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“A PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY
OF HYPERINFLATION:”
WALTER BENJAMIN, WEIMAR AND
THE NEW THINKING

GERMANY'S COALITION WEIMAR GOVERNMENT faced numerous economic and political crises between 1919 and 1933. In addition to the cost of maintaining civil order in a time of widespread poverty and political dissatisfaction and maintaining its massive reparation payments to the allied countries, there was, in 1923, the further loss of income due to the rural worker's strike against the French occupying forces in the Ruhr region. The German Mark, already seriously devalued since 1918, began to be printed in such quantities that its international value began to plummet: by September 1923, one US dollar which had been worth 4 Marks in 1914 now cost over one hundred million Marks. The effect on the domestic economy had politically and socially ruinous consequences, and the infamous tales of million-Mark banknotes being devalued by the hour belies a crucial turning point on the way to the major international conflict of the twentieth century. From governmental ineffectivity to hyperinflation, social unrest, political opportunism and, eventually, Fascism, this period is nonetheless recognized as a period of unequalled cultural and philosophical originality. Works of this period such as Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and Ernst Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* (1919) attempted to address the possibility of radical social change in terms of its problematic relationship with metaphysical conceptualization. Messianism – conceived either as a quasi-utopian possibility of social reconciliation or as that which is wholly anterior to historical-political temporality itself – became the concern of philosophical and historically minded thinkers from all sides of the political spectrum.

The question that remained, then as now, was whether messianism inevitably preclude the possibility of political transformation? The traditional leftist argument is that, as a philosophical position that sees the world in terms of disaster or profane ruination, messianism inevitably obscures the possibility of political action by mourning it's impossibility. With this in mind, I want to revisit here the question of messianism and politics in Walter Benjamin's work and in two thinkers who were very influential to Benjamin,

Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig. The problem of the actual and constitutive relationship between capitalism and philosophy in this sense would be the reorientation of philosophy itself in these years after the end of WW1, from the time of the Spartacist and Hamburg Revolutions, the Weimar constitution to the hyperinflation of 1923. However, if there is a “politics” in Benjamin’s work prior to 1924 and his engagement with Marx – notwithstanding the impossibility of avoiding politics in Germany at this time – then it is above all a problem of representation: of philosophically representing the world in its historical actuality certainly - the world of lived experience - but also the possibility of philosophical representation itself in light of the contemporary situation. For Cohen, Rosenzweig and Benjamin alike the question is that of a philosophy *adequate* to the time and to all that is at stake in it.

My reason for focusing on these three thinkers is not simply because of the historical and personal interrelationships which unite them (both Benjamin and Rosenzweig attended lectures by Cohen in Marburg and read his work extensively, the latter forming a close friendship with his tutor prior to his death in 1918, Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption* also makes a profound impact on Benjamin in 1921) but rather because of the one thing they have in common, a messianism: a messianism which is not *simply* the product of their personal beliefs (that is, neither a cultural, subjective nor racial “given”) but which rather acts either as a category *within* or as limit *of* the philosophical itself. In other words, all three test their philosophical practice (which in each case is a metaphysics inherited from the neo-Kantian tradition) on two interrelated themes: firstly, along the boundaries between philosophy and Judaism (Judaism either as an alternative *to* or modification *of* systematic metaphysics or at the level of personal or existential identity) and, secondly, along the relationship between philosophy and politics, that is, the very possibility of political engagement and/or transformation. In each case this is thought in relation to specific world historical events: Herman Cohen’s public engagement with political questions in the Bismarck era, Rosenzweig’s reorientation of philosophy and theology after his experiences in the first world war, and Benjamin’s turn towards the political contemporary in a short text of 1923 entitled “A Tour Through the German Inflation”. Yet these two questions are inseparable in each thinker from the perhaps more specific problem of methodology: either towards historical understanding (the problem of historical cognition and value is the central concern of neo-Kantianism in all its forms) or as the question of epistemological and/or systematic philosophical construction itself.¹

¹ There remains the more general question of why messianism became such an integral part of philosophical discourse in Germany around this time, and particularly in the forms it took within philosophies that were overtly radical and secular such as Lukács. For a historical account of this period, see, Anson Rabinbach ‘Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse:

Hermann Cohen: Messiah as Idea

Hermann Cohen's "return" to Kant needs to be differentiated from neo-Kantianism as it is commonly understood. For Cohen the fundamental problematic of his early work is framed in the following terms: "can Kant's epistemological findings be extended into the realm of objectification itself?" Kant's method is reworked to develop a radical epistemology where a foundational yet problematic aspect of the system, "perception" [*Wahrnehmung*], is eradicated altogether so that the realm of pure cognition or knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] can be critically delineated. However, it is important to remember that for Cohen and many other neo-Kantians, the return to Kant is not merely an academic reappraisal of a by-now historical methodology. Instead, their philosophical radicalism should also be seen as a response to a number of very real problems both inside and outside the university, not least of which is the problematic relationship between German and Jewish identity in the Bismarck era.² Another factor that is often lost in discussing Cohen is his commitment to a socialist interpretation of Kant in terms of a *positive* conception of ethical ideals.³ In this latter sense, it may be true that his reading of Kant focuses on the shorter polemical essays in terms of both their critique of alienation of labor and the possibility of an actual synthesis of republican ideals and socialist economic institutions.⁴ Whilst also writing shorter works on Judaism, politics and national identity, Cohen establishes his reputation via three "Kant" works: *Logik des reinen Erkenntnis* (Logic of

Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism' in *New German Critique* #34, Winter 1985, *passim*.

- ² Not least amongst these, as Derrida points out in his 'Interpretations at War: Kant, The Jew, The German' are the related question of war and national identity which this generation of scholars became involved with to greater or lesser degrees. For Derrida, both Rosenzweig and Cohen are 'caught up and rooted' in the First World War (see Jacques Derrida 'Interpretations at War: Kant, The Jew, The German' in *New Literary History*, 1991 #22, 41): 'It is too often forgotten, when one is interested in Husserl and Heidegger, that this neo-Kantian sequence has largely determined the context in which, that is to say also against which, Husserl's phenomenology, later the phenomenological ontology of the early Heidegger [. . .] in a way arose' (*Ibid*, 41). Cohen's thought then not only delineates a new way of understanding a certain philosophical history (by overtly connecting Kant to Luther to Philo Judaeus to Plato) but is, crucially, itself a rather unexamined part of the lineage of twentieth century critical philosophy, of which Derrida himself stands as just one example.
- ³ Kantian 'ethical socialism' includes, as well as Cohen, Karl Vorlander (in 1902 he writes a report on the movement), Conrad Schmidt, Eduard Bernstein, Franz Standinger, Ludwig Wolfmann, Kurt Eisner (journalist and future head of Munich branch of USDP). In Marbourg itself, Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp. Friedrich Lange himself remains somewhat outside of this movement. See Harry van Der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988, pages 197 – 239 ('From Social Ethics to Socialist Ethics').
- ⁴ 'On the Old Saw' and 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent' particularly – See Linden *op cit*, 198 onwards. In *Ethics of Pure Will* (1904) Cohen will explicitly state 'The meaning of the labor contract is domination' (*Ibid*, 233), the proposed solution to which is a combination of moral education and cooperative labor practice. See also Andrea Poma *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, tr. John Denton, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1997, 111.

Pure Cognition, 1902, second edition 1914), *Ethik des reinen Willens* (Ethics of Pure Will, 1904/1907) and *Asthetik des reinen Ansicht* (Aesthetics of Pure Feeling, 1912). These works formed what Cohen called a “becoming-system” along the lines of a classically conceived metaphysics, that is, a logic, followed by an ethics and an aesthetics.⁵ Cohen’s central concept – *Ursprung* or origin – emerged here as a radicalization of categorial thought (via both Kant and Plato) such that perception is replaced by the question of cognition alone, yet without precluding a quasi-historical analysis of logical, ethical and aesthetic forms of thought. Cohen followed his Kant trilogy by adding a theory of religion just as Kant produces his essays on rational theology (known as the “fourth critique”) in the 1790s. Cohen’s own “becoming system” culminates in an ethical position premised upon biblical texts as originating sources of ethical life, in this last work, entitled *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*. This book not only prompted Rosenzweig to begin his *Star of Redemption* in 1918 but also had an immediate influence on Benjamin’s *Critique of Violence*, conceived in part as a response to the chapters on Judaic law and their relation to systematic ethics. Cohen’s concepts also appear in Rosenzweig’s and Benjamin’s work at all its periods, most famously in Benjamin’s adaptation of *Ursprung* as a “historical-philosophical” category in the 1925 work *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

I want to make two brief points about Cohen’s conception of Messianism here:

Judaism offers a concept of humanity which is lacking in other traditions, and this idea of humanity is itself a development of Messianism. This is to say, the particularity of Judaism – its distinctness from world-historical events and independence from humanist enlightenment discourse – is the key to the universality of messianism itself.

The time of both “humanity” and “Messianism” is the future, and thus despite any particular “tragic” or disastrous historical manifestations, it must always be understood in light of its progressive tendency: “With this faith in the future the faithful ones distinguish themselves. The messianic idea is the

⁵ Cohen left the University of Marburg in 1912 (Heidegger succeeded him there in 1923 - 28), to teach Rosenzweig and others at the newly formed Institute of Judaism in Berlin. Accounts of Cohen’s personal and philosophical influence on Rosenzweig can be found in Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, tr. and ed. Paul W Franks and Michael L Morgan, Hackett Publishing co, Indianapolis, 2000, pages 4 and 15 in particular, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (ed.) *Judaism Despite Christianity: The Letters on Christianity and Judaism between Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and Franz Rosenzweig*, University of Alabama Press, Alabama, 1969, 39 (where Rosenzweig describes Cohen as ‘a new Hegel!’) and Nahum N Glatzer *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, Schocken, New York, 1961, pages 29–87 passim. Cohen died in 1918 but not before completing his most famous (and to date only fully translated) work *Religion of Pure Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, which was published in 1919, although Rosenzweig obtains a manuscript copy at Cohen’s home in early 1918.

hope for the future of humanity.”⁶

Thus Kantian ethics, as reformulated in Cohen’s early work, accommodates the Messiah as a *telos* of moral action:

The moral concepts are principally laws; pure presupposition of the will: pure prescription for action. However, accommodation should now result in these pure laws of ethics. The conceptual goal must also become the ordering concepts for historical research [. . .] That is the double meaning of goal, the ordering on behalf of accommodation.⁷

And this *telos* is therefore conceivable as a politics:

The ethical value of Messianism consists in this its political, one would say philosophy of history, meaning. The history of peoples as the history of humanity – that is the problem of prophetic Messianism. Peace shall happen here on earth among people, among peoples. The swords shall be beaten into pruning hooks. This irreconciled opposition to what history calls world-politics lies in prophetic Messianism. Therein lies a *moral original power*; the mightiest idea which ethics has borrowed and admitted from a province foreign to the philosophical method; the most instructive example for the insoluble historical connection between ethics and religion.⁸

And so Cohen above all finds a means of validating theological concerns and texts within a neo-Kantian ethical system. However, in *Religion of Reason* there is an essential *reversal* of traditional historical and theological methodologies: Firstly because the system (or Cohen’s “becoming system”) precedes *Religion of Reason* “methodically” and forms the basis for the subsequent approach towards biblical texts, in contrast to protestant biblical criticism which works the other way around (i.e. it creates doctrine on the reading of the text of the bible).⁹ Here, there begins to emerge the second fundamental difference between *Religion of Reason* and Cohen’s previous work: where the development of *Ursprung* allowed for a radicalization of both atemporal epistemological categories and crudely historicist conceptions of the events of sense-data, so the emphasis here will be apparently reversed into that of Messianic goal. *Apparently*, because the development of the messianic – at once a theological, historical and social

⁶ ‘Idea of the Messiah’ from 1892, quoted in Robert Gibbs ‘Hermann Cohen’s Messianism: The History of the Future’ in Holzhey, Motzkin and Wiedebad (eds.) *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism: Tradition and the Concept of Origin in Hermann Cohen’s Later Work* (International Conference, Zurich, 1998), Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim, Zurich and New York, 2000, 336.

⁷ *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, *Ibid*, 379.

⁸ *Ethik des reinen Willens*, *Ibid*, 341.

⁹ Chapters x and xi of Cohen’s book deal with this most explicitly. There are many particular instances of this methodological reversal: for example in Cohen, chapter III (‘Creation’) can match Plato with a reading of Genesis, while chapter VIII develops the term ‘correlation’ but now not only as an epistemological category but in terms of the chapter’s title: ‘The Discovery of Man as Fellow Man’.

term – out of a neo-Kantian problematic means that it cannot simply be seen as the “complement” to the origin in straightforward temporal terms. The messianic as “goal” or “telos” (mirroring the origin as “beginning”) is the starting point for a radicalization of any such restrictively historicist interpretations. Cohen had begun to formulate these problems already in essays such as “The Idea of the Messiah” of 1892 and “The Concept of Religion in the System of Philosophy” of 1915.¹⁰

In sum: “the universality of Messianism is the consequence of the antinomy between state and people in the history of Israel”.¹¹ Therefore the (real, historical) antinomy of a people and statelessness is the basis of the Idea of Messianism which only the “historical singularity” of the Jews could produce – in Kantian terms, the conflict of Jewish particularity and their homelessness is overcome via the regulative idea of one people (mankind) as radically futural, as messianic *Idea*. And so Cohen strives towards a *universality* (of messianism as *Idea*) even as this universality is based on a historical *particularity*, which is itself antinomic in form (the antinomy of the state and the people). Thus politics here would be a politics of the “regulative idea,” or as infinite task.

Written twenty-two years after Cohen’s death, Benjamin’s “On The Concept of History”, Thesis XVIIa, (not normally included in what is now perhaps Benjamin’s most well known writing) comments on the disjunction between the secularized messianic idea of a classless society and the project of neo-Kantianism socialism:

In the idea of a classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing. It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this to an “ideal” that the trouble began. The Ideal was defined in neo-Kantian doctrine as an “infinite task” [*unendlich Aufgabe*]. And this doctrine [*Lehre*] was the school philosophy of the Social Democratic party.¹²

Benjamin continues:

Once the classless society had been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogenous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity. In reality, there is not a moment that would not carry with it its revolutionary chance – provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new

¹⁰ See Poma *op cit*, 157–169. For a discussion of the unity of Cohen’s thought and the recent literature around it, see Gibbs *op cit*, *passim*.

¹¹ Herman Cohen *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, tr. Simon Kaplan, Frederick Ungar Publishing co., New York, 1972, 254.

¹² Walter Benjamin *Selected Writings vol.4: 1938 – 1940*, tr. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Howard Eiland, Michael W Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2003, 402. Hereafter SW4.

task [*Aufgabe*].¹³

It is these “completely new solutions” that Benjamin is already attempting to formulate in his writings of 1923, as we shall see. For Rosenzweig, the problem with Cohen’s approach also lies in temporality, specifically in his utilization of the Judaic conception of historical temporality. Its form, being progressivist, infers an assimilationist, humanist, and, in Rosenzweig’s words, “apologetic” transformation of the messianic itself. It is precisely the task of the “new thinking” as formulated by Rosenzweig to supersede this: its unapologetic form accommodates both historical and existential methodologies (we could say via Feuerbach, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche alike) in order to move beyond all philosophical perspectives into the “timeliness” of thought itself. This emerges out of the historical, irreconcilable, yet productive dualities of “Christian” and “Jewish” dialogue. It is also a reconfiguration of the tensions between theological and philosophical forms of thought such that “theological problems want to be translated into human [problems], while human [problems] want to be driven into the theological”.¹⁴ Above all, it is the ambitious reconception of human temporal relationships at both the historical and communal level that underpins the possibility of redemption in Rosenzweig’s main work, *Star of Redemption*:

That the Jewish people rests on the matter of fact which it itself is, and the Christian community on the event around which it gathers itself, leads in the former case to a general sociology and in the latter case to a sociology of the arts. A messianic politics, thus a theory of war, concludes [Book One, Part Three of *Star of Redemption*], whilst a Christian aesthetic, thus a theory of suffering [follows].¹⁵

It is this “messianic politics” that I shall discuss briefly here.

Franz Rosenzweig and the New Thinking

The ambitious and often obscure metacritical intentions of Rosenzweig’s 1921 work *Star of Redemption* can be understood in its relation not only to the philosophical orthodoxy of its day (neo-Kantianism, the later forms of 19th century positivist approaches to history, anthropology and sociology) but also as the outline of a *collective* task for writers for whom the question of timeliness is made paramount. When Hugo Otto, commenting on the similarities between Rosenzweig and Heidegger’s projects, dismissed the new thinking generally as “a philosophy and theology of hyperinflation,”¹⁶

¹³ *Ibid*, 402.

¹⁴ Rosenzweig *op cit*, 129, ‘The New Thinking’ of 1925.

¹⁵ Rosenzweig *op cit*, 133.

¹⁶ Otto’s remarks are quoted in Karl Löwith, ‘M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig, or, Temporality and Eternity’ in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* vol. III, 1942/43, New York, 90.

this nonetheless encapsulated a movement that attempted to think the question of “timeliness” in terms of its particular relationship to German national identity post-Versailles. For the new thinkers, the disappointments and unfulfilled promises of the Bismarck era produced a radicalization of theoretical thinking along two lines - the theological and the political – which would produce a conception of thinking as a “task” more adequate to the times than the neo-Kantianism that preceded it.¹⁷

This task is immediately apparent in Rosenzweig’s reconception of the problem of historical method. Determined not only by his early studies on Hegel (an approach developed under the influence of Meinecke’s *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*)¹⁸ and in reaction to neo-Kantianism orthodoxy. Rosenzweig’s world-view is an essentially mournful image emerging out of the failures of the Bismarck/Hegelian forms of 19th Century Statecraft. In addition, his “return” to Judaism in 1913 enabled Rosenzweig to incorporate a radicalized conception of Jewish existence as a theological and political alternative to party politics. Messianism could no longer be valid as mere “idea” in Cohen’s sense.¹⁹ Rather, it must become the fundamental category of an unapologetic, experiential and even *liturgical* solution to the question of politics. Rosenzweig’s historical-theological reorientation – out of a Judaic conception of festive/circular temporality - is married to a critique of non-messianic conceptions of world history, whether they are progressivist, assimilationist, humanist, or “pagan.” Judaic time becomes the political alternative to “christianized” historicism: circular and repetitive rather than linear, messianic and anticipatory yet not “directional” or teleological in any way. As an example, in a letter to his Christian interlocutor, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, Rosenzweig writes:

You [Rosenstock-Huessy, as a Christian] evidently have no idea how

¹⁷ But never in liberal or progressivist terms. After the war, such progressivism could only be seen as the failure of neo-Kantianism itself (and the aborted, pre-War project of neo-Hegelianism, in which Rosenzweig was involved). Indeed, for thinkers such as Rosenstock-Huessy, the revolution in thought adequate to the world-historical crises of the time would entail a movement towards Protestantism and a politically conservative understanding of nation, state and identity. In this sense the new thinking plays out many of the complex reorientations of philosophical and political thought which would become more explicit in the conservative revolution to come, where radicalization of method by no means guarantees a progressivism of politics, and often the exact opposite (Heidegger being only the most famous example, but many of Benjamin’s eclectic circle of acquaintances were on the right).

¹⁸ A neo-Hegelian movement attempted to inaugurate itself around 1900 in Heidelberg. Those involved included Max Weber (in opposition to the Georg circle), Wilhelm Windlebrand and Rosenzweig himself. However the ‘movement’ as such was only transitional – a means of liberation from neo-Kantianism - and soon led to disparate and irreconcilable Hegelian interpretations such as those found in the work of Julius Ebbinghaus, Hans Ehrenberg, Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács (see Paul Mendes-Flohr, (ed.) *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1988, 109).

¹⁹ Rosenzweig, like Benjamin, came from an assimilated middle-class German family, and ‘returned’ to Judaism in 1913 after many of his assimilated Jewish friends and colleagues – Hans Ehrenberg and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy in particular – converted to Protestantism. His conviction to the Jewish life was famously reinforced by his encounter with Eastern European Jewish peasants whilst on active service in WW1. See Glatzer *op cit*, pages 23-61.

different all things Jewish are. [. . .] This goes also for economy, although here the relationship between Jews and the nations is quite direct, and doubtless revolutionary. The Sabbath *is* a world revolution.²⁰

Now, despite this flippant remark, the opportunity to address the political appears in Rosenzweig's work in all its stages, most notably his own critical remarks on his pre-War work *Hegel and the State*, his explicitly Feurbachian interpretation of anthropological and sociological concerns, and his frequent, if ambiguous, references to Zionism in letters and elsewhere. Despite all this however, Rosenzweig remains, by his own admission, a quietest at the party-political level. The consideration of a "messianic politics" in *Star of Redemption* may be seen thus either as oxymoronic (according to the logic of his own separation of the messianic and the profane), ironic or simply naïve. Nonetheless, it occurs in *Star of Redemption* as the reconfiguration of a specific moment in German history - "1800" - as the time of most pronounced tension between pagan and Christian world-views. Alongside "1900", "1800" is thus the generic term for the political-social "now" in Rosenzweig, the moment in which the consequences of both pagan and Christian world-views are being played out.

The central figure here is Goethe and the problem of political practice is reconfigured via liturgy:

[The structures of liturgy] anticipate. They take something future, and turn it into today. Thus they are neither key nor mouthpiece for their world, but representatives. For cognition [*erkenntniss*] they represent the redeemed hypercosmos [*Überwelt*]. Cognition takes cognisance only of them. It does not look beyond them. What is eternal hides behind them. They are the light, by which we see light. They are the silent anticipation of a world gleaming in the silence of the future.²¹

The new thinking is an attitude towards the future that is anticipatory yet not impatient. Its "timeliness" is "timely" in all the ethical, theological and political meanings of the word. The model for Rosenzweig is therefore a type of humanity that calls not *directly* for its own redemption but for the possibility of attaining its own infinitude via its (liturgical) work. "Work" here is that linguistic-historical task which calls for the possibility of its own completion: it is thus at once a prayer *and* an orientation to one's individual mortality. Thus Rosenzweig begins *Star of Redemption* with an allusion to the recent war – "the fast approaching volleys of blind death"²² – and proceeds to analyse the ways in which traditional categories of logical, aesthetic and ethical understanding need to be rethought via a more authentic and fearful

²⁰ *Ibid*, 135 (letter of August 25th 1924).

²¹ Franz Rosenzweig *Star of Redemption*, tr. William W Hallo, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1970, 295.

²² *Ibid*, 3.

confrontation with death. In terms of Rosenzweig's aesthetics, this leads to a new understanding of the literary work itself, either as the utterance of the poet or, under different historical circumstances, as the mute defiance of the tragic hero in the face of his own fate. It is this conception of "tragic silence" that forms the cornerstone of Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Within modernity, this aesthetic work - even if conceived as the prayer of the non-believer (the poem, the lyric ballad etc.) - is still that which contains *more* faith than that of the ostensibly religious utterance. The particular reorientation of the speaker to the possibility of their finitude and possible redemption is at the root of this. Thus, whilst Rosenzweig radicalises the idea of messianism in theological terms in such a way that it makes the possibility of political transformation *within* the profane problematic, the question of the individual's understanding of his/her own relationship to temporality is also conceived as a "politics," albeit in a very particular sense. The question for Rosenzweig becomes, "is it possible to entreat or solicit redemption itself?"²³

Rosenzweig creates this messianic politics out of the disparity between what he calls "the last heathen and the first Christian" – Hegel and Goethe respectively – where Goethe's literary and political practice provides an alternative understanding of Kantian/Hegelian modernity. Thus what is remarkable even beyond all the other similarities between Rosenzweig's and Benjamin's projects is that at the very moment at which they turn towards the question of the political, the problem is configured for both of them via a prolonged critique of the "uncanny humanism" of Goethe. Whilst Benjamin's 1919 essay on Goethe appears as something like a "third critique" in his early work ("*Goethe's Elective Affinities*" is concerned with beauty and lawfulness as an ethical and formal relationship between subjects), it is also a work that was written with the political implications of such aesthetic questions constantly in view. As a reflection on linguistic and experiential forms and their dialectical interfolding in the "now" of bourgeois literary deification, Benjamin's "Goethe", like Rosenzweig's "Goethe", becomes the site of a political conflict within modernity itself, where what is at stake is not only the representation of a historical figure but the possibility of reconciliation itself.

Star of Redemption's impact on Benjamin upon its publication in 1921 was important at both the formal and the methodological level. In letters to Scholem he mentions the "seductive" aspects of its form, particularly the tripartite structure, which offers Benjamin the model of a certain systematic symmetry but without the abstraction of formal dialectical systematization. But above all its influence on Benjamin can be detected in its methodological eclecticism, showing how the move beyond Kantian and neo-Kantian

²³ *Erbeten* – the German has connotations of *erbetteln* 'to get by begging'. The subtitle of the last section of *Star of Redemption* is thus entitled 'Über die Möglichkeit, das Reich zu erbeten', on the possibility of *entreating* the (messianic) kingdom.

epistemology can be achieved by embracing not only post-Kantian forms of argument (Schelling, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche) but any number of diverse and even contradictory discourses around one central object. And so, for example, the “Epistemo-critical prologue” to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* intersperses “Hegel, Plato and Leibniz” as competing systematic approaches oriented towards the same question - the relationship between knowledge, concepts and ideas - just as *Star of Redemption* moves through Idealism, theology and anthropology in its analysis of the basic “elements” of God, man and world. Also like *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Rosenzweig’s work is a book fundamentally about representation: *qua* philosophy, *qua* method, *qua* art and above all *in* and *of* language itself. It is also about the ways in which our profane, historical understanding of representation and its forms is actually founded on a confusion of secular and theological concepts (in Rosenzweig this critical position emerges from Schelling’s *Weltalter*, which provides not only the particular model of the three “world ages” but similarly works on the border of philosophy and cosmogony). Both *Star of Redemption* and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* constantly explore the tensions (dialectical and antinomic) between theology and post-Kantian philosophy, between mythical and secular aesthetics, and between sacred and profane forms of law.

Before moving on to Benjamin, it is worth mentioning one more remarkable similarity between *Star of Redemption* and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which is the way in which both books end with the visage or face. *Star of Redemption* culminates in a responsible and responsive relationship with the countenance of God mapped onto the redemptive *Gestalt* of the star of David, whilst Benjamin’s book concludes with a remarkable speculative critique of radical evil, read via the mask-like visage of evil genius itself, that of the devil. We shall see how Benjamin’s project, even if it takes on many of the methodological concerns of Rosenzweig’s work, utilises this reading not towards a theological conception of “messianic politics” and the possibility of redemption itself, but *inversely* towards a politics of the contemporary situation as nothing less than a “theology of Hell”.

Benjamin at no point wants to wholly sacrifice the political to the theological, yet his reaction against Cohen (and what he will describe in 1940 as the “school philosophy of the social democratic party”) entails at once something like a *reversal* of the idea of the messiah from that which is progressive and future oriented to an analysis of the failures and unredeemed status of historical events. The figures through which messianism is read in Benjamin’s thought in all its stages are therefore backward looking, not forward looking, the history of failures (and the history of unfulfilled

utopias) rather than the *imminent* promise of redemption itself.²⁴ I do not want to offer a simply causal or teleological reading of the relationship between Benjamin and Cohen here. Despite their differences, the importance of Cohen for Benjamin is vast, and his work is thus neither “rejected” nor “assimilated” into Benjamin’s.

Walter Benjamin: The Figures and Grounds of Modernity

Benjamin’s work entails a diverse, plural and eclectic approach to methodology itself, indeed, we could say a constant thinking on philosophical system and its alternatives – fragment, quote, reportage, biography. In the preface to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the central problem is the problem of philosophy both as a historical-linguistic “codification”²⁵ and as that which offers the promise of thinking its own status as task – to think thought itself. In this light, the theatre of the Baroque period is at once an incoherent confusion of theological and philosophical ideas *and* a model of the anachronism or temporal confusion at the heart of modernity itself. This is where the strongest affinities between Benjamin’s historical method and Rosenzweig’s conception of the new thinking lie. Like Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*, the work on baroque drama is a thinking which is self-consciously timely *and* untimely, concerned with its own timeliness (in transformative, if not always in overtly political terms) and at once an examination of the untimely, fallen, and even ruinous forms of the historical realm itself: an apparently obscure work of literary history written at a time of profound social and political crises. This echoes Rosenzweig’s understanding of the “now” of new thinking as “1800 and 1900”, that is, modernity is *both* the end and beginning, a transformative point in which the time of the “last heathen and the first Christian” – Hegel and Goethe – co-exists with the more recent historical events of Verdun, Versailles and Weimar. This historical conflation may already look remarkably like Benjamin’s own dialectical image, yet the relationships between these two radicalized readings of the contemporary situation and dialectical or speculative systematization (in Hegelian form or not) remains problematic in either case. It is complicated, for example, by Rosenzweig’s own development of a strong anti-Hegelianism after his pre-war project *Hegel and the State*, an anti-Hegelianism derived from Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer as much as Schelling.

Nonetheless, Benjamin will begin to understand the relationship between

²⁴ However this reverse orientation in Benjamin’s thought does not necessarily entail an inversion of the messianic itself, nor is the messiah reversed (the messiah is not the ‘the angel of history’).

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, tr. John Osborne, Verso, London, 1998, 27. Hereafter OGT.

historical events and the contemporary in terms of dialectics in this period, at the same time as he decides to turn towards political issues, a turn prompted in part by his encounter with Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* in 1919.²⁶ If Bloch's version of messianism, like Cohen's, is all too quickly co-opted into the profane realm of actual political transformation, then Benjamin's methodological radicalism can be seen as his attempt to remain faithful to a certain logic of messianism whilst not precluding all possibility of political effectivity itself. Language or, more precisely, writing provides the key here. In this specific period (1919-1923), Benjamin undertakes a number of deliberate and tactical linguistic practices that can be seen, for all their diversity, as the repeated attempt to find a form of representation adequate to the challenges of modernity in all its anachronistic complexity. And so around 1919 Benjamin attempts to find practical solutions for what he calls in 1937 the "aporias of theory"²⁷ by turning towards a number of linguistic forms – from the quasi-academic treatise (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*) to the collaborative project (*Angelus Novalis*) to the very heart of linguistic transformation itself (his Baudelaire translations). The book that is contemporary with *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, both in its earliest drafts and in its publication in 1928, is "One Way Street", which highlights how the question of political space read out of Baroque dramatic art becomes the political arena of the contemporary situation. As a good Kantian, Benjamin is aware that this is not simply the bad "space" of the political in contrast to the pure "time" of the messianic but an analysis of the complex relationships between *spatialization* and *temporalization*. Space and time *in and of* the political emerges here out of something like a "figure and ground" image of political representation. An important work in this respect would be the fragment "World and Time" (1919/20) in which space and time are for the first time configured in overtly political terms:

World and Time

In the revelation of the divine, the world – the theatre of history – is subjected to a great process of decomposition, while time – the life of him who represents it – is subject to a great process of fulfilment. The end of the world: the destruction and liberation of a (dramatic) representation. Redemption of history from the one who represents it./ But perhaps in this sense the profoundest antithesis to "world" is not "time" but "the world to come"²⁸

²⁶ See Rabinbach *op cit*, 175 – it was not only his book 'but more than his book, also his conversation that was so often directed against my rejection of *every* contemporary political tendency, that finally caused me to immerse myself in this matter [of politics]'.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings vol.3: 1935 – 1938*, tr. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland et al., ed. Howard Eiland, Michael W Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 2003, 263.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings vol. 1: 1913 – 1926*, tr. Rodney Livingston et al., ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings, The Belknap Press at Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1996, 226. Hereafter SW1.

In its present state, the social is a manifestation of spectral and demonic powers, often, admittedly, in their greatest tension to God, their efforts to transcend themselves. The divine manifests itself in them only in revolutionary force. Only in the community, nowhere in "social organizations", does the divine manifest itself either with force or without [. . .] Such manifestations are to be sought not in the sphere of the social but in perception oriented toward revelation and, first and last, in language [. . .] The question of "manifestation" is central.²⁹

Benjamin here makes his position explicit: "my definition of politics: the fulfilment of an unimproved humanity."³⁰ The political problem of this "destruction and liberation of a (dramatic) representation" can be seen as the recurring concern of all works from this period from "Critique of Violence" of 1921 to the simultaneous publication of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and "One Way Street" in 1928.

Origin of German Tragic Drama returns again and again to the dramatic scene as the spatial extension of baroque political and theological understanding.³¹ This is tied, in part, to the aesthetic and historical thought of Jacob Burckhardt, Florens Christian Rang and Rosenzweig himself where drama is understood as a profane development of mythical sacrifice and/or contest. In this reading, the stage is the spatial and figurative extension of the sacrificial altar, the "plot" is the hero's defiance and attempted escape, and the whole is merely a "delay" of the inevitable tragic moment of death. In its theological and political aspects drama is linked specifically with an epistemological understanding of the relationship between time and space such that space is the inversion of pure messianic temporality. For Benjamin, in the Baroque theatre "as in other spheres of Baroque life, what is vital is the transposition of the originally temporal data into an *unreal* ['figurative'] spatial simultaneity [*eine räumliche Uneigentlichkeit und simultaneität bestimmend*]. This leads deep into the structure of the dramatic form."³² As these following passages show, there is a double movement of space and time here that Benjamin returns to again and again in the book:

The decisive factor in the escapism of the Baroque [. . .] is [. . .] the restoration of the timelessness of paradise. History merges into the setting [*Schauplatz*]. [Furthermore,] history is secularized in the setting [*Schauplatz*]. [. . .] In both cases chronological movement is grasped and analysed in a spatial image. The image of the setting, or more precisely [in Baroque drama], of the court, becomes the key to historical understanding.

In contrast to the spasmodic [fitful] chronological progression of tragedy, the

²⁹ *Ibid*, 227.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 226.

³¹ Not, however, of the straightforward *equivalence* of aesthetic and moral phenomena: 'The work of art is unhesitatingly accepted as the exemplary copy of moral phenomena without any consideration of how susceptible such phenomena are to representation' (OGT, 104).

³² *Ibid*, 81.

Trauerspiel takes place in a spatial continuum [*Kontinuum des Raumes*], which one might describe as choreographic.

For where it is a question of a realization of time in space – and what else is meant by [time’s] secularization other than its transformation into the strictly present [*die strikte Genewart*] – then the most radical procedure is to make events simultaneous. The duality of meaning and reality was reflected in the construction of the stage. The use of the drop-scene permitted the alternation between actions on the forestage and scenes which extended to the full-depth of the stage.³³

In 1923, the transformation of these historical-political insights into the contemporary situation becomes of paramount importance. “A Tour through the German Inflation,” the central section of “One Way Street,” was written immediately prior to the hyperinflation’s peak in September 1923. An early draft was given to Scholem as a leaving present upon Benjamin’s trip to Paris, yet later reworked at the same time as the other important “city portraits” of this period such as “Naples”, “Moscow” and the first *Arcades* notebooks of 1927. The “tour” takes the form of 14 “theses” analysing the prevalent bourgeois moods in Germany at the time. It is thus a model for the larger structure of the book it appears in (which takes the form of signposted fragments and mini-essays, some of which contain their own, smaller theses) and later works such as “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and the *Arcades* project. Above all it is a formal play on the spatial aspects of the urban (a tour), structured wholly *within* the linguistic (a book). This “collapse” of temporal/sacred relationships into spatial/profane forms to some extent repeats the investigation of Baroque language, materiality and spatiality in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Perhaps above all it can be seen as a parallel to the Baudelaire studies of 1938 to 1940 (particularly “Central Park”) in its imagistic “figure and ground” approach to the problem of spatialization and temporalization. Thus the Spanish court of the 17th Century transforms into Parisian urbanity in the 19th, or the fated, “one way street” of Berlin in the 20th. What is important is how Benjamin begins to represent the “figures” and “types” which belong to these spaces in terms of their *unreality*: like Benjamin’s recurring optical and painting metaphors (Grünewald’s figures, for example, which stand more vividly against their dark background), the personae of dramatic and political narrative are highlighted against their theatrically conceived backdrop: the more “real” they become *qua* figurativeness, the clearer our perception of their quasi-mythical unreality.

And yet, if we are to have any hope of overcoming the oppressive forms of bourgeois political representation, Benjamin insists that yet another reorientation of thinking needs to take place: we need to reconfigure the “present” as the disastrous, and not the disastrous as something impending

³³ *Ibid*, 92, 95 and 194.

(indeed, like a one way street) which, in itself, *may* be halted:

The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are “status quo” is the catastrophe. It is not the ever-present possibility but what in each case is given. Strindberg’s idea: hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now [and therefore] redemption depends on the tiny fissure in the continuous catastrophe.³⁴

This also calls for a new form of political representation that is somehow imagistic yet *not* realist. In keeping with Benjamin’s own understanding of “new solutions for new problems”, there must be constitutively new (and thus avant-garde) attempts to recognise the immanent possibilities of redemption within the “disastrous” and quasi-mythical configurations of the contemporary situation.

“One Way Street” remains, along with Benjamin’s other urban “spaces”, a self-consciously disjunctive and fragmentary model; both a representation of the anachronistic and a representation concerned with the displacement of temporality itself - the “reverse of the eternal”.³⁵ As Benjamin puts it in Thesis 7 of the “tour”, witnessing the spatial context of the contemporary political situation: “It is as if one were trapped in a theatre and had to follow the events on stage whether one wanted to or not - had to make them again and again, unwillingly, the subject of one’s thought and speech.”³⁶ The model here is panoramic and theatrical, i.e. a thinking of profane spatialization in its “eternally repetitive” form and of the intimate connections between this logic of spatialization and capital itself. And so, in the other great city portrait from this period, “Naples,” the court is subject to the law of “dispersal” and “collectedness” [“*Zerstreuung*” und “*Sammlung*”]. Things are assembled according to their significance; indifference to their existence [*Dasein*] allowed them to be dispersed again.³⁷

In this 1925 text, the explicit link between capital – which, like allegory, is a process of apparently untiring dispersal and collection – and its urban “stage” is brought forth. Thus the “courtyards, arcades and stairwells” are the theatrical backdrops against which the intrigue of capitalism (read Catholicism) takes place, tellingly held together “as if by iron clamps, by the murals of the Madonna”. Capital is not read from a theory of labor but out of its intimate relationships with the city, the visual, and the iconographic itself. Most famously, a theory of capital is transformed here into a theory of

³⁴ SW4, 184-185. Thus in 1927, the burgeoning arcades project and OGT alike are conceived as a ‘theology of hell’. In 1939, Benjamin will apparently mourn the ‘truncated endings of materialist studies (in contrast to the close of the book on the baroque’ (SW4 191).

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910 – 1940*, ed. and annotated by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W Adorno, tr. Manfred R Jacobson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994 (letter 169, February 8th, 1928).

³⁶ SW1, 453.

³⁷ OGT, 188.

gambling, its intoxications, its dream-like and time-wasting forms. Yet Benjamin has in these city writings many varied images of capital's processes, in particular with regards to its own internal logic of dispersal and collection. In a remarkable allegory of the quasi-magical form of surplus value, Benjamin writes:

Someone kneels on the asphalt, a little box beside him, and it is one of the busiest streets. With coloured chalk he draws the figure of Christ on the stone, below it perhaps the head of the Madonna. Meanwhile a circle has formed around him. The artist gets up, and while he waits beside his work for fifteen minutes or half an hour, sparse, counted-out coins fall from the onlookers onto the limbs, head, and trunk of the portrait. He gathers them up, everyone disperses, and in a few minutes the picture is erased by feet.³⁸

Thus capitalism in Benjamin can be seen to be reconfigured away from its more orthodox Hegelian and post-Hegelian categories: instead of "capitalism" we have "Catholicism," in place of a theory of class action we have the essay on violence and the general strike ("Critique of Violence"). Instead of the commodity fetish we have the allegorical image, and in place of surplus labor there emerges the theory of gambling which will become central to the *Arcades* project itself.

Perhaps above all however, is the way in which the "figures" or "types" in these early political considerations become that through which the possibility of political effectivity (and ineffectivity) may be thought. Common to all of these (the intriguer, Hamlet, the idiot, Baudelaire, and Goethe to name those most prominent in this early work) is the way in which they provide new models of the subject's relationship to time itself. And so, in 1927, writing the first notes toward what will become the uncompleted *Arcades* project, Benjamin will state "rather than pass the time, one must invite it in." In contrast to the first "type" - the gambler who "passes the time (kills time, expels it)" and is thus "drained" - and his opposite - the flâneur who "stores time like a battery" - there comes a new alternative: "Finally, the synthetic type ([who] takes the 'energy' in time and passes it on in altered form): he who waits." This is altered in the later versions to read more directly: "the third type: he who waits. He takes in the time and renders it up in altered form - that of expectation."³⁹ The possibility of halting the "eternal return" of capital is a question of the attitude that can be taken to the messianic interruption itself. Just as in Rosenzweig, it is thus a question of anticipation, but of the right kind and in the right form; not a relation between a "subject" and its "history", but between a historically constituted "type" and those alternative forms of temporality that may be glimpsed therein.

³⁸ SW1, 416-417.

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, tr. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, The Belknap Press at Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1999, pages 864 and 107. Hereafter *Arcades*.

It becomes, ultimately, a question of Benjamin's attitude towards dialectical logic: despite the anti-Hegelianism of his early methodological works, the possibility of adequate political representation is dialectically read out of these fallen profane "figures." Benjamin's expanded "armature of physiognomic studies" later includes "the flâneur, the collector, the forger, the gambler,"⁴⁰ yet in "One Way Street" they are already present as the pessimist, the anarchist, the academic and the politician. All are trapped in a ruinous present which they *misread* as an impending "one way street" to disaster, the hyperinflation itself being just as much a figurative trope for this as its actual material condition. Any formally dialectical reading of the situation runs the possibility of remaining within the confines of profane metaphysics itself. Yet Benjamin's particular ambivalence towards Hegelianism does not entail a retreat into the "purely" theological either. For here there is also a reversal of Rosenzweig's theology of the revelatory, divine face: the only form of recognition available here is not that of the "face to face" relationship but that of the city in its opposition to the messianic. "Recognition" is, ultimately, figured dialectically *and* theologically: "Parallelism between this work [*Arcades*] and the *Trauerspiel* book. Common to both, the theme: theology of hell. Allegory, advertisement, types: martyr, tyrant, whore, spectator".⁴¹

Court, stage, street, arcade, city – all these spaces form a "choreographic" or topographic "theology" of hell: The "now" is recognized only as the disastrous "status quo." In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* this was aligned with the specifically Kantian problem of radical evil and, in a further reversal of Rosenzweig's "face of God", of death's head or even the face of the devil, the original dialectical image.⁴² The possibility of arresting this dispersal/collection (the eternal return simultaneously as "boring" or "apathetic" as it is shocking, eternally new) lies in finding the correct approach to temporality itself, as an orientation to the *immanent* possibilities of messianic interruption. *With* Rosenzweig, Benjamin wants to analyse the forms of "perpetual expectations" specific to the profane (for example, "Boredom and: the commodity's wait to be sold")⁴³ so that alternative, more responsive forms can be glimpsed. The problem of capitalism and philosophy is the problem of expectation and the forms of representation adequate to it, neither as "ethics" nor as "liturgy" but perhaps via material contents adequate to recognition.

It is a specific problem, in 1923, of *Mitteleuropa*, economic crisis, and what Benjamin will in "One Way Street" call the "silent, invisible power" of political nihilism. The crisis itself enforces the common belief that the

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 866.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 854.

⁴² Compare, for example, OGT pages 227-233 and Rosenzweig *Star of Redemption*, *op cit*, pages 418-421.

⁴³ *Arcades*, 861

contemporary situation is *always* in a state of either progress or decline (in Benjamin's words, the "stupid and cowardly" belief that things simply "can't go on like this," the "helpless fixation on notions of security and property"). This, however, misdirects attention from the "quite remarkable stabilities of an entirely new kind that underlie the present situation," that is, the real disaster of the "status quo". Finding the new, non-bourgeois, form of anticipation is therefore a question of "directing the gaze" towards the "perpetual expectation [*immerwährenden Erwartung*] of the final onslaught [*Sturmangriffs*], on nothing except the extraordinary event in which alone salvation [*retten –'rescue'*] now lies":

But this necessary state of intense and uncomplaining attentiveness, could, because we are in mysterious contact with the powers besieging us, really call forth a miracle. Conversely the assumption that things cannot go on like this will one day confront the fact that for the suffering of individuals, as of communities [*Gemeinschaften*], there is only one limit beyond which things cannot go: annihilation [*die Vernichtung*].⁴⁴

At this moment, in 1923, the hyperinflation makes not only estrangement and exile but annihilation itself look imminent. The answer appears as a new configuration of writing itself, a production of a despatialized, yet "thinglike," non-narrative approach to language, representation and, consequently, the political. Rosenzweig's call for a "no longer book" at the conclusion of *Star of Redemption* is echoed in Benjamin's remarks at this time: "but it is quite beyond doubt that that the development of writing will not indefinitely be bound by the claims to power of a chaotic academic and commercial activity; rather, quantity is approaching the moment of a qualitative leap when writing, advancing ever more deeply into the graphic regions of its new eccentric figurativeness, will suddenly take possession of an adequate material content".⁴⁵ It remains to be explored just how much the forms of representation - philosophical, aesthetic or political - which emerged alongside the subsequent disasters of 20th century capitalism lived up to this possibility.

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⁴⁴ SW1 pages 450, 451.

⁴⁵ SW1, 456-457.

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