent, temporal index of redemption in every moment of the present, under the strain of the catastrophe enveloping it. The search for happiness in a political form, which sees the unhindered development of each individual into a full human being, what Adorno characterized in Benjamin's thinking as his "Rettung des Toten als der Restitution des entstellten Lebens,"¹²⁶ is unambiguously understood by the early Benjamin as an ethical anarchism:

Die Darlegung dieses Standpunkts gehört zu den Aufgaben meiner Moralphilosophie, in deren Zusammenhang der Terminus Anarchismus sehr wohl für eine Theorie gebraucht werden darf, welche das sittliche Recht nicht der Gewalt als solcher, sondern allein jeder menschlichen Institution, Gemeinschaft oder Individualität abspricht[,] welche sich ein Monopol auf sie zuspricht oder das Recht auf sie auch nur prinzipiell und allgemein in irgend einer Perspektive sich selbst einräumt, anstatt sie als eine Gabe der

¹²⁵ "Quite in opposition to the "fleeting time," to the ephemeral ones, that which persists – duration in the form of time and men – has been developed in the new version of these lines".

¹²⁶ "The historical task is to expose this immanent state of perfection and make it absolute, to make it visible and dominant in the present," Theodor W. Adorno, "Charakteristik Walter Benjamins," in: *Walter Benjamin, Sprache und Geschichte*, Leipzig: Reclam, 1992, 171.

göttlichen Macht, als *Machtvollkommenheit* im einzelnen Falle zu verehren [GS VI:106, written ca. 4/1920].¹²⁷

Anarchism is defined here largely categorically, as an ethical program which rejects both the monopolization of the use of violence and the monopolization of the right to violence. Nevertheless, after a short career in the youth movement, Benjamin was never to express his political convictions in an organized way. Despite his proximity to Spain and his repeated visits to Ibiza in the 1930s, he took no stand in relation to the most important anarchist revolution in the twentieth century.¹²⁸ Nihilism in this text is therefore a form of “world-politics” actually reserved for worldly affairs. It expresses a will for a transformed world, free from domination, a world understood in the messianic sense of redemption, yet only in abstraction.

In many ways, this was a nihilism of circumstance, shared to a great degree by Scholem in their collective retreat to the countryside of Switzerland toward the end of the First World War. While the meaning which the authors attributed to the term is truly the subject of another study, it may be summarized here as an abstention from outward political activity in the hope of revealing a true dimension of politics. In Benjamin's turn to a nihilism, he announces a worldly retreat – in Scholem's words at the time, an “Abschied” – from political engagement while preserving a political idea with the world as its subject. This is a politics which lives on in an unintentional aspect of humanity, and at the same time, in an abstract theory of worldly transformation. It is, in short, a political theology of redemption.

¹²⁷ “An exposition of this standpoint is one of the tasks of my moral philosophy, in which the term anarchism can surely be used. It calls for a theory which does not reject a moral right to violence in itself, but rather in every human institution, community or individuality which accords itself a monopoly of violence, or reserves the right to violence on principle, in general, or from some other perspective, instead of showing reverence for it as the providence of divine power, in specific cases as *absolute power*.” The Right to Use Force, *Selective Writings*, vol. I, 233 [modified translation].

¹²⁸ On the importance of the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, see for example Murray Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, New York: Harper Colophon, 1978.