DANIEL WEIDNER

University of Halle

LIFE AFTER LIFE: A FIGURE OF THOUGHT IN WALTER BENJAMIN[1]

In religious studies, the topic of reception has become more and more important in recent decades. No longer willing and able to reconstruct "origins" and tired of the attempts to draw lines between "religion proper" and its cultural context, researchers turned to ways religious symbols, practices, and institutions affected the world around them and how religion is transformed, translated, and rearticulated. With the cultural turn of the 1970s and '80s, religion is seen less as an "autonomous" phenomenon or a social fact, but tied to culture and thus also the symbolic and practical universe around it. The study of historical processes of reception seemed to be one way to study this entanglement. Countless studies on "religion and …," commentary series that track biblical books "through the centuries," and the multi volume *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Receptions* express this trend.

This goes along with more general trends in the humanities, with a mistrust in origins and a growing skepticism in the ability to give an objective reconstruction of the past. Instead of history one turned to memory, and especially the 1980s brought a boom in memory studies as well as the emergence of different theories of cultural memory that even defined culture in terms of memory— a move that also reached religious studies, where Danièle Hervieu-Léger tries to conceptualize religion as a "chain of memory" to avoid the old problems of how to define religion.[2] The rise of postmodernism has surely contributed to the shift from earlier origins to questions of reception in religious studies in particular, where the notion of post-Christianity or post-religion made the question of what remains of religion and how one could describe these remains urgent. Postsecularism makes the question even more pressing: it highlights that religion is not only a remainder in secular times, but stays important albeit in a secular framework. In fact, it is one of the main insights of memory studies that "renaissances," "reforms" and "returns" are usually rather reconstructions than returns.

Yet despite their overwhelming interest in reception, these studies often suffer from a rather weak conceptual framework. Neither "memory" nor "reception" is a very strong concept, nor do they come along with robust theories or methodologies. The notion of a "collective memory" is clearly a metaphor, and "reception" evokes the concrete handing over of goods which is obviously far too simple for what happens in the realm of cultural traditions. Moreover, both notions tend to be modified and widened extensively. When we speak of a "creative memory" or of a "productive

[1] Paper given at the Conference: *Afterlife. Writing and Image in Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg*, Universidad Federal de Minais Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brasil, October 2012.

[2] Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. Simon Lee (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000). The French original is from 1993.

reception," these terms empty out metaphorical meaning to an extent that they tend to mean anything. In theoretical terms, reception studies often recur to hermeneutics, especially to the revival of hermeneutics in Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method,* in which Gadamer conceives history less as a series of facts to be reconstructed than as "effective history" in which we, the present subjects who understand the past, are in fact the result of a continuum of past "effects," most notably in our embeddedness in language.[3] It is interesting to note that the notion of "effective history" indeed focuses more on the origin than the receiver. This has led to criticism that Gadamer downplays the active and "critical" moment in reception, and that it can become just another version of the fixations on origins so typical for older approaches to religion.[4]

Searching for a more complex and less linear notion of "memory," the new approach turned to Freud, most notably to his late writings on *Moses and Monotheism,* to find a more complex description of how past experiences survive and resurface in a culture in which ideas of latency and deferral play a central role: history is neither a series of facts nor a continuum of effects but rather an interplay full of tensions and abrupt reversals.[5] Similarly, the art historian Aby Warburg became a major point of reference through his efforts to understand how images "survive" and transport their specific meaning and pathos in latency, especially in what Warburg tries to occasionally call the "Afterlife of Antiquity" ("*Nachleben der Antike*").[6] "Survival," "Belatedness," and "Afterlife" thus became important terms in the realm of memory studies.

A third author who is sometimes mentioned as reference is Walter Benjamin, whose criticism of historicism as well as the idea of an "archaeology of the collective's unconscious" by a sort of messianic historiography proved highly inspiring for historians, literary critics, and researchers in memory studies.[7] Benjamin also refers to reception and afterlife, which play an essential part in his approach to history that has been mostly overlooked, but which is all the more interesting in our context. Benjamin explicitly refers to the religious connotation of "afterlife,"

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[3] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1992, 2. rev. ed.). For a general discussion of reception in biblical studies, see Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Bloomington, Indiana UP 2014).

[4] Cf. Jürgen Habermas, "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality," in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, eds. Gayle Ormiston & Alan Schrift (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), 245-72, also Paul Ricoeur, „Hermeneutics and Ideological Criticism," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation,* ed. & trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: University Press, 1981), 23-60.

[5] Cf. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freuds Moses (*Berlin: Wagenbach, 1992), Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 1997); Brian Britt, *Rewriting Moses: The Narrative Eclipse of the Text* (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

[6] Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Surviving Images. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (Pennsylvania: State University Press, 2017).

[7] Cf. among many Walter P. Steinberg: *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Cornell University Press, 2017)

namely the afterlife of the dead, and does not hesitate to refer to notions of eternity and scripture which underline the religious context of his reflections.

This paper aims to reconstruct Benjamin's approach to the afterlife. To do so, I will first elaborate on the specific figural character of Benjamin's concepts in general, and secondly unfold the historical context of Benjamin's reflections, namely the use of "afterlife" in early twentieth century discourse. I will then analyze Benjamin's ideas about historical life focusing on "The Task of the Translator," for it is here that the idea of a historical life is most visible in his writings. And finally, I will highlight the paradox of "afterlife," a "life after life" which is neither life nor its opposite in relation to the study of religion and reception.

I. Figures of Thought

Time and again, Benjamin uses the notion of afterlife. In "The Task of the Translator," he does not only state that the original "survives" (*überlebt*) in translation, but formulates programmatically so that in order to understand the historicity of art, one has to conceive the "life and continuing life (*Leben und Fortleben*) of the works of art."[8] Later, in his book *The Origin of the German Mourning Play,* he characterizes the pre- and post-history of the works of art as "natural life."[9] Even in the materialistic essay on Eduard Fuchs from 1937, he describes historical understanding as "an afterlife of that which has been understood and whose pulse can be felt in the present."[10] Finally, in the notes on historical method of the *Passagen-Project,* he generalizes once more: "Historical 'understanding' is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the 'afterlife of works,' in the analysis of 'fame,' is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in General."[11] In this context, where Benjamin reflects on "the tradition of the suppressed," it is quite remarkable that he refers to "fame," and this is symptomatic both for the enduring importance of his idea of "afterlife" and for the difficulty to fit it into the new context.

In Benjamin studies, these passages are quoted frequently but hardly conceived as a specific project.[12] Especially, the relation between afterlife

[8] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Selected Writings Vol. 1*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2002), 253-63, here 254

[9] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic drama,* trans. Peter Osbourne, (London, New York: Verso) 1998, 47.

[10] Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs. The Collector and the Historian," in: *Selected Writings Vol. 3,*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2002), 260-302, here 262.

[11] Walter Benjamin: The Arcades-Project, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2002), 460.

[12] Studies which discuss Benjamin's Nachleben explicitly are rare in the huge literature on Benjamin's concept of history and memory, and they usually format the afterlife by other concepts as "quotation" (Bettine Menke, "Das Nach-Leben im Zitat. Benjamins Gedächtnis der Texte," in *Gedächtniskunst: Raum – Bild – Schrift: Studien zur Mnemotechnik*, eds. Anselm Haverkamp & Renate Lachmann (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), 74-110.) or "heritage" (Stefan Willer, "'Nachleben des

and life – which seems to be obvious and is even highlighted by the quote on "the life and afterlife of works of art" – is usually not discussed explicitly; by consequence, the idea of afterlife is taken out of its context, loses its specificity, and becomes a mere metaphor. Of course it is true that the idea and the very term 'afterlife' is probably less important than other concepts of Benjamin, such as construction, redemption, tradition, and quotation; it is also true that the references to "afterlife" tend to be less present and especially less programmatic in Benjamin's later texts, as if he had given up the idea. Nevertheless, the reflections on afterlife do reveal a particular thread in Benjamin's thought. Moreover, it presents Benjamin's way of thinking in an extraordinary way, namely, it allows us to conceive the way he sets up certain concepts or, rather, figures of thought.

Benjamin often counts as a somewhat "literary" thinker, and for good reasons.[13] He deliberately crosses the border between philosophical and literary discourse both in terms of subject matter and in his style of writing. Even more important, as every reader of Benjamin knows, his formulations are often central in themselves, since he often develops his argument by language, i.e. by referring to certain uses of languages, e.g. when he speaks of immediacy, *Unmittelbarkeit*, and stressing the media, *die Mitte*. As I will try to show, the idea of afterlife is developed in similar ways; it is less a clear-cut concept but more generated by the transformation and displacement of language, which is, in this case, not simple everyday language, but a peculiar idiom, namely the contemporary philosophy of life. Benjamin actually uses the idea and term of "life," which is full of the most different connotations at the beginning of the 20th century— as it is now— and displaces it toward the idea of afterlife, and it is only if we take this displacement into proper account that we understand his use of afterlife.

It is this interplay between common use and displacement which I understand as figuration: a (markedly) different use of language. The figurative nature of Benjamin's thinking, if we take it for granted at least on this occasion, has important hermeneutic consequences. For it should no longer allow us to treat Benjamin's "concepts" as a mere terminology, i.e. as a series of idiosyncratic terms that might be rearranged and reconstructed in this or that way, which is unfortunately a habit in several Benjamin studies. Benjamin's "concepts" have to be taken literally, in their explicit wording, but they also have to be related to the context, the common usage to which they refer. For it is only in that tension that we see how his texts work and what their productive potential is still today.

II. Life and Afterlife Around 1900

Verstandenen'. Walter Benjamin und das Erbe des historischen Materialismus," in *Walter Benjamin (Neufassung)*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold (München: *Text + Kritik 31/32,* 2009), 88-96.). For a broader philosophical context of Benjamin's Reflections cf. also Gerhard Richter, *Afterness. Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[13] Cf. Among many others Sigrid Weigel, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit. Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1997), and Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), on 'afterlife' cf. 79-94.

If we conceive *Nachleben* as a figure of thought to be placed into its discursive context, it is essential to understand the common usage of the term at the time when Benjamin refers to it. For neither Benjamin nor Warburg invented the term, by contrast, the term was, and still is, an established title for the history of reception in classical studies, both in the history of antique art and in classical philology where we usually find sections on the *Nachleben* of certain ideas and practices. At times, it is even elaborated in programmatic ways. Let me quote a random example from the booklet *Das Nachleben der Antike, The After-life of Antiquity,* published in 1919 by Otto Immisch, a well-known philologist and strong partisan of the classical humanist gymnasium. It is quite symptomatic for the semantic implications of *Nachleben* in German discourse around 1900, even if we do not assume that Benjamin would have read it.

Immisch argues that antiquity is not dead for us, that we do or at least should feel its significance today in the time of crisis: "The stars do shine again, even for us. We see that something is wrong with the Uniqueness of historical phenomena, there is a renovation, a revival, that is more than historical reconstruction."[14] In the realm of the mind, there is a law of conservation of energy: "The Spiritual (*das Geistige*), if it is formed, remains 'a coined form that develops vitally'" – the last formulation being a famous quotation from Goethe's Urworte, orphisch ("*keine Zeit und keine Macht zerstückelt / Geprägte Form, die lebend sich entwickelt*"). Immisch continues: "And since it lives, it also affects. Its affectation however is cut off from its origin, adapts to new circumstances, continues to live and act in its own right and generates continually new effects which are in turn independent and flexible." Therefore, the historical phenomenon is not identical with its very place in history, but consists in a long series of cultural effects: "Everything that lived and effected continues to live and effect." Thus, our task is to free the antiquity from its encrustations: "It appears as a part of our own live-process, which implies that, as all living things, it is flexible to generate future effects."

Immisch's use and idea of *Nachleben* is symptomatic in several respects. The formula of a living antiquity is not only a cultural agenda which claims that classical knowledge still has more than an antiquarian function, it also implies a certain idea of history as a process of life, which generates meaning from the "roots" or "seeds," moreover, this meaning is itself living, i.e. flexible and not dead. Finally, this life appeals to us insofar as it asks us to make it part of our life, to relive it or to live according to it, as one might translate the "nacherleben." Therefore, *Nachleben*, as Immisch uses it, implies specificity though vague ideas of history, tradition, and reception. It is part of a much wider discourse, namely the historic hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey and his followers, who would stress the importance of "*nach*er*leben*" as historical understanding, and even wider the philosophy of life, which was prominent in Germany from Nietzsche and Dilthey to Ludwig Klages and Alfred Bäumler, that is from the 1880s to the 1930s when at least Bäumler was heavily involved in the National Socialist movement.

At first glance, the idea of history implied in this discourse on life and afterlife seems to be a "biologistic" one, and this is of course true to a certain extent. It refers, however, to a specific form of biology, which is

[14] For the following quotations cf: Otto Immisch, *Das Nachleben der Antike* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1919), 15ss. (my translation).

epitomized by the Goethe-quotation— a morphology which is more concerned with the individual life in history than with life in a biological sense as we tend to conceive it. Thus, for Dilthey, the fundamental expression of life is the autobiography, namely Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit,* in which the individual understands itself and represents its time in a way that we can understand it by "*nacherleben*." Life, in this sense, is therefore essentially cultural and historical. By the end of the century, however, life tends to assume more and more connotations, finally denoting all that is alive in contrast to what is fixed, mechanical, antiquarian, reified, or part of the establishment. It becomes a catchword, a slogan, an absolute metaphor of which meaning is only made up by its contrasts.

And even this contrast tends to collapse. We can see the widening of the meaning of life most clearly in Georg Simmel—an author held in high esteem by Benjamin—who described culture as tragic due to a permanent conflict between the stream of subjective life and its products, the fixed objective forms. This conflict, as Simmel elaborates in *Lebensanschauung* from 1918, is even intrinsic to life itself: "Life finds its essence and its fulfillment in being more-life and more-than-life (two compound nouns *Mehr-Leben* and *Mehr-als-Leben*) its positive degree is always its comparative one."[15] Life is, to use a later formula by Helmut Plessner, eccentric to itself, namely in two senses: on the one hand it is permanent movement and generation of new life (more-life) and on the other it transgresses itself toward its other, namely death (more-than-life). Simmel argues that death is actually part of it. This life to death or death in life is of course symptomatic for the time and can be found in other discourses of World War I, examples being Freud and Heidegger. In all cases we can see how the discourse of life integrates even its opposite; it is symptomatic that this leads to a certain compound formula (more-life and more-than-life). For Simmel in particular, this expresses figuratively what cannot be said literally, in a discourse in which the meaning of life tends to become all-encompassing. Already here, we see how the discourse of life leans toward paradox, and it is this potential that Benjamin will use.

III. Benjamin's Historical Life

Life is a fundamental concept in Benjamin's early writings.[16] This is all too obvious in the very early writings on youth and *Das Leben der Studenten,* but it also informs his fragments on anthropology and numerous other texts, at least until the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. Obviously, he thought along the lines of the philosophy of life, which is, however, downgraded in Benjamin studies mostly for political reasons. For the dominant reception of Benjamin by critical theory considered the philosophy of life as dangerously irrational and biologistic, it would naturally lead to the racism which would finally result in Benjamin's death. Therefore, most readers of

[15] Georg Simmel, "Lebensanschauung," in *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe Bd. 16*, eds. Gregor Fitzi & Otthein Rammstedt (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), 209-425, here 235. On Benjamin and Simmel cf. Stéphane Symons, *More Than Life: Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin on Art* (Evanston: Northwestern UP 2017).

[16] Cf. Sigrid Weigel, "Treue, Liebe, Eros Benjamins Lebenswissenschaft" in. Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschgeisteseschichte 84 (2010), 580–596.

Benjamin would be eager to stress his differences with *Lebensphilosophie*, highlighting e.g. his critique of myth. True as this may be in my eyes, this not only overstates the difference but misses the point, since the essential question is not whether Benjamin "differs" with the philosophy of life, but *how* he does so and how he actually refers to its potential to formulate his own conception of history. In this respect, a reading of the translator-essay might prove helpful, as I hope to show.

As already quoted, Benjamin states that the translation of a work is part of its afterlife. Again, most interpretations of the essay hardly mention Benjamin's reference to life but tend to focus on pure language, form, literal translations, and other concepts. Even if these ideas may prove more important in the end of the essay, the reference to life plays an important role for the opening and thus the context of the argument. For after Benjamin's apodictic beginning, which denies any communicative function of art and translation and introduces the concept of form, he establishes the relation between original and translation as "vital connection," or "relation of life"[17] ("*Zusammenhang des Lebens*") and exemplifies how he wants to understand this relation: "Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original."[18] The following paragraph elaborates this relation of life and generalizes its meaning: "The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity."[19] For life is not only a feature of the organic: "The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life."[20]

These somewhat enigmatic statements clearly fit into Dilthey's concept of historical life as the primary domain of the humanities. Benjamin thus proposes to analyze translations as part of a general process of historical understanding. What might be specific for him is the stress on "unmetaphorical objectivity," which implies that life is more than a metaphor; indeed, the text tries to take the idea of a historical life literally in the following, e.g. by claiming that works of art have different phases of life as generation, growth, and inheritance: "The history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models, their realization in the age of the artist, and what in principle should be their eternal afterlife in succeeding generations."[21] It is to the latter realm, which he also calls the realm of fame, that translation belongs. In it, "[t]he history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models, their realization in the age of the artist, and what in principle should be their eternal afterlife in succeeding generations."[22] The unfolding here is probably best understood in the vegetative sense of the unfolding of the "leaves" or of a "seed," as an expressive relation.

These genealogical and expressivist motives are quite important for the argument of the essay since they allow Benjamin to dismiss the traditional

[17] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 254.

[18] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 254.

[19] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 254.

[20] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 255.

[21] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 255.

[22] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 255.

ideas of "concord" or "similarity" between translation and original. That original and translation have a vital connection implies that they do not have to resemble each other —descendants do not have to resemble those who have generated them —and that the conventional criteria of translation, freedom and fidelity, are problematic. For, as we might paraphrase the implicit argument, they tend to compare original and translation as isolated entities and do not take their historicity into account, that actually changes their relation and even the meaning of the original, as Benjamin stresses later: "For in its afterlife – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living - the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process."[23] Therefore, translation is part of the essential life of the historical entity. Its historicity does not merely consist in its original historical place but in its effects, in its being part of history that continues. This continuity, however, is conceived quite differently, for example, in Immisch.

IV. Life and Afterlife

Benjamin does not simply use the semantics of life but displaces them at the same time, namely when after-life but not life in itself becomes most prominent. This is most obvious in the passage where Benjamin introduces the concept, postulating a "vital" connection between original and translation:

> Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original - not so much from its life as from its afterlife [*Überleben*]. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life [*Fortleben*].[24]

Here Benjamin moves from "live" to "survival," from "*Leben*" to "*Überleben*" and "*Fortleben*." In comparison to Immisch, he shifts the emphasis from after*life* in the sense of continuity and turns to *after*life as a life after the original. Systematically, this shift is essential since it distinguishes between original and translation, and is set up in an asymmetric way. Whereas the translation is "generated" by the original in some way, this does not hold true for the other way round. For even if the meaning of the original continues to live in translation, continues to grow, and undergoes the process of ripening, its actual literal form does not, since it is and remains a fixed letter. It is this difference which is essential for Benjamin's conception of translation and distinguishes it from other conceptions, e.g. of a hermeneutic of reception or of a Freudian idea of belatedness according to which the significance of a historical phenomenon is permanently created anew. For Benjamin, the work of art lives on, but it lives on differently, it survives, it has its afterlife and that is a life after life.

By this turn, however, the entire idea of afterlife becomes paradoxical, for what could be a life after life? An afterlife, if we follow Simmel's argument from *Lebensanschauung,* would be either the other of life; conclusively,

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[23] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 256.

[24] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 254.

afterlife would no longer be life. Or, it is still part of life, however then there would be no *after*life but simply life. Benjamin's concept of afterlife expresses the limits of the semantics of life, but it does so in an indirect and paradoxical way. Or, in rhetorical terms, one cannot speak of "afterlife" literally, but only *figuratively.* Therefore, the displacement from life to afterlife is also a displacement from concept to figure, from philosophical thought to philosophical writing, and thus to the form which is characteristic for Benjamin.

The text quoted highlights this turn in several ways. First by the anacoluthic sentence which actually does nothing else other than performing the displacement and literally reads: "Not indeed so much from its life as from its "survival" *[Überleben]."* By its construction, the sentence does not decide if survival is nothing else than another term for life or what is the exact difference between the two. Do the poems on which Benjamin speaks here cease to live when first written down, or in their final version, when their author dies, or when they change their language as in translation? This remains essentially undecided.

Secondly, the aim of the displacement, the "survival," stands in quotation marks, and therefore according to the German convention, not meant literally. Again, this may have a different implication: it may be an idiosyncratic use, i.e. not the usual sense of survival, but may be in the sense of sur-vival, *über-leben*, as a higher form of life, or more-than-life as Simmel elaborated. It may be meant metaphorically, which would have the somewhat perplexing consequence that the work of art would live in an unmetaphorical sense but survive only metaphorically, whereas we tend to see it the other way round. In consequence, the quotation marks make the survival even more ambivalent and transform the figure of thought from a simple word into a more complex set of transformations which makes it all the more difficult to reduce it to any literal meaning.

Finally, survival is immediately followed with another third term, the continuing life, the German "*Fortleben,*" which evokes still other connotations, as Samuel Weber has already pointed out, namely "living on," but also "living away."[25] Once more, the semantic relation remains unclear: is continuing life synonymous with survival or not, and how are the two related to life itself? The metonymic chain from life to survival is thus continued, which hinders us to make clear distinction between the different terms and thereby try to "define" what Benjamin means with afterlife, which does not exist in one term, but in three. In other words, the text does not allow us to retranslate the disquieting figure of afterlife into a concept.

In the rest of the essay, the idea of a living or surviving of the work of art is elaborated on different occasions. For example, translation is described as growing and unfolding—but with a growth that has a hybrid and unnatural moment, whereas the original "content" and language have a natural relation—Benjamin speaks of fruit and paring—it becomes more loose in translation, where language is to content much like a baggy coat. In translation, according to Benjamin, the original is "transplanted" into a higher realm, or as another formulation goes, "the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were. It cannot live there permanently,

[25] Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, 67.

to be sure."[26] "Rising" and "being transplanted" are two reciprocal movements that figure the process in an ambiguous way, as does the figure of the after-ripening of words.

V. Death and Afterlife of Religion

What distinguishes Benjamin's conception of afterlife from that of Immisch, as well as of many other authors, is the difference between life and afterlife, which is also a difference between mere continuity and a more complex relation to the historic past. This distinction implies a recognition of a caesura between life and afterlife, namely a recognition of death. Afterlife is the life after death. This is never stated explicitly in Benjamin's text, in which we would not find any reference to "death" or "dying." This lack is remarkable, since the reference to death belongs quite naturally to the context of surviving or even afterlife. But death, as the unmarked other of life, cannot be addressed explicitly by the discourse of the philosophy of life, but only indirectly as we have already seen in Simmel, by compound construction as more-than-life, *Überleben*, *Nachleben* etc. Let me just mention another indirect reference in Benjamin, namely his relation of the afterlife of works of art to their fame, "*Ruhm*," an idea which is essentially linked to death in the literary tradition at least since Horace: fame is what the poet achieves after death, it is poetic immortality.[27] This reference is all the more important, since the topic of fame plays a decisive role in one of Benjamin's immediate intellectual contexts, the literary criticism of the George-circle.

Here, I would like to elaborate on another moment that actually fuels the paradox of after-life as Benjamin conceives it, namely the religious one. Again, this implication comes quite naturally, for how could the claimed "immortality" of the after-life be conceived apart from a religious semantics, be it a Christian or Jewish idea of an eternal life or a pagan fear of ghosts and specters? Thus, the figure of after-life would not only mark an idea of history which takes death and human finitude into account, but also its religious dimension.

We can see these religious dimensions most clearly in a couple of reflections on "tradition" and "teaching" (*Lehre)*, which Benjamin developed in 1917 and 1918 together with Gershom Scholem. Tradition, too, is a form of historical life, a living form of truth in contrast to abstract philosophical principles. In a letter to Scholem from 1917, Benjamin stresses that tradition is essentially a religious context, which is to be conceived as "the medium in which the pupil continually transforms into the teacher"; "Knowledge becomes transmittable only for the person who has understood his knowledge as something that has been transmitted."[28] To describe this relation, Benjamin finally refers to an image: the teaching of

[26] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 257.

[27] On the tradition of (poetic) fame cf. Leon Braudy, *The Frenzy of the Renown, Fame and its History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[28] Gershom Scholem & Theodor W. Adorno (eds.), The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 94. Cf. the German original: "Wer sein Wissen als überliefertes begriffen hat in dem allein wird es überlieferbar," Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe I* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), 382.

tradition is "like a surging sea, but the only thing that matters to the wave (understood as a metaphor for the person) is to surrender itself to its motion in such a way that it crests and breaks."[29] In this figure of the wave and its crest, the continuous wash of the waves is connected with their breaking, thus implying that even the interruption of tradition is part of the tradition itself. This image seems so fitting to the paradoxes of tradition that Scholem will come back to it, when talking about Kafka in the 1930s, arguing that even the places where nothing seems to be left of tradition may be part of it as the wave trough is part of the sea.[30] Again, it is not only important that this idea can be expressed by an image only, but also that it represents a limit case in which the continuity and the interruption of tradition are indiscernible.

This idea of teaching with its strong religious connotations also plays an important role in the translator essay. Here, it is the end of the text which closes with the statement that a text would be "unconditionally translatable"[31] (*übersetzbar schlechthin*) insofar as it is part of teaching of true language. This ending has often been read as "messianic" closure of the argument, as if Benjamin, by a recourse to some form of messianic belief, tries to avoid the deconstructive consequences of his own approach as the influential reading of Paul de Man argues.[32] However, Benjamin does not argue theologically in a straightforward way here, but rather refers to a certain model of the sacred text which is paradigmatic for the cultural life he wants to talk about. The sacred text, as one might paraphrase the implicit argument, lives as long as it is being commented, as it is glossed and translated, as it continues to generate meaning for the future generations—his life is his afterlife, as one might say, all the more so since it was never in its making since his sacredness tend to obscure its historic origins.[33]

That Benjamin does not point to a messianic fulfillment *beyond* all language or a least beyond the differences of translation, but to this very difference itself, is highlighted by the closing line of his text which does not refer to teaching itself, but to its translation: "The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translations."[34] The interlinear translation indeed expresses that original and translation belong together; it is by no means a final abrogation of difference, but rather highlights and marks it. This is all the more evident if we imagine that Benjamin has an interlinear version of the Hebrew scripture in mind. For, due to the different direction of reading, a German (or English, or Portugese) interlinear translation of a Hebrew text is not readable in any usual sense; since one has to read each German word from left to right, but follow the

[29] Gershom Scholem & Theodor W. Adorno (eds.), The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 94.

[30] Cf. Walter Benjamin/Gershom Scholem, *Briefwechsel 1933-1940* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1980), 286.

[31] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 262.

[32] Paul de Man, "'Conclusions': Walter Benjamin's ,The task of the Translator'," in *The Resistance to Theory. Theory and History of Literature, Volume 33,* eds. Wlad Godzich & Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Manchester: University Press, 1986), 73-105.

[33] On this idea of scripturality of scripture cf. Brian Britt, *Walter Benjamin and The Bible (*New York: Continuum, 1996), esp. 51-69.

[34] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 263.

line from right to left, thus, so to speak, reading in Epicycles. The reference to the holy text therefore does not evoke a fulfillment of truth or a messianic return of an adamic language, but rather a complex and indirect movement of reading, a movement which refers the reader to a different script from which he, as reader of the translation, is excluded at the same time.

In both cases of speaking of the breaking of tradition and the interlinear version of a sacred text, the reference to a religious dimension does not imply a transgression of a secular problematic toward a transcendent sphere, but rather highlights the implicit tensions in the former. Here, too, the figure of afterlife can be read in two ways, depending on how we understand the genitive of "afterlife of religion." On one hand, Benjamin conceives the cultural afterlife as the afterlife of a work of art by using religious terms, as the "immortality" of afterlife. On the other hand, though, their terms are not simply at hand but underwent a certain decline and crisis, as in becoming figurative and paradoxical. What we face in reading Benjamin is thus less religion proper, but the afterlife of it. This ambivalence is, as I think, highly productive not only to understand the function of Benjamin's so-called theology, but also the persistence of religious meaning in a modern, seemingly disenchanted world.

VI. The Afterlife of Afterlife

What can we learn from Benjamin about the problems of reception and historical understanding with which we opened this paper? Benjamin's notion of afterlife is very specific and even idiosyncratic and far from being a ready-made concept that can simply be "used" in analysis. Nonetheless, it addresses certain questions that clearly echo the problems of a general hermeneutics and point to alternatives, to the dominant Gadamerian version of an effective history.

First, the idea of afterlife might enable us to envision a discontinuous, even disruptive process of transmission that breaks with the assumption of continuity typical of more traditional concepts of reception. At the same time, Benjamin does not simply aim at a deconstruction of continuities and a celebration of rupture, for the very rupture is, for him, still part of a process of life in relation to which "afterlife" might both be a mere survival and an eternal memory. Thus, instead of simply stressing discontinuity, Benjamin's approach might allow us to balance continuity and discontinuity as well as the subject and the object of memory. For neither does it conceive what is remembered as being merely "dead" and inert, nor as timeless or everlasting, as the "classical" heritage was conceived in Immisch or Gadamer. By contrast, what has an afterlife might still be living but its life might also be a mere survival, partial or even spectral. Or, in still other words, Benjamin's notions of memory and history try to get rid of both the fixation on origins that is so typical for western historical thought as well as on the modern narcissism which always considers itself as superior to the past.

Second, Benjamin's idea of afterlife is directed toward certain objects, namely to artworks and sacred texts. Traditional hermeneutics, too, gives work of art and of religion a certain precedence because they seem to have the quality to act back on the interpreter, to effect a history, to undo the readers preconceptions, to renew themselves in being read; and it is this quality that allows us to consider history differently and to take viewpoints

that are not merely reflections of the narcissistic present. However, more explicitly than classical hermeneutic theory, Benjamin highlights that this ability is less an intrinsic quality of the works or their "creators" but a result of the very process of reception itself. Therefore, to unlock the agency and experience enclosed in works of art, we do not have to venerate them or simply be affected by them, but subject them to critique in any moment of reading. Benjamin will later use the conceptual pair of commentary and critique to figure the double task of understanding their embeddedness in time and their resistance to it, their historical context and their will to last, and to address us directly. Again, we do not have to find his solutions convincing in order to understand the problem. How can we navigate between approaches to reception that dissolve the object of memory into different discourses and those who decontextualize it from its historical setting?

Even more revealing is the way Benjamin relates to the religious moment of the afterlife. Already classical hermeneutics leans heavily toward religion, as such major terms as "letter," "spirit," or "script" bear heavy religious connotations. The very notion of a binding "force" or of a normative "obligation" that past works impose on us has such reverberation. Historically, hermeneutics as well as idealist aesthetic theory, secularized religious attitudes toward the Bible into a certain form of religion of art. Benjamin, by contrast, avoids the conflation of religious and aesthetic discourses and rather insists on their difference. When speaking of the "eternity" of the work of art, this is more than an illustrative metaphor as seen in Immisch. More precisely, Benjamin takes up the illustrative metaphor from idealist aesthetics, but in taking it *literally* he develops it into a more complex and more paradoxical idea of a work of art that is literally alive and haunts the past by its enduring present. It is by such paradoxes that Benjamin not only figures the relation to the past as being ambivalent but also expresses ambivalence toward religious language as something that we can neither avoid nor simply adopt in the realm of hermeneutics.

Here, too, Benjamin's notion of afterlife stands out not only by its complexity and ambivalence but also by the way it is being generated: less by a definition than by a process of figuration that transforms the common idiom in which we, or the 19th century, talk about art, history, and religion. It is this rhetorical, intertextual, and discursive constitution which renders these notions complex and difficult to handle. But it is no mere matter of taste for Benjamin but rather a reaction to a situation of modernity, a situation in which the promises of philosophy, religion, and art to reveal the truth have become problematic. Philosophical concepts (such as "life") have been emptied out toward paradox, religious promises (such as "scripture") have lost their immediate presence in the secular present, and the claims of art (such as producing "eternity") are questioned by the modern artwork itself—we have to keep in mind that it is actually Baudelaire who is being translated by Benjamin, the poet who celebrates the fleeing moment. To speak truth nonetheless, having no different "fundament" at hand, Benjamin decides to still draw on these discourses, but figuratively, so that they can experimentally play with each other. His concept of afterlife is, in other words, not a philosophical construction, but itself a form of reception, or of afterlife, an echo of the tradition to which it relates. It should encourage us to read concepts of memory and history carefully, with respect to specific traditions, and to develop further concepts from other traditions.