

THE MESSIANIC IDEA IN THE EARLY WORK OF WALTER BENJAMIN

Die Geschichte ist der Kampf zwischen den Begeisterten und den Trägen, den zukünftigen und den Vergangenen, den Freien und Unfreien. Die Unfreien werden stets den Kanon ihrer Gesetze uns vorweisen können. Wir aber werden das Gesetz, unter dem wir stehen, noch nicht nennen können. Daß es pflicht ist, fühlen wir.¹⁸

In the early writings of Walter Benjamin, history is an unending battle between past and future, between the right of law and the right to establish law, between the history of the conquered and of the conqueror in which both past and present are governed by laws not their own. Yet Benjamin submits there is a past which contains its own law, a law insurmountable by worldly dictates, pertaining to historical occurrences and their absconded structure which he seeks to protect in this early essay on Gerhard Hauptman from 1913. Here Benjamin is unwilling (or unable) to reveal this obligation but after a lengthy period of theological and political reflection, the main currents of this law reemerge as a philosophy of history in the terse and rather thesis-like "Theological-Political Fragment" of 1921.

This theological and political "Fragment" begins where most tractates on history conclude. Yet here the end of history is not an end not formed by an outburst of cumulative reason, nor by the might of a worldly empire whose sovereignty rests on the shoulders of the defeated, but by the Messiah who completes all historical occurrence and repatriates all downtrodden. It points to the conclusion of a temporal and spatial plane, meaning both an end to past and future as well as the division of this world from the next. The end of history connotes here a messianic understanding of the unfolding of worldly events, whose approach is juxtaposed to the empty resolution of history — represented in the history of the worldly victorious. A messianic understanding, here termed mystical, strives to reveal an abstract picture of the divine kingdom in theological terms, or utopia in its political counterpart. Agency becomes the focal point of the tension between the divine and profane worlds in which an event in one realm is shown to have an effect in the other. This tension is expressed in the form of a messianic drama, where the nature and actions of the individual is span between the decline of all spatial and temporal parameters in the redemptive act that inadvertently establishes eternity.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin "Gedanken über Gerhart Hauptmanns Festspiel" in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band II.1, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991, 60. All citations are from this edition and will appear in the text as follows: [II:60].

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

Theologisch-politisches Fragment

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

Die Ordnung des Profanen hat sich aufzurichten an der Idee des Glücks. Die Beziehung dieser Ordnung auf das Messianische ist eines der wesentlichen Lehrstücke der Geschichtsphilosophie. Und zwar ist von ihr aus eine mystische Geschichtsauffassung bedingt, deren Problem in einem Bilde sich darlegen läßt. Wenn eine Pfeilrichtung das Ziel, in welchem die Dynamis des Profanen wirkt, bezeichnet, eine andere die Richtung der messianischen Intensität, so strebt freilich das Glückssuchen der freien Menschheit von jener messianischen Richtung fort, aber wie eine Kraft durch ihren Weg eine andere auf entgegengesetzt gerichtetem Wege zu befördern vermag, so auch die profane Ordnung des Profanen das Kommen des messianischen Reiches. Das Profane also ist zwar keine Kategorie des Reichs, aber eine Kategorie, und zwar der zutreffendsten eine, seines leisesten Nahens. Denn im Glück aber erstrebt alles Irdische seinen Untergang, nur im Glück ist ihm der Untergang zu finden bestimmt. — Während freilich die unmittelbare messianische Intensität des Herzens, des innern einzelnen Menschen durch Unglück, im Sinne des Leidens hindurchgeht. Der geistlichen restitutio in integrum, welche in die Unsterblichkeit einführt, entspricht eine weltliche, die in die Ewigkeit eines Unterganges führt und der Rhythmus dieses ewig vergehenden, in seiner Totalität vergehenden, in seiner räumlichen, aber auch zeitlichen Totalität vergehenden Weltlichen, der Rhythmus der messianischen Natur, ist Glück. Denn messianisch ist die Natur aus ihrer ewigen und totalen Vergängnis.

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

Theological-Political Fragment

First the Messiah completes all historical occurrence, whose relation to the messianic (in this sense) he himself first redeems, completes and creates. Therefore nothing historical can intend to refer to the messianic from itself

out of itself. For this reason, the kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it can not be set towards a goal. Historically seen, it is not goal but end. Thus the order of the profane cannot be built on the idea of the kingdom of God; therefore theocracy has no political, but only a religious significance. To have repudiated the political meaning of theocracy with all intensity is the greatest service of Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia*.

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

To strive for this, even for those stages of humanity which are nature, is the task of world politics whose method is called nihilism.¹⁹

In terms of a political and theological theory of history, the "Fragment" presents a decisive picture of Benjamin's early messianic concept of redemption in the context of the early writings.²⁰ In 1920-1921, the years in which this sketch of a

¹⁹ Note on the Translation: Several points in this text makes a natural rendering rather impossible and when feasible as a translation, only with substantial clarification. Surely the first translator was aware of these problems (*Reflections*, Schocken: 1976) but remained unable to address the ambiguity embedded in several phrases of the text. For instance, the conjugational phrase "Darum" which appears four times in the first paragraph seems unable to be rendered easily in English, keeping the programmatic, rhythmic and cumulative effect of the original without introducing a monotonous tone. In the second paragraph, I have also tried to preserve the superlative within the genitive phrase "seines leisesten Nahens," which was lost in the Schocken version. Finally, the term "Glück" with its corresponding "Unglück" presents a problem to any translator. While the former may be rendered as happiness, it would be grounds for misunderstanding to render the latter misfortune, for while the term misfortune does convey the 'unhappiness' of an event, it unwillingly also introduces the notion of fortune which I believe runs against the grain of the original. Thus I have chosen the term tragedy which seems to best express the meaning of "Unglück" in the context of Benjamin's early work, a point which I devote considerable attention to in this essay.

²⁰ For two contrary opinions, see Michael W. Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*, Ithaca, NY: 1987, 59 and Jürgen Nieraad who places the "Fragment"

theological politics is suspected to have been written, the gaping wounds of the carnivorous First World War had yet to heal, followed by the eruption of the short-lived revolutions and general strikes in Munich and Berlin. The array of support for the war, from Social Democrats to the intellectual and political leadership of the Jewish community, most notably Martin Buber, contributed to an atmosphere of despair concerning the notions of allegiance, moral fortitude and political agency.²¹ The growing influence of Soviet Marxism after the Russian Revolution also added to a state of confusion concerning ends and means.

Most readers have been inclined to interpret historical events from a given period as having had a considerable effect on Benjamin's political writings.²² The "Fragment" seems no less the case. The curious oddity with this miniscule text, however, is the fact that naming this period has proven highly contentious. The "Fragment" was given its title by Adorno in the first edition of Benjamin writings in 1955 and, since then, has reserved a place of controversy in Benjamin's work. According to Adorno, he and his wife met Benjamin for the last time at the end of 1937/1938 in San Remo, Italy. Benjamin reportedly read them the text aloud, referring to it on that occasion as the "Newest of the New." Adorno dated the text 1938 accordingly.²³ Yet Scholem believed something quite different:

Ich halte es für unbezweifelbar, daß diese Seiten 1920-1921 im Zusammenhang mit der »Kritik der Gewalt« geschrieben wurden und noch keine Beziehung zu marxistischen Auffassungen unterhalten. Sie stellen einen metaphysischen Anarchismus dar, der den Ideen des Autors vor 1924 entsprach. Adorno datiert sie aus dem Jahr 1937 [...] Meine Antwort darauf ist, daß es sich um einen Witz handelt, um zu wissen, ob Adorno einen mystisch-anarchistischen Text für einen kürzlich geschriebenen marxistischen Versuch nehmen würde. Benjamin pflegte übrigens solche Experimente anzustellen.²⁴

Scholem was skeptical of his late friend's motives concerning the dating of the text. Adorno's account appeared to him as an attempt on Benjamin's part to

largely in the context of the later writings in "Walter Benjamins Glück im Untergang: Zum Verhältnis von Messianischem und Profanem," *German Quarterly* 63, 1990, 222-232.

²¹ On Martin Buber and the war, see [von berlin:65,76].

²² One could cite a dozen sources for the claim, for example, that the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" from 1940 was written, in part, in response to the Hitler-Stalin pact.

²³ There is also some evidence concerning the type of paper used in the manuscript which would correspond to the earlier period, but these findings can not be considered conclusive. See Anmerkungen in [II:946-9].

²⁴ Taken from a letter Scholem wrote on November 11, 1970 to the French editor of Benjamin's work (Walter Benjamin, *Mythe et Violence*, Paris 1971, 149). Originally in Irving Wohlfarth, "Immer radikal, niemals konsequent: in *Antike und Moderne: Walter Benjamin's Passagen*, ed. by Norbert W. Bolz und Richard Faber, Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1986, 130.

hoodwink his eager audience into believing in an unbroken passage of the messianic idea into Marxism, seeing the text rather as characteristic of the earlier period where Benjamin's inclination toward articulating a "Philosophie des Judentums" and a metaphysical anarchism loomed large upon his intellectual horizon. If one is to consider some of the formative literature of the early period, namely Ernst Bloch's *Geist der Utopie* (1919) and Franz Rosenzweig's *Stern der Erlösung* (1921) in relationship to the "Fragment," it does appear possible to place the text in the context of the early writings.²⁵ In this respect, the focus of the following chapter is to rework the text back into the fabric of the early years, in order to allow the central categories of Benjamin's early political theology to come to the fore. These terms and categories will then serve as a point of reference for the rest of this study, beginning with the first aspect of the idea of redemption in the Messiah.

²⁵ A bit different than what he records in terms of his own methods, Benjamin's stance to other thinkers is seen here as perhaps more similar to a navigator passing a crossroad than a sea captain under the magnetic pull of the North pole. [V:570] To charter this course between the *Geist der Utopie* and several years of independent theological and political thought appears to have been the task, later cartographed and guided by the *Stern der Erlösung*. The relationship between Benjamin and Bloch, unlike Benjamin's single encounter with Rosenzweig in December 1922, was extensive and complex. It lies beyond the realm of the discussion here to attempt to explicate the myriad of overlapping affinities, influences, perhaps even rivalries between these two thinkers, which alone has received considerable attention. The importance of Bloch's book for Benjamin, however, as indicated in the reference in the text itself, points to a key influence which no interpretation of the "Fragment" can do without. With regard to Rosenzweig, the influence is somewhat more determinable. In a letter to Scholem dated November 8, 1921, Benjamin writes that he just completed a first reading of Rosenzweig's book, but must reserve judgment having only gone through it once. [Benjamin, briefe I: 242] The emphasis on evaluating the work and its structure raises the possibility that the "Fragment" was partly a first attempt at a close analysis of Rosenzweig in the context of his own theological speculation which date from an earlier period. This view is shared by Michael Löwy. See his *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian thought in Central Europe*, London: Athlone, 1992, 101-102.

THE MESSIANIC STATE: DOES THE MESSIAH INITIATE OR CONSUMMATE?

Denn es ist so, wie der Baalschem sagt, daß erst dann der Messias kommen kann, wenn sich alle Gäste an den Tisch gesetzt haben; dieser aber ist zunächst der Tisch der Arbeit und dann erst der Tisch des Herrn — die Organisation der Erde besitzt im geheimnis des Reichs ihre unmittelbar einwirkende, unmittelbar deduzierende Metaphysik. - Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*²⁶

The Messiah consummating the messianic process as conceptual tradition can be seen in many different sources, periods and schools of thought in Judaism.²⁷ In *Sefer Zerubbabel* (ca. seventh century), the Messiah appears as a beggar in rags in the archways of Babylon (or Rome as the case may be), though poised to battle with ultimate evil and win redemption for the world. He is the one who consummates and completes, for he puts down an evil which has no human counterpart.²⁸ In the "Treaties on the Left Emanation" of Jacob ha'Kohen, the Messiah returns in the form of a warrior, also set for battle, to extinguish the satanic embodiment of evil and usher in redemption. Here there is no portrayal of humanity in these apocalyptic dramas; the Messiah enters as hero, Satan naturally as his opposer and history, the stage upon which the plot unfolds. While humanity plays no particular role, other than perhaps as witness, there is nothing to suggest its exemption from the messianic process. In the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, we find both a Messiah in rags and ha'Kohen's critical influence,²⁹ in which the Messiah as warrior intervenes to stop human history, to the degree that human history is imbued with suffering and evil, and releases a meta-history from its imprisonment in falsehood.

²⁶ Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, erste Fassung von 1918, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971. zzgl. Band 16, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Page numbers follow each citation as [GdU:411].

²⁷ Eliezer Schweid, for example, defines the messianic idea as following four distinct and perhaps cumulative phases: (1) the on-set of evil, (2) necessity of suffering leading to an end, (3) prophetic visions of redemption, and (4) restitution of a Davidic kingdom as redemption. See his "Jewish Messianism: Metamorphoses of an Idea" in *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements*, ed. by M. Saperstein, New York University Press, 1992, 61.

²⁸ For expository purposes, a few representative (but in no way exhaustive) post-biblical examples are given here. On *Sefer Zerubbabel* in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 16. p. 1002ff; I. Levi in *Revue des études juives*, 68 (1915) 129-60. On the "Treaties on the Emanation on the Left" see *The Early Kabbalah*, ed. by Joseph Dan, New York: Paulist Press, 1986, 151-183. I. Tisby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, Oxford, 1994. On Sabbati Zwei, see Scholem, *Main Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken Books, 1974, 287-324, "Redemption through Sin" in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, Schocken Books, 1971, and *Sabbati Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, Princeton University Press, 1973.

²⁹ For a thesis of culmination, see Joseph Dan, *The Early Kabbalah*, New York: Paulist Press, 1986, 36.

This idea takes a radical turn in Lurianic Kabbalah of the 16th century, one which cannot merely be summarized in a few lines.³⁰ Here the notion of consummation takes on an entirely new meaning, in which humanity now plays a more active role in its own redemption and even in the redemption of God as evil is delegated to divine error. The Lurianic notion of evil takes on new meaning in the theology of Nathan of Gaza (17th century) where it receives a full reinterpretation, particularly in relation to the figure of the Messiah. In his conception, humanity can prepare prehistory (or even be implored to do so), they can work to redeem the shards of divine light which have been broken off into sparks, but only the Messiah can perform the final capturing the last sparks which, when redeemed from their fallen state, bring on the *tikkun*, prepared for in every other way by human agency.

Thus the notion of the Messiah as consummator, expressed in the statement: "First the Messiah completes all historical occurrence" clearly remains within the context of this tradition. Benjamin's notion of completion is directed more specifically to the final completion of history, in which the last remnants of bad actions are made good again. This is what is meant by the idea of all historical past being redeemed — the divine reparation of all actions in the world which went awry. These past events are historical for they were formed in the world. Rather than being forgotten, they are returned to their original state of wholeness. This is the nature of messianic creation, which returns to its origins in the process of redemption, completes the remains, and constitutes itself at the same time, as is it would be in an undivided divine realm.

In this way, the idea of redemption ending historical time, since predicated by history itself, can be understood within the broader notion of historical completion. The end of historical time, however, is not to be confused with the end of history in a Hegelian sense. History's completion is here expressed not as "goal but end." As Benjamin states elsewhere in an early fragment: "Geschichte hat ein Ende aber kein Ziel." [VI:94] While time generates various irreconcilable moments in history, redemption is its only complete and thus true end, rather than a goal set for the telos of history. Seen from a negative perspective, neither the kingdom of God, the workers state, nor bourgeois democracy can be pronounced as the end of the historical telos. Only a understanding which approaches history in its unfolding, which is unmitigated by any external, worldly preconditions, can approximate a messianic conception. An end which is placed in relationship to the

³⁰ For a brief but through analysis, see Scholem's *Main Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1974, 244-286.

creative act, is an end which harbors no worldly telos, no self-generation, no intention, no motor of history — it is merely the inverse of beginning. Towards creation, it appears messianic, for alone it completes creation. A determinate end, which is understood in relation to creation and which is constituted as messianic, is therefore an end as redemption. When beginning can no longer remain indeterminate and, to be beginning, is distinguished from the moment in which it is no longer development but standstill, in which everything related to beginnings sink back, only then is there a "Vollendung des Werkes" in the sense of completion.³¹ Everything which is incomplete when redemption sounds, springing forth from creation but still hanging on to beginning, is returned back into itself.³²

A model to conceptualize the notion of a redemptive end in relation to creation can be found in *Der Stern der Erlösung* in the idea of the work of art.³³ In the profane world, only the work of art is able to approximate a closed, finished state of completion and therefore to grasp the principle of end in its necessity and categorical integrity. End is categorical and historical, but as it reaches the aesthetic realm, it achieves the possibility to arrive as such. Through its inherent transformative dynamic, the work of art in the realm of the profane is able to comprehend the redemptive category of what Rosenzweig called "das Fertigwerden." By this, he seeks to show how the end of history can be understood as approximating a work of art. It occurs. Its self-differentiation appears no longer at the beginning but at the same time always contains the meaning of coming to a complete and final condition.³⁴ Bloch also conceives of an end in the context of creation, such that a full and complete end in the *Geist der Utopie* is situated within worldly time, between past and future: "So hat also die Welt wie einen Anfang so ein Ende in der Zeit," he writes, "weil sie nur als Prozeß begreifbar ist, weil allein Geschichte die auftreffende, wesentliche Methode der Welterkenntnis bildet [...]."³⁵

³¹ In his dissertation on the idea and the critique of art, Benjamin formulates the role of criticism as the "Vollendung des Werkes" itself. [I:108] Completion here here understood as an action of creation. But since a critique is a human endeavor, this notion of completion, if it is meant to uphold the category we have before us here, can only be seen as anticipatory and not final.

³² See also Franz Rosenzweig, *Stern der Erlösung*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988. [SdE§236] Citations refer to the paragraph, rather than page number.

³³ Within the heart of this complex imagery, one may be tempted to see a reformulated Lurianic structure which was undoubtedly to have a meaningful impact on both Rosenzweig and Bloch as well as Benjamin. See particularly [SdE§236].

³⁴ Rosenzweig terms this a "gehaltvoller beseelter Zusammenhang" which is able to arrive at "ein in ästhetischen Sinn, Fertiges, Anschließendes zustande." [SdE§238]

³⁵ Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, erste Fassung von 1918. Suhrkamp, 1971. zzgl. Band 16, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 437-8. [GdU:437] Page numbers follow each citation.

Bloch emphasizes here the lasting aspect of historical occurrence, the notion of which itself necessitates a concept of history.³⁶

Of interest to Benjamin here is not historical occurrence itself, locked in the mortality of passing away, but clearly an approach to history which is able to articulate a messianic dimension. The historical events of the powerful can never be the "Telos der historischen Dynamis," which themselves can never lead to the "Gottesreich." [II:203] Such a conception of history, needless to say its application, is precisely at odds with the view presented in the "Fragment." Here "das Reichgottes [...] kann nicht zum Ziel gesetzt werden," just as with the notion of justice which, in being relegated to the divine, also cannot be set as a goal.³⁷ The kingdom of God is not an aim of the worldly because it is not an act but a state; if it can be sought, it surely cannot be targeted. Thus as a state and not as a goal, it is possible for a full and complete end to be reached. For this reason, everything which pertains to history cannot be paralleled by the ahistorical i.e. that which is beyond the realm of worldly events. The order of the profane and worldly experience cannot be structured on events in the divine world, events with which no notion of time can be associated. Since no distinction between thought and action extends to the divine, no historical occurrence can likewise be established on the idea of the kingdom of God as an aspect of progress. With this distinction, the divine and profane realms are initially determined as discrete and radically separate realities.

Darum kann die Ordnung des Profanen nicht am Gedanken des Gottesreiches aufgebaut werden, darum hat die Theokratie keinen politischen sondern allein einen religiösen Sinn. Die politische Bedeutung der Theokratie mit aller Intensität geleugnet zu haben ist das größte Verdienst von Blochs »Geist der Utopie«. ["Fragment" II:203]

Benjamin's opening remarks concern the role of the Messiah in fomenting the end of history. Whether the role of the Messiah is to consummate a new dimension or to conclude this historical process, it is situated both in an on going tension in his own work and in Jewish Messianism as a whole. This discussion is then transferred to the debate on human agency as we shall see shortly. The focus so

³⁶ Evil, which stands at the end of a messianic conception of history, also waits at the end of Bloch's historical process. He also refers here approvingly to Maimonides critique of Aristotle's second proof of the eternity of the world and formulates a notion of time which is not merely the history of progress but rather knowledge of the world as history. However, Maimonides real views on the matter may not be so clear. See Daniel Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy 1180-1240*, Leiden: Brill, 1965.

³⁷ This is the subject of the third section, chapters two to seven.

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

It is for this reason that theocracy has no *political* meaning.³⁸ Theocracy forms the representation of the ideal of the divine world which, in contrast to the living, can only remain a categorical reflection. As such, it cannot be a fulfillment of politics which ostensibly stands antithetical to theology, or one void of historical agency in the sense of a mystical theology. In the realm of a categorical absolute, a theocratic state can be postulated, says Benjamin. This realm would take its independence from theology, which stands free to conceive of the constitution of the world from the perspective of its hidden messianic dimension. Such an

³⁸ Jacob Taubes's article on the "Fragment" makes the specious claim that only Jewish theocracy is political, whereas (early) Christian theocracy is able to take on purely religious dimensions. He appears to resurrect the old dogma of a spiritual Christianity verses a Jewish religion of the book in order to construct an haphazard link to Scholem's notion of the Jewish messianic idea taking place in history. Out of this myriad of competing themes and arguments, he comes to the unfortunate conclusion that Benjamin was a modern version of the early Christian heretic Marcion. Jacob Taubes, "Walter Benjamin — ein moderner Marcionit? Scholems Benjamin-Interpretation religionsgeschichtlich überprüft" in *Antike und Moderne. Zu Walter Benjamins Passagen*, ed. by Norbert Bolz and Richard Faber, Würzburg: Königshaus und Neumann, 1986, 138-147, esp. 139-140.

approach is therefore presupposed by a methodology of historical understanding beyond history, a historical philosophy that postulates a messianic dimension of history through its redemptive end. This concept of history connotes the formulation of a non-historically determined dynamic, independent of any teleological prescription or any precise unyielding development, but nevertheless imbued with the necessary contours of being i.e. a beginning and an end. It is a being with a messianic force running through it like a subterranean grotto. Agency is a moment of intervention into this dynamic which is ultimately able to cancel this division and allow the end to rectify the beginning.

Theocracy as politics has therefore to be seen as something extraneous to Benjamin's analysis: the political categories of theology, if not to fall into falsehood, must remain absolute. Thus rather than a political form, theocracy is to be understood as a divine category which is only meaningfully contemplated in the context of Messianism. This would appear to lead us to the "great service" of Bloch's *Geist der Utopie* that Benjamin praises as a "repudiation" of theocratic politics. With such a definitive statement, any reader would find it hard to believe that no clear discussion of theocracy as such is to be found in the *Geist der Utopie*, leading some to interpret Benjamin's comments as as a somewhat disguised critique of Zionism.³⁹ However, if a critique of Zionism can be found in *Geist der Utopie*, it would express the very opposite: condemnation not of theocratic zealotry but the aspirations of the parvenu.⁴⁰ In his chapter on Jews, Bloch criticizes Zionism for denying the "power of being chosen" and seeking the assimilation of the Jew into a Balkanized national state, no different from the rest.

By the time Benjamin read the *Geist der Utopie*, his views on Zionism were surely well formed. In this sense, it is true that little seems to have changed in terms of his clear rejection of "practical" Zionism in 1912, where he expressed his lifelong conviction, however much at times distraught, that Judaism has found its home in European culture.⁴¹ His later decision to learn Hebrew, even acquiring a stipend through the first president of the Hebrew University, Yehuda Magnes, (which he later spurred to the embarrassment of Scholem), actually does not deny

³⁹ See Irving Wohlfarth, "Immer radikal, niemals konsequent," 118.

⁴⁰ Bloch's writes: "Sie hat derart viel gelernt, sowohl von den Antisemiten, die jeder stolze Jude an Schmerz und Haß tausendfach überbeitet, wie auch von den Strebungen eines staatlich festgelegten Zionismus; dessen Schaden freilich ist, daß er die gesamte Kraft des Auserwähltseins leugnet und derart mit dem Begriff des Nationalstaats, wie er im neunzehnten Jahrhundert ephemere genug kursierte, aus Judäa eine Art von asiatischem Balkanstaat machen möchte." [GdU:320]

⁴¹ [II: 837-8]. Letter from October 10, 1912 to Ludwig Strauß. See also the discussion in Momme Brodersen, *Spinne im eigenen Netz*, Elster Verlag, 1990, 52-56.

his earlier views.⁴² Scholem however fundamentally disagreed with Benjamin's rejection of Zionism and later in life may have even seen Benjamin's isolated and ultimately devastated European existence as a model for a form of Jewish alienation which he bitterly deemed self-imposed.⁴³

Yet in itself, without any further indication in this regard, the introduction of the concept of theocracy here cannot be taken as a hidden critique of Zionism, which, as a religious or potentially theocratic movement, is largely a phenomenon of the last few decades. Nor can it be understood merely as statement on the necessity of pure thought. From the search for a messianic conception of history, a more fundamental problem arises: for no discussion of political theology is complete without a concept of theocracy, not only in the accidental sense of the contemporary resurgence of theocracy the world over, but for reasons inherent in the messianic idea itself. As in other religious movements with a political dimension, theocracy has to be seen therefore as an essential component of Jewish Messianism. It is the notion of a state which is executed in law but grounded in covenant to God, existing as a form of rule but also as a means of organization. Josephus, who is believed to have first coined the phrase in relation to the other Greek terms regarding political forms (democracy, oligarchy, hierarchy), sought a term to define not only the form of religious structure of the Israelites, but one which could describe their social organization.⁴⁴

The Torah proscribes that the covenant to God surpasses legal obligation as do the prophets who limit the power of kings. Nevertheless, a conception of Messianism without the restoration or completion of the Davidic dynasty is rare indeed. Even if the post-biblical idea of theocracy, beginning with Talmudic and Midrashic traditions, do not always strictly emphasize the house of David conquering the kingdom, it is difficult to conceive of Judaic redemption outside of a monarchical structure if we consider the centralized, political theocracy of the

⁴² We can only speculate as to Benjamin's true intentions concerning the move to Palestine in the 1930s. Had he gone, he would not have been the first of his kind to move to Palestine while still entirely wedded to Europe linguistically, culturally, and foremost politically.

⁴³ See the interview with Gershom Scholem in *Unease in Zion*, ed. by Ehud Ben Ezer, New York: Quadrangle Press, 1974, 265-267. In this respect, the vigorous exchange between Benjamin and Scholem in the later years have to be examined not only from the perspective of Benjamin's attempts to merge his earlier political ideas with elements of Marxism as a rejection of theology but rather a loosening of his commitment to anarchism.

⁴⁴ See the articles by Bernhard Lang, "Theokratie" and Hubert Cancik, "Theokratie und Priesterherrschaft" in *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie*, ed. by Jakob Taubes, vol. 3, "Theokratie," München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987, 11-15, 65-76.

Davidic kingdom as primary Judean ideology.⁴⁵ In Benjamin's "Fragment," the question of theocracy can be also read as a term of political structure carried over into a "religious" dimension. If it is to remain an element of a political theology, then the category of theocracy implicitly poses the question: Can there be a conception of Messianism without theocracy i.e. is there such a thing as a theocracy which is truly utopian, free from domination and hierarchy? An anarchist kingdom of God?⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See R. A. Horsley, "Popular Messianic Movements around the time of Jesus" in *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements*, ed. by M. Saperstein, New York University Press, 1992, 87; F.M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, Cambridge University Press, 1973; Jakob Taubes (ed.), *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie*, vol. 3, "Theokratie," München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987; "Staatsrecht" in *Jüdisches Lexikon*, Band IV:2, 1930, 618-623.

⁴⁶ In Scholem's description of the period in Bern, he defines his discussions on politics with Benjamin as concerning a "theocratic anarchism:" "Wir sprachen auch viel über Politik und Sozialismus, über den wir, wie über den Stand des Menschen bei seiner eventuellen Realisierung, große Bedenken hatten. Noch immer lief es bei uns auf theokratischen Anarchismus als die sinnvollste Antwort auf die Politik hinaus." [freund:108] We may understand theocracy as a necessary dimension of Messianism and anarchism as the most "sensible" political position [see also jjc:33 where he makes the same statement on anarchism]. Benjamin's rejection of "political" or historical theocracy favors an abstract role for this "theocratic anarchism."

THE DIVISION OF THE HOLY AND PROFANE

The division of the profane from its opposite is clear: it is a category entirely separate from the kingdom. Despite its antinomian relation to the divine, the profane is the correct and essential category of the immanence of the messianic age and its nearing. Its approach is quieter than all else, more silent than all that has been silenced in its alienation. The approaching of the kingdom should not however be understood as quietistic for it is not passive toward this coming, not indifferent, but cataclysmic, essential, necessary. It has been lodged where it is least expected, as is the concept of the Messiah in this world. It remains in existence, nonetheless, taking root in the profanity of its exile.⁴⁷

In Benjamin's text on Hölderlin, we find a juxtaposition of the divine and profane such that immortality of the living confronts the eternity of the divine: "Die Himmlischen sind zu Zeichen des unendlichen Lebens geworden, das aber gegen ihn begrenzt ist." [II:125] Why, one might ask, does Benjamin reinstitute a radical partition between the divine and profane centuries after philosophy asserted its collapse? An answer to this question first requires the explication of the nature of the dichotomy. Where the juxtaposition is dualistic, there can be no ultimate unity of the holy and profane in redemption; where it is dialectical, it is here constituted to be messianic.⁴⁸ If the dualistic realms of heaven and earth would seek the neutralization of messianic tendencies, the postulation of a final abrogation of all previously necessary divisions is integral to a dialectical theology. Rosenzweig's understanding of this division is essential to his own notion of its ultimate negation, not as destruction but as a final reunification of "das Reich Gottes und das Reich der Welt."⁴⁹ He links the two realms by a track on route to redemption, for whereas

⁴⁷ Benjamin's appreciation of quietism in relation to the divine, noted in "Die religiöse Stellung der neuen Jugend," [II:74] should not be mistaken for pacifism. Despite its importance for Benjamin in the First World War and his praise for the anarchist-pacifism of Tolstoy, he maintained a critical distance to the movement, once citing its inability to distinguish "ethical Anarchism" from the destruction of a Jewish community in Galacia. The later may have appeared passive, but this would not be due to an understanding of Anarchism; rather, a belief in *kiddush hashem*, a practice which has played an important role in Jewish tradition from Rabbi Akiva to the first Crusades and beyond. See Benjamin's comments in "Das Recht zur Gewaltanwendung" [VI:107] and the discussion in section three, chapter six.

⁴⁸ If we are to draw from Scholem's own comments on the role of dialectics in his early conception of political theology, he writes that he was not to "learn dialectics from Hegel or the Marxists, but from my own experiences and from pondering the labyrinths of Zionism as I was trying to implement it." [jic:36] Should this comment question the use of dialectics in the history of the Kabbalah is worthy of further exploration.

⁴⁹ Rather, Rosenzweig continues, "Sie stehen nebeneinander. Das Reich Gottes setzt sich durch in der Welt, indem es die Welt durchsetzt. Von der Welt aus ist ohnehin, wie zum Zeichen dieser

revelation is directed solely toward humanity, having no existence in-itself but purely for-itself.⁵⁰ Redemption is here the completion of the world through its fulfillment in the world. Unlike creation, which occurs spatially, and revelation, temporally, redemption ends both spatial and temporal parameters. It cannot therefore merely exist but rather must come into being through its own link to the world. This portal, through which redemption makes its entrance and is therefore perceivable in the world, is achieved through human activity. For Rosenzweig, this activity is *Die Nächstenliebe*.⁵¹

A similar division between divine and profane can also be found in Bloch where history is conceived in its final abrogation through the rejoining of the worldly and heavenly realms.⁵² In Bloch, the holy represents a "überwelte Sphäre, eine utopische Wirklichkeit oder eine noch nicht erreichte, wohl aber geltende Realität der Idee," an "übersinnliche," "überempirische Welt" which exists for the "utopische-absoluten Subjekt," in contrast to a "Sinnliche," "untere empirische Welt."⁵³ The world above represents the 'not-yet-existing' and in this sense fully

Unvergleichbarkeit nur ein Teil des kommenden Gottesreichs überhaupt wahrnehmbar, nämlich nur der Mittelteil, der »Dual« der Nächstenliebe." [SdE§232]

⁵⁰ It is my inclination here to view the parallel of concepts and categories as an indication of Benjamin's affinity with Rosenzweig, in regard to ideas he himself had worked out nearly seven years prior to the publication of the *Stern der Erlösung*, particularly in his essay on Hölderlin. Bloch's own construction of this problem, as I develop in this chapter, may have also contributed to his understanding. This phenomenon constitutes Benjamin's unique form of exegesis. It is therefore important to note here the use of language, categorical similarity and the formal juxtaposition of the categories in the "Fragment" which may reveal an indebtedness to Rosenzweig.

⁵¹ Profane activity contains within it a magnetic tension for Rosenzweig, to which *die Nächstenliebe* is drawn. [SdE§203] His tightly woven analysis of neighborly love is directed entirely towards worldly affairs. It is, however, at the same time a divine commandment and therefore concerns divine obligation. The principle of love is based on a notion of freedom for humanity; its free will is constituted in relation to a property first found in God. God's nature must be based on an internal freedom of action which is so permanent and unchanging that it is understood as fate, here expressed as its "Urgesetz." [SdE§144] But what makes its appearance as "das schicksalgebundene Sein" is a form of fate which transforms an "augenblicksgeborene Willkür [...] zur dauernden Macht" [SdE§144], that is, permanent as it is constantly changing. "Denn Liebe allein ist zugleich schicksalhafte Gewalt über das Herz, in dem sie erwacht, und doch so neugeboren, so — zunächst — vergangenheitslos, so ganz dem Augenblick, den sie erfüllt, und nur ihm selbst entsprungen" [SdE§144]. God's love exists in a nexus between compulsion in its force but freedom in its unrestricted choice, permanent in its decisiveness but momentary in its lack of time. It is God's momentariness, however, which forms His presence (Dasein): "gegenwärtig, wie der Augenblick, wie jeder Augenblick, und damit fängt er an zu werden, [...] was er auch jetzt erst zu werden anfängt: »tatsächlich«" [SdE§144] Existence in the moment initiates the process of becoming 'actual.'

⁵² This is indeed the element of secularization which Benjamin also sought to introduce but in a markedly different way.

⁵³ [GdU:276] Here the two realms are mediated through their tension: "So wird schon die Geschichte in zwei Räume geteilt; in einen unteren, irdischen und einen oberen, unsichtbaren, zwischen denen sich dieser Rotationswechsel der zwei Gruppen und Zeiten vollzieht, sofern in dem oberen Raum als dem Raum der Abgeschiedenen, als dem Zwischenreich zwischen Hier und Dort, die Geschichte oder Typologie des nächsten Zeitraums jeweils ihre wesentliche kausale Prägung erhält;" [GdU:430]

reflects the abstract, not-yet-attainable conception of the divine in Benjamin. The world above which, although mediated by the profane, is seen from its end in redemption and therefore is only expressed as a "kingdom in-between." [GdU:430] Its categorical integrity of being "above" and not "below" is metaphorical and can immediately be called into question, for it does not exist for us in our worldly selves but is intended to serve as a realm of ideas. What is not under question is the firm separation between theology as a form of critical understanding and politics in its materialist realization. Thus the use of the concept of kingdom can never be understood as the will to establish God's kingdom on earth. The question therefore turns to the perception of the divine in the profane.

We have thus far seen a bifurcated conception of history, resting on a conception of the temporal and spatial existence and the methodology of its apprehension. This conception, polarized by the tension between a profane world and a messianic, is one which Benjamin describes as "one of the essential elements in the teachings of historical philosophy," which is the precondition of "a mystical conception of history, whose problem permits itself to be represented in an image." We begin therefore with a positive statement toward mysticism representing a historical philosophy contingent upon the tension between agency and the messianic, and of revealing a messianic index within profane activity. This mystical conception can only be represented in an image, which permits its representation only in so far as the falsehood of images itself is retained. Just as no idol is permitted by God to stand before Him, the divine kingdom is not to be revealed through imitation, through words or symbols which allow passage into the divine realm through a form of mimicry.⁵⁴ However, although the image is an impoverished representation, it is the only form able to capture this messianic understanding. In "Das Leben der Studenten," we also see a reference to the conception of history as only understandable and possible as an "Abbild einen höchsten, metaphysischen, Standes." [II:1:75] In this sense, the representation of a messianic history is mediated by the image seeking divine representation.⁵⁵ The image is like a mirror: it presents metaphysical truth within history but only in an inverted form. It is captured by a weak, profane capacity but nevertheless is able to

⁵⁴ As with the rest of this elusive "Fragment," the author does not allude to what aspect of image-forming is problematic. Nevertheless, it is possible that our author did indeed have in mind the problem of the concept of image in relationship to the corporeality of God.

⁵⁵ If this image is a divine image in representation, its dissonance is its expression of "damaged immediacy" (see discussion in section two). Its immediacy poses a problem, for God is naturally far greater than the things he created. Thus human language falls shy of ever being able to express the nature of God, and merely lends itself to its conception. This is to say that through this dynamic, the divine kingdom only finds its true form when it is faced by its linguistic limit in historical agency. This agency takes form at the same time as being fundamentally and inherently formless.

express a fragment of the divine in dissonance. We see this elsewhere in the early writings in speculation concerning metaphysical truth locked within the image:

Jede Bilddissonanz, der in äußerstem Nachdruck eine lautliche anklingt, [hat] die Funktion, die innewohnende geistige Zeitordnung der Freude sinnbar, lautbar zu machen, in der Kette eines unendlich erstreckten Geschehens, das den unendlichen Möglichkeiten des Reimes entspricht. So rief die Dissonanz im Bilde des Wahren und des Teppichs die Beschreitbarkeit als einende Beziehung der Ordnungen hervor, wie die »Gelegenheit« die geistig-zeitliche Identität (die Wahrheit) der Lage bedeutete. Diese Dissonanzen heben im dichterischen Gefüge die aller räumlichen Beziehung einwohnende zeitliche Identität und damit die absolut bestimmte Natur des geistigen Daseins innerhalb der identischen Erstreckung hervor. [II:117]

In the citation above, taken from "Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin," we read of an image which resonates with sound, associated here with verse and rime. Dissonance arises out of a harmonic image of truth in its externalized expression, carrying with it a divine purpose: revelation concerning the underlying structure of time so that time no longer appears as lineal string of barbarism but an infinite table of events which are bound to redemption, the "temporal order of happiness." It is here that we can see his discussion with Scholem playing a role in the notion of historical events being countable without necessarily being numerical.⁵⁶ Here, dissonance of the image reveals its identity as truth in spatial existence, determining itself and nature in the context of the underlying identity of time. In this imagery, the concept of words being read as images is akin to the notion of image in Jewish scholarship which often must contend with the problem of Hebrew being both the language of God and man.⁵⁷ Here time is measured not in terms of events of the past, nor simply in the negative relationship of present to future, but from the point of perfection to the past, the present being just a moment in between.

The theological problem of the image is already present in Genesis where we learn that humanity was created in *b'tzelem*, in the image of God, not however in his essence, which is pure truth.⁵⁸ If the notion of the image is to be seen as speculation on Benjamin's part concerning the perception of the truth of God in the profane, he would indeed be touching on a central concern of theology, needless to say a fundamental problem in Jewish theology, in regard to the corporeality of

⁵⁶ See Scholem [tag I:390, 401], [freund:45] as well as Benjamin [VI:90, 682] and the discussion in chapter two, section three.

⁵⁷ This point is developed further in the chapter on Franz Joseph Molitor. See chapter eight, section two.

⁵⁸ Gen. 1:26, Ps. 119:160

truth.⁵⁹ Accordingly, a discussion of the importance of the representation of God and His image are present in both in the *Stern der Erlösung* and *Geist der Utopie*.⁶⁰ But perhaps the most well known treatment of this problem is to be found in Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*.⁶¹

The division of form from content here is paralleled by a discussion of myth and divine manifestation in the context of justice, where revelation upsets the order of mythical forces.⁶² The purity of the divine, and the "damaged immediacy" [II:153] of its worldly perception, appears in many ways to be what Rosenzweig had in mind when he referred to the question of whether God, and more specifically God's countenance [Antlitz], can be expressed in an image:

Wir sprechen in Bildern. Aber die Bilder sind nicht willkürlich. Es gibt notwendige und zufällige Bilder. Die Unverkehrbarkeit der Wahrheit läßt sich nur in dem Bilde eines Lebendigen aussprechen. Denn im Lebendigen allein

⁵⁹ We can see this tradition dating back to the inconceivable measurements of God in the text "Shiur Komah" and the abhorrence it was to face by its most rationalist readers. See Scholem, *Die Jüdische Mystik*, 68-70, 38 n. 82 and *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit*, chapter one; Joseph Dan, *Ancient Jewish Mysticism*, Tel Aviv, 1989, 48-58, M.S. Cohen, *The Shiur Qoomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism*, Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1983.

⁶⁰ [SdE§455,459], [GdU:347]

⁶¹ Maimonides begins his tractate with an exegetical exposition of the terms image (tzelem), likeness (demuth), and form (to'ar). "People have thought that in the Hebrew language," he writes, "image denotes the shape and configuration of a thing. This supposition led them to the pure doctrine of the corporeality of God, on account of His saying: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'" [Gen 1:26] But due to the necessity to disprove the corporeality of God to maintain His unity, Maimonides introduces the concept of form to refer to the shape and configuration of the thing. Whereas the concept of form is applied to measure, it is not applied to God's configuration. Image, however, does concern what Maimonides calls the "natural form," which is defined as "the notion in virtue of which a thing is constituted as a substance and becomes what it is. It is the true reality of the thing in so far as the latter is that particular being." The natural form, from which human apprehension derives, is the only aspect of human beings that has the possibility of achieving immortality. In the statement, "In the image of God created He him" [Gen 1:27], image can only be referring to the apprehension and not to His form, shape or composition. The use of the term image for idols, he explains, is attributed to the essence which was thought to dwell within them and not an attribute of their form as such. The concept of likeness is also meant to refer to the natural form and therefore not to a general principle of shape. Thus the non-corporeality of the attributes of God, although mirrored in human beings, are rather the capacity of the intellect to develop pure theoretical thought. The image of God, then according to Maimonides, allows itself to find similarity or likeness in the intellect. Truth, whether historical or symbolic, must then be synonymous with the divine. As would be the case if we were to say (tautologically) that if God as truth lets Himself be perceived in image without form, then truth too is conceivable in image. See the first chapter in Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. by Shlomo Pines, Chicago 1963. Benjamin makes reference to Maimonides in his article for the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, "Juden in der deutschen Kultur" [II:807]. The article, however, cannot be considered authoritative due to the irrevocable altering of the text. See [II:1521].

⁶² See the discussion in chapter seven, section two on language and justice and on justice and violence in section three, chapter six.

ist schon von Natur und vor aller Setzung und Satzung ein Oben und Unten ausgezeichnet [...] ⁶³

Rosenzweig concludes that in order for an image to exist, a division between projection and reception must be presupposed i.e. projection from up high, perception from below. The compelling truth of the image expresses itself in its existence but only by the fact that it is necessarily received by the living. The image here mediates the raw truth of God and while the divine requires no mediation, truth capable of expression by the living is the earthly side of God's countenance.⁶⁴ In reception, and in the capability for apprehension, the means is created by which we are able to see the truth of God, His true history, so to speak, in the apprehension of the revealed image, which is indeed beyond worldly life and what Rosenzweig calls "die Schau auf der Höhe der erlösten Überwelt." [SdE§459] In the "Fragment," the image appears to have a distinctly "mystical" task in history — mystical for it seeks a unseen realm in the profane, placed there by divine providence. The divine plan governs the terms of the beginning and the means of the end. It is a measure of God's truth and therefore finds its profane expression in a limited form, in the idea of an image.

⁶³ [SdE§456] "weil es in der Wahrheit Oben und Unten gibt, deshalb dürfen nicht bloß, sondern müssen wir sie das Antlitz Gottes heißen" This means to have a natural and not merely a general form in Maimonides' terms.

⁶⁴ Like Maimonides, Rosenzweig follows that it is "nicht Gott, aber Gottes Wahrheit ward mir zum Spiegel." For each element of holiness which we are permitted to view, forms "in der Welt selber ein Stück überwelt, ein Leben jenseits des Lebens." [SdE§459]

THE MESSIANIC INTENSITY OF HAPPINESS

The concept of happiness is the basis of the structure of agency. Being part of the pre-formation of the messianic age, its pursuit is formed by its worldliness and thereby introduces a counter-force into redemption.⁶⁵ Like the juxtaposition of profane and holy, two concepts of happiness are postulated in opposition to each other. Happiness which runs counter to the direction of messianic redemption is happiness conceived of as self-indulgent pleasure. Pleasure, as such, is not rejected categorically, as it might be perhaps by an orthodox pursuit of redemption, but rather is situated as a counter-messianic force.⁶⁶ The difference between the two forms of happiness may also lie in the difference between happiness itself and its pursuit, whereas its pursuit could take the negative form of an over-determined and misguided will. It must be said, however, that the *Glückssuchen* is somewhat different categorically, although perhaps not conceptually, from the *Streben nach Glück*, which is generally associated with the pursuit of happiness. However, that the category of happiness takes up the position uniquely reserved for the Antichrist suggests a more integral role for a negative happiness in Benjamin's conception of redemption. But how, one might ask, could the "pursuit of happiness of free humanity" be seen as representing the Antichrist of the messianic dialectic? In this sense, we find Benjamin here seeking to uncover an inherent structure which emits redemptive forces in *this* world, leading to the next:

aber wie eine Kraft durch ihren Weg eine andere auf entgegengesetzt gerichtetem Wege zu befördern vermag, so auch die profane Ordnung des Profanen das Kommen des messianischen Reiches. [Fragment, II:204]

Like an object which is circumscribed by everything it is not and is therefore able to generate its opposite which already exists implicitly within itself by moving fully through itself, so is the "profane order of the profane" conceived

⁶⁵ Bloch refers to a "menschliche Glücksuchende Wille" in reference to Marx's notion of a humanity which is not "completely rotten" and whose moral will is able to be determined by a "Wille als revolutionäres Klasseninteresse bereits durch die einfache Tatsache der Gemeinschaft des Wollens." *Geist der Utopie*, 2nd Edition, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 300. This will is explained in the first edition of *Geist der Utopie* as the will to be free from the alienation of production. "Der Mann, der immer nur Teile zu bearbeiten hat und niemals das Glück der ganzen und Fertigproduktion genießen kann." [GdU:20]

⁶⁶ Benjamin's critical views toward the pleasure seeking aspect of modern society appears several times in the early writings. In "Dialog über die Religiosität der Gegenwart," for example, we find reference to the idea of a unity in bourgeois pleasure and progress: "Was hat aller Fortschritt, alle Weltlichkeit mit Religion zu tun, wenn sie uns nicht eine freudige Ruhe Geben? [...] Wir sind gehetzt von Lebensfreude. Es ist unsere verdammte Pflicht und Schuldigkeit, sie zu fühlen. Kunst, Verkehr, Luxus, alles ist Verpflichtend." [II:18] I will be returning to this point in the section on tragedy in this chapter.

as praxis in the world, capable of forwarding the coming of the messianic kingdom. Both the terms "Gottes Reiches" and "des messianischen Reiches" represent categories of the age of redemption and the revolution which will bring it about. In this sense, the messianic kingdom is bound to the notion of image which is only an approximation out of the inherent impoverishment of its expression and not solely because the telos of the dynamic of history has no goal which we can name. Language, in its own internal exile of "damaged immediacy," is constitutionally unable to fully convey the messianic age or assist as a means of its coming, save for a realm of language preserved for the pure "judging word."⁶⁷ It itself must be renewed by the age in which it finds its true meaning.⁶⁸ The concept of the profane order of the profane points therefore to worldly realms, not the least of which to language. Profane is repeated here twice to emphasize the context of this order: it is based on the living, sensuous conditions of the world and its juxtaposition to the divine kingdom. While praxis as form is agency, the body which it structures is the profane, worldly pursuit of proprietary and consumptive happiness, existing fundamentally opposed to the next world. But in being by its nature the opposite and by standing in direct relationship to the messianic, it acts to forward the conditions by which a redemptive age could be ushered in. Therefore, the profane order of the profane stands in distinct relation to the idea of evil.⁶⁹

Although this negative category in the form of a negative happiness stands in contrast to redemption, it is postulated independently. It would therefore be an evil bearing no necessary, causal connection to the nature of God.⁷⁰ "Free humanity" is a distinctly negative freedom which seeks the hedonistic aspects of the world in relation to the course of redemption. In generating further degrees of self-alienation, this seeking releases its opposite, liberating the pursuit of happiness from its link to a bourgeois conception of history which finds its end in consumption. The profane unleashes within itself, and i.e. within the profane

⁶⁷ [II:134,154] A discussion of these terms is forthcoming in the second section, chapter seven on judgment and language.

⁶⁸ I deal with these ideas more thoroughly in the context of Benjamin's concept of language as a whole. See section two on "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen."

⁶⁹ Benjamin had a long-standing interest in evil, Satan and demonic forces which perhaps should not be taken as a form of occultism but rather, as I argue here, a necessary component to Messianism. On the devil, see [II:101] and Scholem's reflections on Benjamin's intrigue with the demonic in *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992, 46-49 as well as Giorgio Agamben's essay "Walter Benjamin und das Dämonische. Glück und geschichtliche Erlösung im Denken Benjamins" in *Walter Benjamin. 1892-1940, zum 100. Geburtstag*, ed. by Uwe Steiner, Bern, 1992, 182-216.

⁷⁰ On the difference in intension between the divine and profane, see the related theme of "Selbstzweck" and "göttliche Selbstzweck" in the "Dialog über die Religiosität der Gegenwart" [II:17].

world, those elements of freedom which would contravene the course of redemption. The evil element stands as its opposer and therefore partly as the grounds for its existence. Under these presuppositions, evil assists in the coming of the messianic age. Such reasoning, which aims to show the world as it exists and to separate it from the concept of the next world or the world as it should exist is the work of historical philosophy, whose aim is not to justify or prescribe a predetermined goal in its development but to understand the dynamic of the world in its unfolding.⁷¹

All events in this world have a relationship both to the profane and to the coming of redemption. Activity in *this* world which may appear as commonplace, *ungesegnet* or profane is simultaneously the essential corner stone "from which the *next* world is itself built." [SdE§328] Worldly affairs are conducted with a force that entails the introduction of a realm of sanctity into the world of things.⁷² The seeking of happiness of free humanity appears to be directed in the opposite direction as the divine. In actuality, however, the gravitational force of motion toward earth is the same force that lays the foundation for its worldly abrogation, its "Vergängnis zur Ewigkeit," says Rosenzweig, overcoming a division which "penetrates the whole of life."⁷³

The idea of an eternal passing-away becomes an essential moment in the effect which the profane has on the divine. Happiness is here the force which points the way, as Benjamin writes in the "Fragment:" "Denn im Glück aber erstrebt alles

⁷¹ Benjamin's "Glücksuchen der Freien Menschheit" here can be compared to Rosenzweig's formulation of free will with regard to 'redemption-intentions.' Rosenzweig's free will is determinate in relation to God's complete freedom. The non-coercive free act of love which is applied to the neighbor is the pursuit of happiness in the anarchic sense. This pursuit is an event which takes place in the world, but at the same time evokes the coming of the next, for in Rosenzweig's structure, redemption is not beyond human participation. He carries with him, in this sense, a Lurianic legacy. See Moshe Idel article in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. by Paul Mendes-Flohr, University Press of New England, 1988, on some kabbalistic influences. A broader explication of the Lurianic elements embedded in the corpus of the *Stern der Erlösung* is still however in need.

⁷² In Rosenzweig, worldliness is "de-thingified" or "enchanted" (entdinglicht) as everything entering the *Jewish* world contains a two-fold meaning: "einmal auf »diese« und dann auf die »kommende« Welt. [...] in »dieser« Welt dient es zum gemeinen Gebrauch, kaum anders als ob es ungesegnet geblieben wäre, aber gleichzeitig ist es jetzt einer der Steine geworden, aus denen sich die »kommende« Welt erbaut. [...] Diese Spaltung durchdringt das ganze Leben, als Gegensatz von heilig und Gemein, Sabbat und Werktag, »Thora und Weg der Erde«, Leben im Geist und Geschäft. [...] und wie der Segen alles Gemeine erfaßt und nicht mehr gemein bleiben läßt, sondern alles heiligt, so werden auch des ewigen Lebens der künftigen Welt [...]" [SdE§328]

⁷³ [SdE§328] We find this juxtaposition in Benjamin in the sense of the holy and worldly standing in direct relationship to each other through human activity. For holiness to be existent in Rosenzweig's system, the division here is necessary, being resolved only in the moment of redemption. Just as the blessed ultimately absorbs into itself everything external, leaving nothing simply profane but rather forms holiness, "so too will it be in the eternal life of the coming world."

Irdische seinen Untergang, nur im Glück ist ihm der Untergang zu finden bestimmt." [II:204] The idea of happiness, upon which the order of the profane is established, corresponds to everything earthly, which is by nature everything belonging to the profane in the process of passing. It strives for its own abrogation as does nature and only in happiness, in the formation of the limits of agency and evil, is this passing-away constituted to find the last and true prefiguring of messianic redemption. The unmediated messianic "intensity" of this act, which is paralleled by the spirit of revolutionary transformation which seizes each person and stirs a longing for a totally different world, a redeemed world, is forced into a state of unhappiness, not unlike the idea of the Messiah which the Sabbatianist ascribed to their anointed one: "When the Messiah is fighting evil at its core," writes Joseph Dan on perhaps the most dynamic Messiah of the last 300 years, Sabbati Zevi, "his external melancholy is the result; when he approaches the divine world with the redeemed sparks, he is exalted, happy, in a state of enlightenment."⁷⁴ Since the early Christians attributed great meaning to the suffering of Isaiah's Israelite, the category has remained one of the cardinal signs of the Messiah.⁷⁵ *Unglück* in this case, however, is not merely a state but an event, or an event which opens up a state in its relationship to the tragic hero and is perhaps best understood here as tragedy rather than the more inconsequential misfortune. In the case of Zevi, it is the moment in which he is engaged in the ultimate form of the Lurianic redemption of sparks which are inaccessible to the normative and collective activities of redemption. Melancholia is the condition which sets in. But *Unglück* has another, more important meaning for Benjamin, one which links him to the concept of antiquity in his time: the hero of Greek tragic drama and his *Untergang*.

The direction of all human activity toward the transformation of the profane is the condition in which everything worldly can take its leave; a condition, for example, which forms the cornerstone of redemption in Rosenzweig's system.⁷⁶ In

⁷⁴ Joseph Dan, *Gershom Scholem*, New York: New York University, 1986, 292. A more readily known example is the suffering of the devoted Job.

⁷⁵ The most important passage in this respect is Isaiah 53.

⁷⁶ Following Rosenzweig's analysis of the *Nächstenliebe*, this same process which is to be found in God is also to form the means of the 'actualization' of the individual. Rosenzweig first considers that form of love which is outwardly and active rather than its reception, for it is a form of self-devotion which is more resilient in its constant renewal. Love takes the form of something given without the intention of reciprocity [SdE§145]. For this reason, it is defined as "keine Eigenschaft, sondern Ereignis," and God's love is "die feste unveränderliche Grundform seines Antlitzes" [SdE§146] i.e. the basis of the appearance of His countenance in the world. It cannot be understood as a changing quality, being divine, but as an event. Although the "Inbegriff" [SdE§191] of all the commandments, its necessity as commandment is negated. It is commanding, but at the same time inherently spontaneous, anarchic. It becomes principle rather than compulsion and, in this way, able

Benjamin, it is clear that the world must pass away but its passing can only be achieved through happiness. This happiness is at once constituted to be worldly and, at the same time, messianic, in the sense of being directed toward messianic activity. In this respect, the focus of this development, based on happiness, turns to the motor of redemption. Benjamin's response to the question of agency concerns the problematic unity of the collective and individual in what he calls the striving "des innern einzelnen Menschen:" the inner solitary person who passes through "Unglück, im Sinne des Leidens," which is here understood not merely as misfortune or unhappiness but rather tragedy in the sense of suffering. Similarly, in "Das Leben der Studenten," Benjamin speaks of a original "Strebungen des inneren Menschen" which has been replaced by a more narrowly defined, pedestrian form of social service. [II:78] That figure which embodies the "unmediated messianic intensity of the heart," the intensity of passion of the solitary individual, suggests another distinct figure of ancient literature distinct in this case from the Messiah, which requires our attention to be turned shortly to Athens rather than Jerusalem. Interest in the idea of the tragic hero was common among several literary, political and theologically oriented German speaking Jews in the period preceding and following the First World War.⁷⁷ Rosenzweig, Bloch, Lukács, and Benjamin were all concerned with the relationship between tragedy and the messianic structure of the solitary individual — but at the same time, the inner quality of every individual — who passes through a pre-determined series of historical events was seen in light of the suffering Messiah.⁷⁸ The connection to the character-less Messiah and messianic anticipatory activity of the single person in his or her relation to the world lies within the concept of the decline (Untergang) of the hero.

to bring all other commandments to life, out of their absolute form and into the world. Though it may no longer be mere obligation, it does not lose the force which it finds under such conditions. For Rosenzweig, it is the only force which is able to penetrate the devotion of the soul, "so daß die Seele keinen Raum mehr hat, um zu »vergehen«, a force which must be located in the "form-becoming of the soul" in order to give the "Inbrunst des Heiligen ihre Festigkeit und Gestalt." [SdE§198]

⁷⁷ See Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 14-26; Anson Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism," in *New German Critique*, 1985, no. 34-36, 78-124; Christoph Schulte, "Messias und Identität. Zum Messianismus im Werk einiger Deutsch-Jüdischer Denker" in *Bruch und Kontinuität*, ed. by E. Goodman-thau and M. Daxner, Berlin: Akademie, 1994.

⁷⁸ It is important here to note that although his ideas are directed towards the individual, Benjamin's politics can not be reduced to a brand of individualism. See the critical remarks on individualism in [II:25].

TRAGIC DEVOTION

Nietzsche made several contributions to the understanding of this reoccurring figure of ancient literature in *The Birth Of Tragedy* and was surely to have influenced the concept of tragedy in this period. In this work, Greek drama is characterized as presenting a concept of individuation in which the hero determines his existence by acquiring knowledge of himself, understood as tragic knowledge. Tragic knowledge is, in fact, deemed a relative of the fall from grace. The Greek myth of the tragic hero is understood as the "Aryan" brother of the "Semitic" tree of knowledge. The tragic hero suffers in his acquisition or transmission of knowledge and undergoes a form of punishment. Through this act, he has not only determined his existence, in the sense of existing spatially as well as temporally, but has also reached into the heavens as a mortal, a transgression of the division between the divine and earthly worlds. This transgression, which is deemed a demonic force,⁷⁹ is the rendering of immortality.⁸⁰ Nietzsche, however, ultimately rejects the tragic hero, symbolized in Socrates' death, with its moral calling and dialectical optimisms. Benjamin introduces the figure of the Messiah at this juncture.⁸¹

Rosenzweig's notion of the tragic hero and Benjamin's clearly converge in the later *Trauerspiel* book.⁸² A short presentation of Rosenzweig's concept at this point may assist us in forming a better picture of Benjamin's own approach.⁸³ Rosenzweig presents his idea of tragedy in the context of character:

In der Trägödie wird leicht der Anschein erweckt, als müßte der Untergang des Einzelnen irgend ein gestörtes Gleichgewicht der Dinge wiederherstellen. Aber dieser Anschein beruht nur auf dem Widerspruch zwischem dem

⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *Werke in drei Bänden*, Band I, Köln: Könnemann, 1994, 67, 77.

⁸⁰ This concept was received quite differently by Benjamin, Bloch and Rosenzweig. As a model for the rebirth of tragedy, Rosenzweig rejects this out of hand; for Benjamin, the divinity of the poet/artist is problematic; For Bloch, it is accepted and incorporated in the secularizing task of the *Geist der Utopie*.

⁸¹ This appears to have been the consensus of both Rosenzweig and Bloch as well.

⁸² See Mosès, Stéphane, "Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig," in *Walter Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, ed. by G. Smith, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 228-246.

⁸³ In the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin brings together his own earlier reflections of fate and character with Rosenzweig's concept of the decline of the tragic hero to introduce the notion of *Trauerspiel* as religious tragedy. Only through the drama of the martyr is the *Trauerspiel* as "heiligen Tragödie" believable. "Im sterbenden Sokrates," he writes, "ist das Märtyrerdrama als Parodie der Tragödie entsprungen" [I:292]. Indeed, this is not the first discussion of the figure of Socrates in Benjamin. Here Socrates represents the immortality of character of the hero. He chooses fate, rather than allowing the despotism of the events leading to his death succeed in his capitulation, and in this way no longer remains a victim of arbitrary forces. This paradox points to the end of tragedy as such. See also "Sokrates" [II:129], written around June of 1916.

tragischen Charakter und der dramatischen Fabel; das Drama der Kunstwerk braucht beide Hälften dieses Widerspruchs, um zu bestehen; aber das eigentlich Tragische wird dadurch verwischt. Der Held als solcher muß nur untergehen, weil der Untergang ihm die höchste Verhelsing, nämlich die geschlossenste Verselbstung seines Selbst ermöglicht. Er verlangt nach der Einsamkeit des Untergangs, weil es keine größere Einsamkeit gibt als diese. Deshalb stirbt der Held eigentlich auch nicht. Der Tod sperrt ihm gewissermaßen nur die Temporalien der Individualität. Der zum heldischen Selbst geronnene Charakter ist unsterblich. [SdE§70]

The necessity of the fall of the individual was a predetermined given of classical drama which sought to restore a sense of balance to the natural world. But in the formation of the hero's character within the unfolding of his fate, we witness a profound break with the tragic element altogether. Although the hero must fall or "go under," he achieves the highest state of heroism and the self-definition of his own character. This is then defined as his own immortality. There is no greater isolation than this going under, that is, achieving an afterlife in this world, as there is no commonality between mortals and gods. He shares neither commonality with the divine nor profane which therefore forms one aspect of his suffering. In this sense, the hero does not actually perish in his fall, or at least a part of him lives on i.e. his character, which is only able to arrive at immortality through a confrontation with fate, with the "temporality of individuality" and with the nature of passing-away. Indeed, the tragic hero wins his own character both in its "temporal and spatial totality," as expressed in the "Fragment," and thereby locates his conclusion in worldly affairs. The individualistic aspects of the self, his personality, is determined by this tragic confrontation such that character becomes immortal as the individual passes away into the undifferentiated of nature and of good and evil.⁸⁴

The first appearance of Benjamin's formulations of the categories of tragedy and obligation, fate and character occurs in the Summer of 1916, directly preceding

⁸⁴ As in Rosenzweig, we also find recourse to "heiligen Tragödie" in Bloch. But unlike Benjamin, Bloch notion emphasizes the idea of Jesus as Messiah, son of Joseph in what amounts to a mystical and sometimes rather ahistorical materialist theology in the use of Kabbalah and Talmud: "Zudem haben viele anerkannte jüdische Lehrer die Erwähnung und weissagende Beschreibung des Gottesknechts im Deuterotesaja auf den Messias bezogen, in guter Übereinstimmung mit der Haggada, die sehr wohl einen leidenden Messias kennt, wenn auch unter der Einschränkung, daß man den leidenden, den Sohn Josefs, durchgängig von dem herrschendem Messias als dem Sohn Davids unterschied." [GdU:326] Had he applied himself to the blood-soaked question of Jesus as Messiah more thoroughly, he might have seen that he was not the first to apply Jesus to the idea of the two Messiahs. Indeed, in his well known *Vikuah* which reports the transcripts of the forced disputation of Barcelona (1263), Nachmanidies rebukes the necessity of Jesus having been either of the two Messiahs. See Hyam Maccoby (ed.), *Judaism on Trial. Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, 1993, 42f.

his essay on language.⁸⁵ "Die tiefere Erfassung des Tragischen," writes Benjamin in a piece entitled *Trauerspiel und Tragödie*, "hat vielleicht nicht nur und nicht sowohl von der Kunst als von der Geschichte auszugehen." [II:133] Here the concept of tragedy is already connected to the idea of history. The individual stands at the center of this relationship:

Die Zeit der Geschichte geht an bestimmten und hervorragenden Punkten ihres Verlaufs in die tragische Zeit über: und zwar in den Aktionen der großen Individuen. Zwischen Größe im Sinn der Geschichte und Tragik besteht ein wesensnotwendiger Zusammenhang — der sich freilich nicht in Identität auflösen läßt. [II:134]

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

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

As merely a device for counting the passing of empirical events, time remains empty and unfulfilled, for the "bestimmte Kraft der historischen Zeit" is neither fully collected nor fully contained by the events themselves. Historical time may be countable, he tells Scholem, but not necessarily numerical.⁸⁶ There is however an event which "im Sinne der Geschichte vollkommen sei" and quantifiably indeterminate in what is truly a different idea of time: "Diese Idee der erfüllten Zeit heißt in der Bible als deren beherrschende historische Idee: die messianische Zeit." [II:134]

Messianic time is conceived not as individual but collective time. This determination, we are told, differentiates "die tragische Zeit von der messianische," [II:134] posing the same problem as the difference between individual and Godly

⁸⁵ "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen" November 1916

⁸⁶ [tag I:390, 401], [freund:45], [VI:90, 682]. See also the discussion in chapter two, section three.

fulfillment of time. In tragedy, the hero dies, for in filled-time "keiner zu leben vermag." The hero "stirbt an Unsterblichkeit" which Benjamin here describes as the "Ursprung der tragischen Helden [und] der tragischen Schuld," where hubris forms the "eigentliche Ausdruck der Schuld" of the hero. [II:135] Hebbel's notion of the "Individuation als der Urschuld" with which Benjamin here confers, conceives of evil in the fall from grace, where knowledge served to differentiate Adam and ultimately cause his suffering, discovering his responsibility as the hero only in his decline. That is why he departs in his own "going-under." This *Untergang*, which is a decline of the individual in confrontation with fate, appears to be out of the control of the hero at first glance and therefore takes the form of paradox in the "völlige Passivität des Helden." He continues in the same strain:

Denn nicht selten sind es die völligen Ruhepausen, gleichsam der Schlaf des Helden, im dem sich das Verhängnis seiner Zeit erfüllt, und gleichmaßen tritt die Bedeutung der erfüllten Zeit im tragischen Entschluß, im retardierenden Moment, in der Katastrophe. [II:134]

In tragic drama, actual tragedy occurs when the hero meets his fate which has already been decided for him. He is nonetheless unable to know or to understand this decision and therefore appears vain and passive, despite all his efforts. That fate finds him in the realm of dreams rather than on the battlefield, enchants the audience, as passivity is the paradox of heroic fate. His death however is not actually passive; seen from the religious, courage is a measure of devotion. Here the passive moment does not alter the rather active conception of the hero's passing.⁸⁷ As he writes elsewhere:

⁸⁷ In *Geist der Utopie*, we see a very similar concept of the tragic hero forming himself out of his own choice in the face of a predetermined destiny. Drawing on Lukács, Bloch writes: "Alles ist ja schon vorher auf das Ende gerichtet gewesen, nicht als Unglück oder Strafe, [...] Sondern das tragische Sterben ist das Vorrecht der Größe [...] So kann der tragische Tod nach dieser Betrachtung nicht anders definiert werden als der durchaus von hier geschehende, zurückkehrende, immanente, durchaus unmythologische Zwang zur Form, zum Horos, zur Gestalt und dem endgültigen Terminus des Ichs." [GdU:68] In tragic death, what appears as tragedy or punishment becomes the triumphal march of victory. The death of the tragic hero for Bloch: "ist nicht weniger, nicht anders real als die Heiligenlegende, wenn auch durch charakteristische utopische Gegenstands- und Sphärengrade von dieser verschieden, und so wird die letzthinige Beziehung des tragischen Problems auf den Tod Christi als dem Inhalt der paulinischen »Gnadendramatik« in der religiösen Sphäre unausweichlich. Denn der Held geht nicht unter, weil er wesenhaft geworden ist, sondern weil er wesenhaft geworden ist, geht er unter; erst dieses macht das ernsthafte zu sich selber Gekommensein zum Heroismus, zur Kategorie des gewaltigen Schicksals und der Tragödie, die den Menschen erhebt, den sie zermalmt, indem sie ihn zermalmt;" [GdU:77] In his death, the tragic hero again reaches his own essence as finished; Bloch stresses that his essentiality causes his passing. For our purposes, it is the relationship between form and decline which finds affinity with Benjamin's notion of the individual. Here the figure of the hero secures his character in his *Untergang*, as does the individual who is able to destroy the tragedy which pulverizes him. This is what Bloch calls the "eine — vom Charakter stammende — Absichtlichkeit im Schicksal der Einzelnen." [GdU:351] In the face of tragedy, that portion of the individual which has the possibility of becoming fixed, is completed, and springs heroically into tragedy out of free will. This final leap, not into faith but fate, is the

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

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

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

Trauerspiel is only able to present the law of a higher, eternal life — and thereby of good messianic 'living' — in the limited sense of the earthly realm. Death puts an end to its unfolding in the profane so that it may repeat itself in a higher form. But *Trauerspiel* cannot put on this eternal performance before God and the angels alone:

So ist das Trauerspiel freilich nicht Bild eines höheren Lebens, sondern nichts als das eine von zwei Spiegelbildern, und seine Fortsetzung ist nicht minder schemenhaft als es selbst. Die Toten werden Gespenster. [II:136]

Drama does not actually fulfill time, however much it has been able to cast the expression of the idea of redemption. The *Trauerspiel* is no divine image; the dead are merely ghosts, not the reincarnated sages whose reappearance is perhaps the most important sign of the beginning of messianic time. "Die Idee seiner Auflösung" of *Trauerspiel* in this other-worldly sense, no longer lies "innerhalb des dramatischen Bezirks." [II:137] For Benjamin, the final distinction between *Trauerspiel* and tragedy therefore lies merely in a metaphorical realm, for while the

propulsion of the hero out of the realm of drama, out of the malignancy of time and through the gates of redemption: "wenn Luft und Boden entzogen werden und alle Räume des physischen Vorbei, [...] dann stehen wir nackt vor Gott, halb, lau, unklar und doch »vollendet«, im Sinn der tragischen Situation vollendet, wenngleich aus ganz anderen Wünschen, Zusammenhängen und Zeitmaßen zerschlagen als aus denen unseres Werks und seiner dem Satan mühevoll abgerungenen Zeit." [GdU:439]

dramatic rite is closed in itself and can make no transition to that beyond itself — the *Untergang* of the individual in his or her messianic act is a part of the filled-time of redemption. [II:134] *Trauerspiel* itself may still find a redemptive place in music, he concludes, pointing to this sense of place as a "feeling" in the text "Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie." To transcend its limitations, *Trauerspiel* is forced to leave the realm of performance and understand itself in a transformative rather than merely descriptive form, not simply to "pass-away" as a fallen historical occurrence but to unleash the terms of immortality: "Das Spiel muß aber die Erlösung finden, und für das Trauerspiel ist das erlösende Mysterium die Musik; die Wiedergeburt der Gefühle in einer übersinnlichen Natur." [II:139]

Thus the tragic model of human devotion is left behind in the sphere of *Trauerspiel*, while the meaning of the hero confronting fate is carried over further into speculation concerning the inner constitution of the individual. In Benjamin's piece from 1919 on "Fate and Character,"⁸⁸ he begins with the question of whether the character of a given individual can be known in terms of its relationship to worldly events, as in the case of the fate of the tragic hero. [II:171] If the response to particular events can be understood, then, as with the dramatic form, the fate of the individual may also be established. In the ability to view character and fate as intimately intertwined and not limited merely to the body, as is the case with character predictions drawn from horoscope and astrology, "die Möglichkeit einer Vorhersagung des Schicksals rationell begreiflich zu machen" would be at hand. [II:172] It would also be possible to speak about a core of character, says Benjamin, which, if not completely predictable, would be knowable to the degree that the external world is knowable. Character is not formed simply by will alone, for humanity and world here are mutually transformative and self-mediating. The relationship between the individual and the outer world is expressed in the following way: "das Außen, das der handelnde Mensch vorfindet, kann in beliebig hohem Maße auf sein Innen, sein Innen in beliebig hohem Maße auf sein Außen prinzipiell zurückgeführt." [II:173] Following Nietzsche's principle that character entails an eternally reoccurring experience, Benjamin's concludes that if the character of an individual is constant, so is his fate.

⁸⁸ His interest in this relationship begins in 1916, but it is not until the *Trauerspiel* work of 1923-26 that these notions are fully explicated, there finding expression in direct connection to the *Stern der Erlösung*. See [I:418]. Stéphane Mosès first mentions this connection but gives a different interpretation. See his "Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig" in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. by G. Smith, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989, 228-246, and S. Mosès, *Der Engel der Geschichte*, Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag, 1994.

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

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

Schuld here understood as a form of guilt in which an eternal punishment is applied to an eternal crime. Fate is then associated with tragedy as punishment i.e. as *Verschuldung*, to make one responsible for a crime. One example of this is Greek tragedy, another, Jewish "responsibility" for holy tragedy.⁸⁹ This erroneous concept, Benjamin concludes, has to be understood in part as related to an undeveloped concept of fate and responsibility.

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

Das Glück in this sense is not happiness bestowed in avoidance of responsibility, not aimless wandering but rather the quest for the most difficult responsibility of all, the challenging of the arbitrariness of the Gods⁹⁰ and the course of history upon which they have decided. It is not imposed but chosen. The relationship between fate and happiness is essential, for it is happiness which is able to release "den Glücklichen aus der Verkettung der Schicksale und aus dem Netz des eignen." Happiness is therefore not permanently in opposition to tragedy but rather something which is able to point beyond the relationship between responsibility and tragedy, toward a messianic return to innocence. It is therefore a final category, one in which the distinction between God and humanity loses its clarity — what Benjamin understands as the meaning of Hölderlin's concept of "Schicksallos."

⁸⁹ On the following page, Benjamin states that this understanding of responsibility cannot be seen as being religious at all. The reference here is undoubtedly to Christian dogma on the origins of evil and the Jews. On this point, see the discussion in chapter one, section three.

⁹⁰ The reference here to the Gods could easily refer to a single God, leading to the possibility of interpreting such discussions as either an attempt to hide or legitimize Jewish mystical ideas, brought to the project through the Greeks. Whether this is to be understood as legitimation or concealment depends on the standpoint of the reader. This is also applicable to the reference to the early Christians and the Genesis conception of word and deed. See [II:74] and the section on immortality in this chapter.

Glück brings humanity out of the confrontation with fate as if returned to a state of innocence in a release from the responsibility for sin. Rather than irresponsibility i.e. in the avoidance of sin, the natural state of happiness, freed from a false application of sin, leads to the restitution of a returned enchantment of humanity with nature and with its language.⁹¹

⁹¹ "Das Glück und Seligkeit führen also ebenso aus der Sphäre des Schicksals heraus wie die Unschuld." [II:174] On the complex relationship between *Schuld*, *Verschuldung* and *Schicksal*, see the first chapter in section three.

RESTITUTIO IN INTEGRUM AND IMMORTALITY

Der geistlichen restitutio in integrum, welche in die Unsterblichkeit einführt, entspricht eine weltliche, die in die Ewigkeit eines Unterganges führt und der Rhythmus dieses ewig vergehenden, in seiner Totalität vergehenden, in seiner räumlichen, aber auch zeitlichen Totalität vergehenden Weltlichen, der Rhythmus der messianischen Natur, ist Glück. [Fragment, II:204]

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

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

In Benjamin, as well as in the authors which surround the "Fragment," we have seen how the character of the fallen hero becomes eternal.⁹² From this, we have been able to deduce that in the same way as character becomes divorced from the organic, all human life seeks immortality through redemption. Moreover, just as the next world must indeed be constituted in direct contrast to this world, our natural world must be *Vergänglichlich*, that is, able to pass-away, as the eternal world must be *Un-vergänglichlich* i.e. inorganic. This is the principle of their opposition which we saw in the paired identity of the holy and profane structures. These tightly-wounded contraries correspond to the human and immortal worlds.

The divine inorganic is therefore the reference point for the *nicht-Vergänglichkeit*. Death itself is stranger to both God or Gods; it defines a completely worldly condition in which nature is the atmosphere surrounding all living beings. God, however, is inorganic; as the creator of nature, He is beyond its

⁹² We see this terminology in Rosenzweig: "Denn wenn wir sonst nichts von Ewigkeit wissen, dies ist sicher: daß sie das Un-vergängliche ist. Dieser Bestimmung durch ein unendliches Nun muß also das zur Ewigkeit geschaffene Heute zuvörderst entsprechen." [SdE§304] In Rosenzweig's concept of redemption, time becomes an infinite Now. It is no longer a "Leerlauf" of progress but the filled time of the moment, where all past events have been resolved and its historical end becomes the future as now-time.

Vergänglichkeit. If holy is the category of immortality, worldly is the essence of humanity. But rather than a determination of being which takes center stage in Rosenzweig, the underlying notion of death in the "Fragment" expresses a orientation far less existential and more metaphysical: all natural things die, and not merely in a final stage, but are in a constant state of decay, of passing.⁹³ However, with regard to the notion that the difference between the holy and profane is precisely immortality in the inability to be organic, Rosenzweig formulates a similar notion of the "Nichtsterbenkönnen" of the individual.⁹⁴ This is the constitution of the fallen hero whose self as character becomes "unsterblich."

The question of how humans achieve immortality, which is a necessary condition of a redemptive age, is a central dimension of theology. Benjamin is apparently aware of this already in 1912 where he puts forward the question of whether "Die Religion garantiert uns ein Ewiges" [II:20] and again in the "Metaphysik der Jugend" where he returns to eternity as central category of religion.⁹⁵ Bloch also raises the question of the immortal elements of the body which separates themselves and becomes eternal through the organization of the earthly world, containing within itself the germ-cell of its completion and perfection. The focal point for this transition from the organic to the inorganic, and

⁹³ Rosenzweig makes several categorical distinctions in this regard, centered on what he ultimately considers the groundwork of all philosophy, which for him is none other than death. He writes: "Vergänglichkeit, die Gott und Götter fremde, der Welt das bestürzende Erlebnis ihrer eigenen, sich allzeit erneuernden Kraft, ist dem Menschen die immerwährende Atmosphäre, die ihn umgibt, die er mit jedem Zug seines Atems einsaugt und ausstößt. Der Mensch ist vergänglich, Vergänglichsein ist sein Wesen, wie es das Wesen Gottes ist, unsterblich und unbedingt, das Wesen der Welt, allgemein und notwendig zu sein." [SdE§55]

⁹⁴ Rosenzweig turns to the Platonic doctrine of the soul and posits the first contradiction to the principle of immortality which is set in direct correlation to the character of the tragic hero: "So kommt die Antike Psychologie zustande. Die Psyche soll das natürliche Etwas sein, das schon von Natur wegen todesunfähig ist. So wird sie vom Leib theoretisch getrennt und Träger des Selbst. Aber diese Verkettung des Selbst mit einem letztthin eben doch nur natürlichen Träger, eben der »Seele«, macht die Unsterblichkeit zu einem höchst prekären Besitz. Die Seele, wird behauptet, kann nicht sterben; aber da sie in die Natur verflochten ist, so wird das Nichtsterbenkönnen zur unermüdlichen Verwandlungsfähigkeit." [SdE§71] The psyche is that part of the notion of immortality which is truly "Nichtsterbenkönnen." It is something which, although part of nature, is eternal. It is in this way to be found divided in ancient philosophy from its corporeality — the soul contains the self. Rosenzweig interprets this as problematic precisely for the fact that while the soul is entwined in nature, it is always capable of transmigration; not death, not messianic end, but eternal travel. But this is an immortality of a single dimension, whereas redemptive immortality requires "eine Unsterblichkeit ohne Wandel und Wanderung," beyond an "Unbeschränktheit seines vergänglichen Wesens" of the self. [SdE§71] This, in turn, posits a false dichotomy between body and soul, he goes on to say, which proves unable to resolve the transformation of the profane into the holy. A reformulation of the paired relationship in which the two are fully mediated — not merely as soul wandering but the end of wandering altogether — could then provide a conception of the unity of character of the tragic hero and the principle of the eternity of the soul: "Würde das Selbst zur Seele in diesem Sinn, dann wäre ihm auch Unsterblichkeit in einem neuen Sinn gewiß, und der gespenstische Gedanke der Seelenwanderung verlöre seine Kraft." [SdE§71]

⁹⁵ "Der Gegenstand der Religion ist Unendlichkeit." (1913-14) [II:97]

thereby the restitution of all past forms of life, both animate and inanimate, is the *restitutio in integrum*, from which Benjamin may take his cue. In the *Geist der Utopie*, Bloch writes:

Das seelische Leben schwingt zwar über den Leib hinaus, es gibt ein seelischen Keimplasma und die transphysiologische Unsterblichkeit wird vom Verlust des Leibes nicht betroffen. Aber daß das seelische Leben auch über die Vernichtung der Welt hinausschwinge, dazu muß es im tiefsten Sinn »fertig« geworden sein und seine Taue mit Glück um die Pfosten der jenseitigen Landungstelle geworfen haben, soll nicht auch das seelische Keimplasma in den Abgrund des ewigen Todes gerissen, und das Ziel, auf das es bei der Organisierung des Erdenlebens vor allem ankommt, das ewige Leben, die auch transkosmologische Unsterblichkeit, die alleinige Realität des Seelenreichs, die Restitutio in integrum aus dem Labyrinth der Welt — durch Satans Erbarmen verfehlt werden.⁹⁶

Bloch's conception of a trans-cosmological immortality with its spatial dimension is implicit (or at least implicitly possible) within the constitution of the worldly sphere — the active restructuring of the profane within the context of the cohesive reality of the kingdom of the souls.⁹⁷ This he identifies with the *restitutio in integrum*. This term can also be considered in relation to that which he elsewhere articulates as "das absolute Zentrum der Realität:" "die Geburt und Einsetzung aller Dinge und Wesen in ihr Eigentum" [GdU:430]. The *restitutio in integrum* finds one other expression in der *Geist der Utopie*, in a passage where holy mother Mary gently illuminates "the brothers" in the importance of earthly concerns.⁹⁸

In Benjamin, we read of a spiritual *restitutio in integrum* which is represented by the worldliness of the profane. The addition of the word "spiritual"

⁹⁶ [GdU:442]. The "soul-full" life is understood as being constituted to "swing" out of the body. It contains an implicit core of trans-physiological immortality which is ultimately not affected by the loss of body as such. But to move beyond the abrogation of the world, the soul must be complete and un-torn by the "abyss of eternal death," which is only possible if the "soul-full" core of life is able to extend itself to reach the pole, the "point of landing beyond," which arrives at its goal of eternal life through the organization of the earthly world, able to lose its particularities and become "trans-cosmic" in its immortality, in the return of all things to their place out of the "labyrinth of the world" and not be steered wrongly through the inheritance of evil.

⁹⁷ One cannot help but notice that the concept of soul here, both in Bloch and in Rosenzweig, bears some similarity to the Maimonidian rational core of the individual which achieves its trans-physiological, trans-cosmological form, not from moral activity in the world, which we know is the greater materialist understanding of *restitutio in integrum* in Bloch, but through acquisition of abstract knowledge. However much Bloch actually departs from Maimonides rather central anti-messianic tenants, the immortal core which is constituted as independent of worldly affairs i.e. transcendent of them, and the necessity to avoid evil in the pursuit of immortality, clearly parallels Benjamin.

⁹⁸ Here the emphasis on redemption is individual in contrast to a messianic conception which would be collective in constitution: "über all dieser unendlichen Verwirrung der Linie lächelt Maria so süß und weise, daß sich die Gräber erhellen, daß sich die fernen mystischen Kammern bereiten und auch dem niedrigsten der Brüder die restitutio in integrum erleuchtet steht." [GdU:42]

to this phrase indicates a marked difference to the greater materialist meaning of Bloch's *restitutio in integrum*.⁹⁹ Rather than merely the return of all things to their original status of possession, Benjamin here emphasizes something other than a purely materialist component of the final return of all things to their true historical right. If there is an impulse toward secularization in Benjamin, the emphasis here is on the opposite.¹⁰⁰ In turning back for a moment to the "Metaphysik der Jugend," we find an earlier elaboration of the relationship between eternity and the restoration of things:

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

The "birth of immortal time" does not actually take place in time.¹⁰¹ Timelessness, in this sense, is what lends the temporal dimension of everything which has occurred its messianic element. If there is to be a ingathering outside of the realm of time, then it would be difficult to suppose that this collection of objects is to

⁹⁹ The origins of this inheritance has also been proposed by other scholars. Toward a definition of the term, M. Löwy writes: "*Restitutio in integrum* (or *restitutio omnium*) is a figure from Christian theology, which refers both to the resurrection of the dead at the Last Judgement and to the eschatological return of all things to their original perfection." Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 102.

¹⁰⁰ Irving Wohlfahrt presents a different view of secularization in his essay "»Haarscharf an der Grenze zwischen Religion und Nihilismus«. Zum Motiv des Zimzum bei Gershom Scholem" in *Gershom Scholem. Zwischen den Disziplinen*, ed. by P. Schäfer and G. Smith, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995, 176-257.

¹⁰¹ The praise of God, explains Rosenzweig, lends further validity to the quest for immortality as a necessary part of the transformation to the messianic age. "Die Wir" which he borrows from "Aber wir, wir loben Gott von nun an bis in Ewigkeit" [Ps. 115:18], "ist ewig; vor diesem Triumphgeschrei der Ewigkeit stützt der Tod ins Nichts. Das Leben wird unsterblich im ewigen Lobgesang der Erlösung" [SdE§253]. If it is true that God requires his praises to be sung for as long as He lives, then there is no alternative but for humanity to eventually achieve a state of immortality. However, "Um ewiges Leben zu erlangen, müssen [die Menschen] freilich in den Welttag des Herrn eingehn. Die Unsterblichkeit wird ihnen erst in Gott." [SdE§264] In this formulation, there is no completion of God's plan without entering into the divine, where human eternity, which was "gepflanzt in den Boden der Schöpfung" [SdE§265], eventually makes its appearance in the final day of redemption. Death no longer holds substance; the concept of evil itself has lost its meaning. For as with the immortality of God and the divine realm, so must humanity be constituted: "So wird [Gott] bis zum Ende. Alles was geschieht, ist an ihm Werden. [...] so ist jenes Werden Gottes für ihn kein Sichverändern, kein Wachsen, kein Zunehmen, sondern er ist von Anfang an und ist in jedem Augenblick uns ist immer im Kommen. [...] »Gott is ewig« bedeutet also: für ihn ist die Ewigkeit seine Voll-endung." [SdE§264] Everything which takes place in Him is "be-coming;" no growth as such, but simply impending arrival, his existence as "coming." As with praise, His eternity has no beginning and no end, which as categories can no longer maintain themselves as essentially different. This entering into the final "Welttag" of redemption is the final reunification of creator and created.

have merely a physical, materialist meaning. The ingathering of the self (i.e. the individual or perhaps individuals) occurs at a distance from the divine kingdom; it does so as an experience of the divine from afar, thus linked to the notion of image. This ingathering then takes the form of the medium with a divine quality, in which this newly constituted self creates a force that enables the experience of the things in pure time again, beyond fate as such. "Kein Ding, keinen Menschen," Benjamin writes in "Die religiöse Stellung der neuen Jugend," "darf [die Jugend] verwerfen, denn in jedem (in der Litfaßsäule und im Verbrecher) kann das Symbol oder der Heilige erstehen." [II:73] In Benjamin's hopeful conception of the religious conviction of the youth movement, the relationship between things and people are spiritualized, such that word and deed are seen as one:

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

In the experience of the early Christians, says Benjamin, a residue of the earliest notion of divine language was alive.¹⁰² Such a language, in which word and deed was one and the same, is to be found in a linguistic conception of genestic creation, where the creation of things and people were consecrated by a divine utterance, in which a divine insignia was transferred to all created beings. Therefore, even corrupt objects and human forms have a redeemable quality which compel their preservation. Here the ingathering "in sich" and a *restitutio in integrum* find some common ground if a spiritual (i.e. less secularizing) emphasis is added to the latter.

Bloch interprets immortality in terms of human history transcending history. Humanity does not pass into the divine to achieve immortality by dissolution but remains a "full house," solid and enlighten, as everything natural takes its course. In his concept of tragedy, the hero achieves his own destiny in the very moment when he overcomes the determining force of fate. This is achieved by a tragic hero who overcomes his isolation and achieves his purpose in redemption. In this sense, he posits a retreating God, essentially a secularized Lurianic *zimzum*,

¹⁰² Benjamin's appreciation of the early Christian doctrine of worldly activity and the social calling of Christian anarchists like Leo Tolstoy often found expression in his early writings. In "Das Leben der Studenten," Benjamin mentions the challenge made by the early Christians to the division of *civitas* and *dei*, civil and religious, profane and holy: "Die [frühen] Christen gaben die mögliche Lösung für die *civitas dei*: Sie verwarfen die Einzelheit in Beiden" [II:84]. This is the direct opposite of Nietzsche who criticizes the Christians for failing in "die kunst des diesseitigen Trostes." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Geburt der Tragödie, Werke in drei Bänden*, Band I, Köln: Könnemann, 1994, 17.

illustrated by the metaphor of God exiting the state of history.¹⁰³ God here is no longer the unmoved mover but merely a spectator: the inorganic is ultimately bound not to the Gods but to science.¹⁰⁴ Only if humanity remains intact while the rest of the world falls and passes away, could God return from exile to take up residence. The transmigration of the souls and its *restitutio in integrum* would then have a social, historical, cultural — in a word, a materialist meaning. Its distinctly "spiritual" dimension is lost.

Benjamin may have partially anticipated this discussion in his "Dialog über die Religiosität der Gegenwart" to the degree that he recognized religion as being based on "ein inniges Streben nach Vereinigung mit Gott."¹⁰⁵ Unlike Bloch, he introduces the social and historical, even material dimensions of a redemptive restitution without necessarily postulating the annihilation of the divine, a point we shall encounter again in the concept of justice. Here Benjamin seeks to conceive of this restitution in a way which would not render the divine-profane structure completely arbitrary. For him, it is precisely the negation of the profane rather than an inner abolition of the divine which opens the portal to redemption.

¹⁰³ The tragic hero for Bloch is undoubtedly the enlightener Prometheus but a Prometheus whose drama unfolds under the direction of Isaak Luria. In this sense, Bloch's expressionistic statements such as "denn wir tragen den Funken des Endes durch den Gang" [GdU:382] and "der Funke ihres Endes" (die Idee) [GdU:387] must be understood within the context of an attempt to secularize the activist and collectivist structure of Lurian Kabbalah. This can most clearly be seen in his reworking of the drama of redemption, a scenario marked by God's failure with thoroughly Lurianic consequences: "erst wenn wir ganz gottlos geworden sind, werden wir wieder eine Tragödie haben [...] Gott muß die Bühne verlassen (denn, so fügen wir hinzu, er ist nicht, er gilt, es soll nicht als Gott sein), doch Zuschauer muß er noch bleiben: das ist wie die noch einzig mögliche neue Frömmigkeit, so auch die historische, die utopische Möglichkeit tragischer Zeitalter." [GdU:69]

¹⁰⁴ "Inkognito des einzelnen kann nur vor sich selber, ja letztthin nur am Ende der Tage vor Gott enthüllt werden, wie sich Gott selbst enthüllt." [GdU:347] The individual transcends his isolation in the final revelation of God. The anonymity of the individual is matched by God's exile. Unity is not with God proper but with humanity: "worauf ja auch die Auferstehung aller Titen im einfachen Unsterblichkeitsdogma hinweist, am letzten Ereignis der Geschichte subjektiv existent zu sein. *Alles könnte vergehen, aber das Haus der Menschheit muß vollzählig erhalten bleiben und erleuchtet stehen*, damit dereinst, wenn draußen der Untergang rast, Gott darin wohnen und uns helfen kann — und solches führt aus der Seelenwanderung heraus auf den Sinn der echten sozialen, historischen und kulturellen Ideologie." [GdU:429] My emphasis.

¹⁰⁵ In this sense, his earlier mixing of redeemer and redeemed [II:100-101] and attributing divine qualities to the poet [II:110-114] gave way, I believe, to a more nuanced understanding of immortality particularly in the concept of tragedy.

NIHILISM

Denn messianisch ist die Natur aus ihrer ewigen und totalen Vergängnis.
Diese zu erstreben, auch für diejenigen Stufen des Menschen, welche Natur
sind, ist die Aufgabe der Weltpolitik, deren Methode Nihilismus zu heißen
hat. [Fragment, II:204]

Vergänglichkeit is the force behind the dialectics of existence which is its "eternal state of decline:" everything is in a state of passing, evolving, declining — the Heraclitian concept of time upon which the dialectic is grounded.¹⁰⁶ This also represents the internal process of nature. Nature in its *Vergehen* is its rhythm, that is, the pace at which it generates negation.¹⁰⁷ The totality of nature, an outline thereof, is the knowledge of messianic redemption; it is a state of existence beyond the passing of nature. "Ganz im gegensatz zur »Flüchtigen Zeit«, zu den »Vergänglichen«,," comments Benjamin on a poem by Hölderlin (Chiron), "ist in der Neufassung dieser Zeile das Beharrende, die Dauer in der Gestalt der Zeit und der Menschen entwickelt worden." [II:119] The eternity of redemptive time remains constant; it is only the image which changes. Achieving a point beyond passing, i.e. immortality, is therefore messianic happiness. This concept of happiness is then the unity of the holy and profane. It is the conception of the transcendence of the division of theory and praxis, mental and manual labor. "To strive for this," which again suggests a unity in the concept of human agency, is the task of world politics. To understand the rhythm of messianic nature leads to a striving. This striving is a praxis in itself. But just as it is a praxis of program, is a praxis of nihilism, meaning a retreat from worldly participation in favor of an abstract and categorical realm of messianic reflection, embodied in a mystical understanding of history. If there is a historical program which could be said to follow this early political theology, it is perhaps best captured by the opening paragraph of "Das Leben der Studenten:"

¹⁰⁶ In "Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin," Benjamin in fact quotes a fragment of Heraclitus to this effect: "Im Wachen sehen wir zwar den Tod, im Schläfe aber den Schlaf." [II:120]

¹⁰⁷ The term "Rhythmus" seems to describe the understanding of a dynamic motion of time or objects in time without seeking to overly determine them. In "Metaphysik der Jugend," we find mention of a "Rhythmus" of conversation [II:93], "Rhythmus der Zeit" [II:100] and "die Rhythmen der Geigen." [II:103] In "Zwei Gedichte von Friederich Hölderlin," Benjamin uses this term twice: "Die Verbundenheit des Gottes mit Menschen ist nach starren Rhythmen in ein großes Bild gezwungen" [II:111] and "durch das Gedicht [gehen] Götter und Sterbliche in entgegengesetzten Rhythmus." [II:113] In "Das Recht zur Gewaltanwendung," he refers to a "Rhythmus der Ungeduld" as opposed to a "Rhythmus der Erwartung, in welchem das messianische Geschehen verläuft." (4/1920) [VI:104]. See also in "Dialog über die Religiosität der Gegenwart" [II:18] and "Das Leben der Studenten." [II:87]

Den immanenten Zustand der Vollkommenheit rein zum absoluten zu gestalten, ihn sichtbar und herrschend in der Gegenwart zu machen, ist die geschichtliche Aufgabe. [II:75]

The historical task is none other than the witnessing the immanent, temporal index of redemption in every moment of the present, under the strain of the catastrophe that surrounds it. The search for happiness in a political form, which sees the unhindered development of each individual into a full human being, what Adorno characterized in Benjamin's thinking as his "Rettung des Toten als der Restitution des entstellten Lebens,"¹⁰⁸ is unambiguously understood by the early Benjamin as an ethical anarchism:

Die Darlegung dieses Standpunkts gehört zu den Aufgaben meiner Moralphilosophie, in deren Zusammenhang der Terminus Anarchismus sehr wohl für eine Theorie gebraucht werden darf, welche das sittliche Recht nicht der Gewalt als solcher, sondern allein jeder menschlichen Institution, Gemeinschaft oder Individualität abspricht[,] welche sich ein Monopol auf sie zuspricht oder das Recht auf sie auch nur prinzipiell und allgemein in irgend einer Perspektive sich selbst einräumt, anstatt sie als eine Gabe der göttlichen Macht, als *Machtvollkommenheit* im einzelnen Falle zu verehren.
[VI:107, written ca. 4/1920]

Anarchism is defined here largely categorically, as an ethical program which rejects both the monopolization of the use of violence and the monopolization of the right to violence as we shall see in the discussion on justice.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, after a short carrier in the youth movement, Benjamin was never to express his political convictions in any organized way. Despite his proximity to Spain and his repeated visits to Ibiza in the 1930s, he took no stand in relation to the most important Anarchist revolution in the twentieth century.¹¹⁰ Nihilism therefore is a form of world politics reserved from worldly affairs while committed at the same time to a transformed world, free from domination and oppression, a world understood in the messianic sense of redemption. In many ways, this was a nihilism of circumstance, shared to a great degree with Scholem in their collective retreat into the countryside of Switzerland toward the end of the First World War. We shall see in the next chapter the nature of Scholem's abstention from outward political activity during this period in time. In Benjamin's turn to a nihilist world politics, he announces a retreat from political engagement in the moment while preserving a realm of politics in the abstract with the world as its subject. This is a

¹⁰⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, «Charakteristik Walter Benjamins» in *Walter Benjamin, Sprache und Geschichte*, Leipzig: Reclam, 1992, 171.

¹⁰⁹ See section three, chapter six

¹¹⁰ On the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, see Murray Bookchin's, *The Spanish Anarchists*, New York: Harper Colophon, 1978.

politics which lives in an unintentional aspect of humanity leading toward redemption — in short, a political theology of redemption.

THE THEOLOGICAL POLITICS OF GERSHOM SCHOLEM

"Ich glaube in dieser Stunde nicht mehr, wie ich es einmal geglaubt habe," noted Gershom Scholem in a pivotal moment in his journals, "daß ich der Messias bin." [tag I:158] With this realization, the query of the young man on whether it was he who God anointed to end human suffering was put to rest. Following the disillusionment which would have to accompany such thought, the groundwork for the task of worldly affairs is initiated, drawn not from a divine mandate but from profane, human reality. The Messiah, in being chosen to fulfill a prophecy announced long before his appearance, has himself little to choose from in matters concerning redemption. But for the false Messiah Gershom Scholem, however, politics is born in the very moment in which his Messiahship is revealed to him to be of the profane. Thus, the task of uncovering the means of political agency in worldly affairs and to distinguish between categories of political thought is left for him to decipher. Anarchism, nihilism, Zionism, theocracy are indeed the categories which confront the curious reader of the early political and theological thought of Gershom Scholem. The ideas which prompted Scholem's radical decision to move to Palestine in 1923 and which formed the basis of his later notions of politics is a treasure-chest, rich for the political explorer.

With the recent publication of Scholem's journals and letters from this period, a thorough analysis is slowly being made possible.¹¹¹ The texts which have already appeared, however, are abundant in thoughts of a political nature and offer a fairly reliable first-hand account of a rather intimate collaboration with Benjamin in the years 1915 to 1919. A comprehensive understanding of Scholem in this period may therefore also have the additional effect of helping us form a better picture of the conditions which shaped Benjamin and his early writings.

Scholem's theological politics began and ended with anarchism. There is, therefore, nothing more essential than an examination of this notion if we are to come to terms with Scholem's political and religious ideas and how these ideas came to inform and guide his research. For the purposes of such an analysis, I have divided Scholem's conception of anarchism into four categories: traditional, nihilistic, cataclysmic and epistemological. But like Scholem's own formulation of

¹¹¹ Some of the relevant material, however, has not yet reached the shelves and is either being prepared for publication or is still lingering in the Scholem archive in the National and University Library in Jerusalem. In this regard, I would like to thank Michael Löwy for his unpublished essay "Esoterica - Metaphisica: les papiers inédits du jeune Gershom Scholem."

the messianic idea, whose conservative, restorative and utopian divisions are no doubt informed by an understanding of anarchism,¹¹² they are dependant on each other and thus weave themselves in and out of various states of his life, though always remaining integrated with his first traditional understanding. But it also must be said that in every stage of its formulation, anarchism was never to be seen as a political substitute for dogma and the variation which the concept undergoes is testimony to this fact. This unyielding, transformative aspect is then later to be taken up again as phenomenon itself in the final conception of anarchism as an orientation towards knowledge.

¹¹² On the formation of Jewish Messianism, see Scholem, *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums*, Suhrkamp, 1970, 123-5.

TRADITION AND ANARCHISM

Scholem's reflections on his early political convictions in *Walter Benjamin — die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, written many years after the fact, suggest a far more somber attitude, if not secondary interest, than the enthusiasm which the journals and letters of the early period reveal. As he recalled nearly sixty years later:

Ich las damals viel über Sozialismus, historischen Materialismus und vor allem über Anarchismus, dem meine Sympathien am meisten galten. Nettlaus Biographie von Bakunin und die Schriften Kropotkins und Elisé Reclus' hatten auf mich tiefen Eindruck gemacht, wozu 1915 die Lektüre der Schriften Gustav Landauers trat, vor allem dessen *Aufruf zum Sozialismus*. [freund:14]

The first discussion on anarchism took place in the context of an exchange of letters with his elder brother in September of 1914. Werner Scholem who, at that time was attending a Guildmeisterschen Institute in Hannover, was active in the German Social Democratic Party. The debate was to touch upon several points of conflict between anarchism and Marxism. Gershom Scholem writes with the news that he has read the 1891 Erfurt Program of the Social Democrats and agrees with its contents but refuses the label Social Democrat for the term socialist. The heart of his difference concerns the question of organization. "Die Organisation ist wie ein trüber See," writes the younger brother, "in den der schöne Reißende Strom der Idee mündet und der ihn nicht mehr hinausläßt. Organisation ist ein Synonym (!) von Tod. Nicht nur bei den Sozialdemokraten — auch bei den sonstigen isten und ismen gilt dies, nur bei den Sozialisten in furchtbarer Art. Sie wollen so schönes, und die Menschen befreien ist ihr Ziel — und sie zwingen sie in Organisationen! Ironie!" [B I: 5] "Sag mal," writes Werner Scholem in reply, "was sollen denn nun die Sozialisten machen, wenn sie sich nicht organisieren? [...] Wie kann die Partei den politischen Kampf führen [...] oder soll sie vielleicht keinen führen, damit die Arbeiter Mann für Mann Zentrum oder Liberal wählen?" [B I: 14]

In that the question for the younger Scholem concerns the freeing of the individual from yoke of organization, a two-fold relationship with traditional anarchism emerges. Firstly, in a general sense, it expresses the imperfection of human organizations and the restriction of the individual within them, in relation to the perfection of divine laws and structural order of the divine world. This enables a traditional religious anarchic critique of worldly authority and its bodies.

Secondly, a faith in a divine socialism distinguishes itself from a worldly socialism achieved through the formation of a party where party structure and discipline become the overriding factors in its vision of a new society. His was a moral and perhaps even spiritual opposition: "Die Flamme des Sozialismus, die Flamme eines heiligen Volkswillens darf nicht der Nahrung beraubt werden, indem man ihr ein Gefäß überstülpt, nämlich die Organisation." [B I:13] Scholem's vision of a religious socialism, consisting of a free associations of morally active individuals, is therefore more akin to the utopian front-runners of anarchism such as Charles Fourier, Sant-Simon and Robert Owen.¹¹³ Scholem's views were also drawn in part from the fiery rhetoric of Michael Bakunin and his critique of the state. "Jede Organisation einer sogenannten provisorischen und revolutionären politischen Macht," as expressed in a resolution of the International Congress of 1872, partly formulated by Bakunin, "um diese Zerstörung herbeizuführen, [könnte] nur ein neuer Betrug sein und für das Proletariat ebenso gefährlich wäre, als alle heute bestehenden Regierungen."¹¹⁴ "Die notwendigerweise revolutionäre Politik des Proletariats," continues Bakunin elsewhere,

[soll] die Zerstörung der Staaten zum unmittelbaren und einzigen Gegenstand haben [...] Wir geben nicht zu, nicht einmal als revolutionäre Übergangsformen, weder nationale Konventionen, noch konstituierende Versammlungen, noch provisorische Regierungen, noch sogenannte revolutionäre Diktaturen, weil wir überzeugt sind, daß die Revolution nur in den Massen aufrichtig, ehrlich und wirklich ist, und daß, wenn sie in den Händen einiger regierender Personen konzentriert ist, sie unvermeidlich und unverzüglich zur Reaktion wird [...]¹¹⁵

Bakunin's banishment from the First International is put to Werner Scholem for an explanation in the first exchange.

The essence of Scholem's challenge to his older brother's thoroughly worked out arguments concerns the Marxist view of good and evil. "Ich möchte gern wissen," writes the young challenger, "ob ihr [Marxisten] die Moral für etwas wirkliches, d.h. uns eingeborenes, oder für etwas erfundenes haltet. Es ist das sowohl für das Verständnis eurer Stellung zur Anarchie als auch der Gründe, der tieferen Gründe der sozialistischen Ideen notwendig." [B I:6] With the debate on

¹¹³ See Scholem's comments on the utopian socialists, who he compares with the likes of Schopenhauer, Marx and Hegel, in: [tag I:79].

¹¹⁴ Von der zweiten Resolution des internationale Kongreß. Saint-Imier. September 1872 in Max Nettlau, *Geschichte der Anarchie*, Volume II, Topos Verlag, 199. See also Max Nettlau, *Michael Bakunin: eine biographische Skizze*, mit Auszügen aus seinen Schriften und Nachwort von Gustav Landauer, Berlin: Verlag von Paul Pawlowitsch, 1901.

¹¹⁵ Max Nettlau, *Geschichte der Anarchie*, Volume II, Topos Verlag, 1972, 200.

human nature and the origins of evil, Scholem draws here on the premises of the Russian natural scientist Peter Kropotkin and his book *Mutual Aid*.¹¹⁶ Despite the fact that Kropotkin's work does not formulate an argument on the innate qualities of human nature, Scholem interprets him in this light, for in his view, Kropotkin "ist einer von der ethischen Seite des Anarchismus, und er glaubt an die Moral." [B I:6] He was to find an even more developed appeal to the ethical dimension of human nature in the work of the revolutionary anarchist-socialist Gustav Landauer, who was to play an important role in Scholem's development. In addition to his *Aufruf zum Sozialismus*, Scholem's journals reveal quite an extensive reading of Landauer's works.¹¹⁷ His notes on Landauer reflect both criticism and praise; the imperative tone of Landauer's "Sind das Ketzergedanken" found favour in the fiery young scholar, whereas the essay on Buber struck him as being largely rhetorical. [tag I:181,126] He also alludes to differences with Landauer on Zionism based on his readings of the essays appearing in the influential collection *Vom Judentum* (1913), published by the Bar Kochba circle in Prague. Scholem heard Landauer speak on at least three occasions on Romanticism, "das Problem der Demokratie" and on Socialism.¹¹⁸ After one particular lecture, he reports discussing with Landauer the question of Zionism, stating that he "stehe dem Zionismus sehr nahr." [tag I:250]

¹¹⁶ This work, which was written primarily as a response to the Social Darwinism (particularly T.H. Huxley) in vogue in turn of the century London, promotes a theory of natural selection which is based not so much on the competition of species and the survival of the fittest but on a 'law of mutual aid' in which an alliance of species in a cooperative manner, whether in the collective hunting methods of pelicans or 'compound families' of elephants, enables their 'struggle for life' to be carried on through organic nature. See Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: a Factor of Evolution*, London: 1972, 43-71 and Paul Avrich's fine introduction to this edition.

¹¹⁷ These include *Die Revolution* [tag I:44/48], *Ein Weg deutscher Geist* as well as the essays "Strindbergs 'Neue Jugend'" [tag I:396], "Stelle, Dich Sozialist!," [tag I:142] "Martin Buber," [tag I:126], "Sind das Ketzergedanken?" and "Doktrinarismus," [tag I:83] with the last two essays appearing in *Von Judentum* (1913). It is also quite likely that in conjunction with his interest in Fritz Mauthner's *Beitrag zu einem Kritik der Sprache*, Scholem read Landauer's *Skepsis und Mystik* — a philosophical review of Mauthner. [tag I:271] Scholem reports discussing both the essay on Martin Buber and "Stelle, Dich Sozialist!" with Benjamin, which appeared in the first issue of the journal "Der Aufbruch." [tag I:142] He also records Benjamin's critical stance towards Mauthner linguistic philosophy. [tag I:136]

¹¹⁸ Landauer's lectures took place on December 12, 1915, January 29 and March 11, 1916. See [tag I: 197,250,284].

ZION: ANARCHIST PRAXIS OR METAPHOR?

Scholem's journals reveal quite a rhetorical penchant in the young scholar, one linked to a radical program in several different spheres of life. On the fourth of January 1915, he made the following entry:

Unser Grundzug: das ist die Revolution! Revolution überall! Wir wollen keine Reformationen oder Umbildung, wir wollen Revolution oder Erneuerung. Wir wollen die Revolution in unsere Verfassung aufnehmen. Äußere und innere Revolution [...] Revolution gegen die Familie, gegen das Elternhaus [...] Wir wollen Revolution aber vor allen Dingen im Judentum. Wir wollen den Zionismus revolutionieren und den Anarchismus predigen, das ist die Herrschaftslosigkeit. [tag I:81]

Anarchism and Judaism were intimately intertwined in Scholem's conception of socialism. In this regard, he was to form a very unique brand of Zionism which was linked to the cultural imperative articulated by Achad Ha'am and whose collection of essays entitled *Am Scheidewege* were to have a lasting impact on both him and Benjamin.¹¹⁹ Political Zionism, or what Benjamin once more aptly referred to as practical Zionism,¹²⁰ he rejected out of hand. The problematic relationship of the Jew and the world in *galut* or exile could neither be articulated by a single problem, such as the lack of political sovereignty, nor solved by the formula of a state. For the young Scholem, if a means existed to solve *die Judenfrage*, "ja alle Judenfragen [...] zu lösen, [...] das [wäre]: Heilig zu leben." [B I:91] Scholem picks up the same strand of thought in a letter to a member of the *Jung Juda* two months later (October 1917): "Wir sind Zionisten, und das heißt: wir wollen mehr als das reine Nationaljudentum, das uns noch leer und schematisch erscheint [...] Wir wollen, wie Achad Ha'am, ein Judentum mit jüdischen Inhalten." [B I:116-7] Zionism was not to be merely a Jewish state in the form of an imperialist handmaiden as Herzl envisioned; "den lehnen wir ab." He continues in the same passage of his journal:

Denn wir predigen den Anarchismus. Das ist: wir wollen keinen Staat, sondern eine freie Gesellschaft [...] Wir wollen nicht nach Palästina, um einen Staat zu gründen — o du kleinliches Philistertum — und in neue Fesseln aus den alten zu geraten, wir wollen nach Palästina aus freiheitsdurst und Zukunftssehnsucht, denn dem Orient gehört die Zukunft. [tag I:81-82]

¹¹⁹ Scholem reports reading this work together with Benjamin and having extensive discussions with him on Achad Ha'am in [tag I: 391, 400]. Scholem makes several references in his journals to a perceived affinity between Benjamin and Ha'am. See Achad Ha'am, *Am Scheidewege*, Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1913. On Ha'am's influence on Benjamin, see chapter six on a "politics of pure means" in section three.

¹²⁰ Benjamin an Ludwig Strauß [II:835-844]

A state, in fact, was very far from Scholem's idea. According to his vision, a return to Zion was to be informed by "die erhabenste anarchistische Lehre" which would transform and revolutionize the Orient. [tag I:83] Scholem emphasis on the term Zion over Zionism should not be overlooked. In his letters and journal entries, he appears to favor the former over the latter, pointing to a rather unique approach to Judaism and Jewish culture. More than a preference for one or the other, Zion, Zionism and Judaism were to be expressed as a unified whole. In this sense, no distinctions were to be drawn between Zion and Zionism, in which an impediment to the transformation of the biblical idea into political theory was not to be anticipated. In Scholem's view, the prophetic conception of Zion and the return to Palestine in the 20th century were conceived as one and the same; the two were just as well to be expressed as one. This conclusion was in fact to follow quite logically from his conception of Judaism, for if the Torah is to be understood as the cornerstone of Judaism and the return to Zion as an integral part of the Torah, then it was a forgone conclusion that a return to Zion should be synonymous with the will towards an "Erneuerung des Judentums" as such. "Uns ist der Zionismus das Judentum," was the shape this unique conception of Judaism what to take in the journals. [tag I:414] Should biblical Zion and modern political Zionism be understood as standing in direct historical relationship to one another, we would also have to assume an unmediated interpretation of the Torah, one founded on a belief in a divine origin of scripture. As in the voice of the prophets: "Von Zion geht der Thora aus und der Wort Gottes von Jerusalem" in Isaiah 2:3 and again in Michah 4:2 — a phrase which forms a very standard part of the liturgical procession in each service in which the Torah is read. [tag I:353] In a brisk exchange of letters with Siegfried Lehmann, one of the influential figures in the *Judische Volksheim* (who himself was strongly under the influence of Buber), Scholem passionately articulates his political thesis on Zion:

Die Thora [...] - nach dem Prophetenworte — geht von Zion aus, und das verstehe ich auch innerlich: daß der innere Ausgangspunkt der Thora für uns Zion sein muß — *Zion ist ein Religiöses Symbol* — daß Zion ein innerlichstes Zentrum der Thora ist, äußerlich und innerlich, und daß wer ein Zionist ist, nach Thora streben muß, nicht nach Erlebissen, sondern nach Leben, und daß der Zionist das Wort Gottes nur von Jerusalem vernehmen kann. [B I:48]

Although the premise of this view may have perhaps changed over the years, as we shall see in the later observations on epistemology, the unity of prophetic Zion and the 20th century movement of the Jews to Palestine in this formulation remains part and parcel of the same political phenomenon. Many years

latter, he was to write that "Zion war für mich ein Symbol, das unseren Ursprung und unser utopisches Ziel in einem eher religiösen als geographischen Sinne verband." [von berlin:74] This notion of Zionism, therefore, naturally placed Scholem in a unique position vis-à-vis the Zionist movement. Should a prophetic Zion have been sought, the means to pursue it had been set out long before in orthodox Judaism through the study of the Torah. If, on the other hand, the ingathering of the exiles was to be seen in strategic or imperial terms, there could be little room for a biblically conceived Zion. That political Zionism was held to be an abomination of prophetic Zion by the orthodox was something Scholem was quite familiar with at the time. Such views were widely held in traditional religious branches of Judaism and similar to the orthodox Agudass Jissroël (Agudat Israel) which was newly forming in Berlin as Scholem became a principle member. Agudat Israel had just released its manifesto in which religious devotion and the study of the Torah was juxtaposed to the practical Zionists in a quasi-parody of their recent declarations.¹²¹

In his autobiographical writings, we read that Zion was conceived as a religious symbol. It is therefore quite surprising to find that in his *95 Thesen über Judentum und Zionismus*, written initially in July of 1918 as a gift to Benjamin but never delivered, we read under number 21 the supposition: "Zion ist keine Metapher." This statement opens a new dimension to the idea of Zion: that its literal interpretation irreparably transforms the notion of divine Scripture. But what is particularly interesting here is the degree to which Scholem's political notions take shape in the context of debate. In a letter to Max Fischer (author of *Heine, der deutsche Jude*), whom he discovers is a convert to Christianity, Scholem lashes out at his apostasy in ignorance of the very thing he rejects. In attempt to draw this distinction, Scholem argues polemically that he:

[...] nicht bei Gott, wie Sie, [Herr Fischer] sondern bei den Menschen stehen muß. Ich scheidet zwischen mir und Ihnen deshalb, weil Ihnen die *civitas dei* nicht nur wichtiger ist als die *civitas humana*, sondern allein wichtig. Für uns [...] gibt es aber keinen anderen Weg zur *civitas dei* als durch *civitas humana*, das ist über Zion. [B I:34]

Zion is envisioned here as the outcome of a *civitas humana* in which a devotion to worldly affairs facilitates the realization of *civitas dei*. The favoring of the later to the exclusion of the former, which is Scholem's assessment of Fisher's Christian division of heavenly and worldly, expresses Scholem's desire to distinguish

¹²¹ On Agudas Jisroel, see *Berichte und Materialien*, Frankfurt: Büro der Agudas Jisroel, 1912.

between Judaism of the past and of the future, between the two poles dividing German Jewry: Assimilation or Zionism. And this is where the debate with Benjamin comes into the picture. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Benjamin divides the notion of theocracy into the categories of the political and the theological. But only in the later does theocracy have meaning. A political notion which has as its goal the establishment of a religious state, therefore, is for Benjamin simply a facade which, in lacking substance, throws the divine origin of scripture into question. On August 24, 1916 Scholem writes in his journals:

Am ersten Abend sprachen wir auch darüber, ob Zion eine Metapher sei, was ich bejahte — denn nur Gott ist keine — und Benjamin verneinte. Wir kamen durch die Propheten darauf, denn Benjamin behauptete, man dürfe die Propheten nicht metaphorisch benutzen, wenn man die göttliche Autorität der Bibel anerkennt. [tag I:388]

From the vantage point of Scholem's thoughts, we can now see to what degree Benjamin sought to distinguish his own views from Scholem's, perhaps in the aftermath of an intense period of collaboration in Bern. Benjamin's notion of theocracy, a notion which we have seen to be inherent to the messianic idea, is not meant metaphorically but rather, in contrast to Scholem, is articulated as a notion of Zion, discharged of its messianic power in history. The negation of metaphorical meaning and, at the same time, being unrealizable in any concrete sense, reveals a rather ambiguous conception. As a weak messianic force, it may perhaps be inherent in history but remains unable to be actualized in the history of here and now. In this way, the fundamental distinction between Scholem and Benjamin in these matters has little to do with what one often is led to believe under the terms Zionism or Anti-Zionism but rather with a differentiated conception of Judaism and, in the late years, of anarchism. And this conception was not so much a difference articulated as a matter of principle but of interpretation, for if Zion is to be understood merely as a metaphor, then the authority of scripture is also thrown into question, in which theocracy could have a political and not merely a theological form. But at the same time, Benjamin's conception of Judaism from Scholem's point of view would remain doomed to a fate expressed in the last part of »Trauerspiel und Tragödie«¹²² on the nature of Trauerspiel which appears transformative but is only able to present the law of the divine world in a limited sense and never able to reach it. Judaism, through the prism of Zion, would also be subject to the same limitation, not only in its projection of the divine world, but of a praxis in this world which could lead the way.

¹²² »Trauerspiel und Tragödie« [II:136]

A PROGRAMMATIC TORAH

Aharon Heller, a fellow member of the *Jung Juda*, writes to Scholem on the ninth of July 1917: "Unser Ziel ist Verwirklichung des Zionismus = Verwirklichung der Tora" along the lines of Exodus 19:6 — "Und Ihr sollt mir ein priester Reich sein und ein heiliges Volk." Heller's views on Torah and Zionism correspond to Scholem's own: both call for worldly devotion for their actualization. But what is meant by Torah when not the five books of Moses, a divine book of teachings, or even Talmud-Torah? For Scholem, Torah envelops a far broader collection of ideas and events:

Was ist Thora? Ich verstehe folgendes darunter: I) das Prinzip, nach dem die Ordnungen der Dinge gestaltet sind. Nach der Ansicht des Judentums nun ist dies Prinzip als Sprache Gottes auch, und sogar in besonderer Weise, in den Überlieferungen der Menschen Erkennbar [...] II) Thora das Integral, den Inbegriff der Religiösen Überlieferungen der Judenheit von den Tagen der Urzeit bis zu den Tagen des Messias, ein Integral, das dem Judentum in eigentümlicher Weise mit dem Gesetz der Dinge und ebenso mit dem in einem Buche, der "Thora" als Wort Gottes angesprochen geistigen Wesen der Welt zwar nicht identisch ist, aber *koinzidiert*. [B I:89]

In contrast to the opening debate with Werner Scholem and the classical conception of anarchism in utopian form, a divine order of things formulated here explains in part the poverty of worldly organization. Knowledge of this order is possible through tradition, of which Torah is the center. Torah is not merely "teaching" or "law" but a reflection of the divine order, i.e. law and essence of the law, placed in the hands of humanity to understand; not so much a book of laws but the invariables order of the divine. It is, as in the *Bereshit Rabba*, a blue-print of the world which God used in creation as his construction plans to build the world. As such, the building blocks which formed the foundation of the world must be understood as linguistic. In the story of Genesis, God articulated words and these words took shape and formed things. These things were formed according to the structure of God's acoustic utterances, in which the formation of light was followed by the creation of the heavens through the separation of water, followed by the drying of the land, the emergence of grass, trees and so on, all through speaking.

God, surprisingly enough, turns out not to be the measure of this observation, not even the measure of the Torah. "Für mich," writes Scholem, "ist Zion das Zentrum [...] Ob Gott das Zentrum der Dinge ist, weiß ich nicht. Ich glaube es aber nicht. Von Zentrum aus kann Gott erst erkannt werden." [B I:90] God is rendered secondary in history or at least of secondary concern. History has

an independent course which, if determined by God, is certainly not steered by Him. History is not eternal in this view but transient.¹²³ Here we are able to distinguish between two categories of the messianic idea and situate Scholem's early Zionist notions accordingly. The first idea would consist of a redemption occurring where and when history ends, namely in the arrival of the Messiah. Human vocation might be reduced to a minimum in this plan. Once the Messiah appears, the work of redemption can begin with the participation of the living and the resurrected. A second perspective on the messianic idea is denoted by human activity and a commitment to worldly affairs before the arrival of the Messiah. In this view, humanity is imbued with a power, perhaps even a theurgic power, which is able to enact redemption through its own agency in this world. In Scholem's conception of Zionism, we are faced with the following elements: a commitment to worldly affairs which, through its realization, ushers in a state of the divine and a Torah which explains Jewish practice as the movement towards Zion, where Zion is no longer a metaphor but an idea to be realized. With such a clear formulation, one cannot but help but notice a distinctly messianic quality in Scholem's formulation, despite the fact that Scholem was to argue passionately in his later years against just this form of mixing of Zionism and Messianism, pleading for a radical separation of the two in every sense and warning against the havoc that Messianism has unleashed in Jewish history. But If Zionism here implies a commitment to a *civitas humana* through which a *civitas dei* is possible, in which the realization of the Torah is not conceived of as a divine act but rather one which takes place in history, then it is difficult to conceive of Scholem's Zionism here as anything but messianic leading to a *civitas dei* as theocracy.

Thus Scholem's early thought is fundamentally radical. It reveals an unmistakable longing for origins and a purity of desire, boring its way through the early letters and journals and leading directly to Palestine. "Lieber Ewig im Golus und meine Sünden allein tragen," notes Scholem in a journal entry of 1917, "als in [Eretz Yisroel] ein heidnisches Leben führen." [B I:361] Everything in exile was merely preparation for a future life in Zion, devout to the study of Judaism. The cadre in exile is to prepare for this transition. A "besserung der Herzen" in the words of Achad Ha'am was to take a more radical form in the *Jung Juda* and to be applied to all aspects of Zionism, not the least of which "das sexuelle Verhältnis" of its members.¹²⁴ He continues in the same passage:

¹²³ Similar to the notion of eternity we encountered in Benjamin, eternity is here solely the promise of return without the means to achieve it.

¹²⁴ See Achad Ha'am, "Die Lehre des Herzens" in *Am Scheidewege*, volume I, Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1913, 96-110.

Wir alle müssen einsehen, daß ein Stück Asketentum (in allen Dingen) dazu gehört, aufzubauen, was wir aufbauen wollen. Ich muß ja hier beim Militär auf die furchtbarste Art erfahren, was sexuelle Unreinheit aus den Menschen macht. Wenn wir die Volksgesundheit in dem Sinne erstreben wie etwa die Deutschen, mit denen zusammen ich hier eingezogen bin, ein gesundes Volk sind, so sind wir verloren, denn jeder Zugang zur Heiligkeit ist hier durch die Zote versperrt. [...] Wollen wir aber heilig sein [...], so müssen wir uns in der Einsamkeit verbinden. Jeder Gemeinschaft, die jetzt nicht aus wirklicher Einsamkeit hervowächst, ist ein Schwindel, denn sie hat das Golus noch nicht überwunden, trägt vielmehr sein Hauptgift im Herzen.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ [B I:80]. See also [B I:89].

REVOLUTIONARY NIHILISM

Lying on a cot in the barracks reserved for the psychiatrically ill under a six week observation period, Scholem wrote these lines in response to Heller's letter previously quoted while waiting for an exemption from military service.¹²⁶ These sentiments mark a definitive shift in Scholem's political thinking, moving from the early, more traditional anarchist notions and a corresponding idea of action to a more critical view toward outward activity which had already started to take effect in Berlin. A propaganda campaign for Zion began to appear futile, the avocation of the cause of piousness, vain. Scholem began to see a concentration of the self and the *Jung Juda* in a movement away from external activities as a necessary step. Thus a distinct form of nihilism comes to the fore which was to shape and form the previous conception of politics anew. In a phrase written many years later to distinguish this form of political theology from its more destructive correlate, he once termed it "ein Nihilismus quietistischer Natur."¹²⁷ I believe it best understood here as an anarchist nihilism.

The first indication that the use of the term nihilism implies a withdrawal from politics occurs in the debate with Werner Scholem in 1914, where the term is used to illustrate his own absolute rejection of the war in contrast to the opportunism of the Social Democrats. [B I:5] But it is not until 1917 that the initial conception of active politics was thrown into question which, until then, was primarily focused on the introduction of his and *Jung Juda's* conception of Zionism into the youth movement. "Wir sind uns alle einig darüber," writes Scholem to another member of the *Jung Juda*, "daß wir vorläufig auf die sogenannte 'Außenarbeit' im Sinne großer Veranstaltungen [...] verzichten, und intern die Sache machen." [B I:66] It appears as if the Zionism of the *Jung Juda* had little success in winning over many to its demanding vision of Jewish renewal. Isolation was therefore the outcome in the substitution of "Außenarbeit" for inner teaching, as Scholem remarked in the letter to Heller quoted above. A community of Zionists of Scholem's nature must recognize the profound state of alienation in exile and form its activities with this in mind. Just as the Jew in Zion cannot be hypothesized from Jew in exile, so too would a politics of the possible in Galut be, in his words, 'poisoning the core of Zion.' Thus Scholem was not to embark on a trail of

¹²⁶ Scholem was eventually diagnosed as suffering from an "incurable schizophrenia" and released from military duty in July/August of 1917. [von berlin:108]

¹²⁷ See "Der Nihilismus als religiöses Phänomen" in *Judaica 4*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984, 131.

pessimism or to resign from previously held views of an anarchist, utopian-socialist nature, nor was his nihilism a critique of everything in existence. It seems that his nihilism is here best surmised as a politics in *Aufschub*.¹²⁸ Activism would be left to the preparation of the few as *Jung Juda* was poised to become a *Geheimbund*.¹²⁹

The move towards this nihilistic conception of politics was crystalized in an open letter to Siegfried Bernfeld, editor of the *Jerubbaal* (a journal of the Zionist youth movement) entitled "Abschied."¹³⁰ This period marks the height of Scholem's anarchist nihilism in Muri. Following the intense contact with Benjamin, Scholem embarked on a re-evaluation of the youth movement from the distance of Switzerland and of the war. His belief that Benjamin also subscribed to the views articulated in this open letter to the Jewish youth movement and, as a consequence, his anticipation that Benjamin would articulate his own "Abschied" (which had de facto already taken place) in co-signing this letter suggests profound theoretical agreement between the two which Scholem alludes to with such uniform clarity on rare occasion.¹³¹ The subject and the tone of "Abschied" do tend to confirm Scholem's testimony to a joint assessment in many ways but there are also marked differences. Nevertheless, an atmosphere of reflection on the metaphysics of politics and terms upon which community would be possible are the sentiments of this open letter. But the community desired by both the revolutionary socialist and the Zionist, Scholem concludes, is only possible through the very condition it seeks to overcome:

Gemeinschaft verlangt Einsamkeit: nicht die Möglichkeit, zusammen das Gleiche zu wollen, sondern allein die gemeinsamer Einsamkeit begründet die Gemeinschaft. Zion, die Quelle unseres Volkstums, ist die gemeinsame, [...] Solange dies Zentrum nicht mit strahlender Heiligkeit restituiert ist, muß die Ordnung unserer Seele, zu der sich zu bekennen die Ehrlichkeit gebietet eine

¹²⁸ This reference to a politics in postponement or reserve appears in several places in Scholem's writings. See the discussion in section three.

¹²⁹ See [B I:81-2]. A defense of the *Geheimbund* also appears in "Abschied" roughly a year later: "Die Jugend, die eines Bundes würdig ist, ist noch nicht da, und wenn sie da ist, wie können Sie glauben, daß sie sich anders organisieren wird als in einem Geheimbunde, der die einzige Möglichkeit einsamer Gemeinschaft darstellt, die in der Verborgenheit verwirklicht wird." [B I:465]

¹³⁰ In a letter to a friend on 28 May 1918, just prior to the Bernfeld letter, Scholem refers to importance which "Abschied" was to have: ". . . ich werde nun draußen in Muri den offenen Brief an Bernfeld schreiben (den wir beide, mein Freund [Benjamin] und ich, unterzeichnen werden), und wenn er so wird, wie wir es uns denken, so wirst du staunen. Es wird die nackte Wahrheit darin stehen, die über die metaphysische Haltung der jungen Zionisten gesagt werden muß. Da ich jetzt Gott sei Dank keinen mehr vor Augen habe, kann ich aus der Distanz das Bild desto deutlicher sehen." [B I:156] Little has changed in Scholem's Nihilism by 1 November 1918 in a letter to Ludwig Strauß: "Ich lebe nach wie vor völlig zurückgezogen und komme mit hiesigen 'Zionisten' gar nicht zusammen." [B I:182]

¹³¹ The other major agreement with which he makes repeated reference to in the early papers, is Benjamin's conception of language.

anarchische sein. Im Galuth kann es keine vor Gott gültige jüdische Gemeinschaft geben. Und wenn Gemeinschaft zwischen Menschen in der Tat das Höchste ist, was gefordert werden kann, welchen Sinn hätte der Zionismus, wenn er im Galuth verwirklicht werden könnte. [B I:462]

In "Abschied," we witness a call for a disengagement from practical, worldly affairs, particularly from the movements which rattle the sabers of change but reveal themselves as idle chatter, no further along than where they began. For in exile, there can be no true community.¹³² What is held in common are not political goals but the alienation from their immediate realization. Needed for this realization are not worldly organizations but rather the orientation of the individual to these goals which, we are told, are informed by anarchism in its utopian sense, until the restitution of the divine "order of the soul" supersedes this isolation, by which redemption is undoubtedly meant. Thus, silence (as opposed to idle chatter) is the element which the youth movement needs in its quests for the reparation of the division between word and its meaning, word and deed:

Wie die Jugend nicht einsam sein kann, so kann sie auch nicht schweigen. Das Schweigen, in dem sich Wort und Tat vereinigen, ist ihr fremd [...] Menschen aber, die nicht schweigen können, können im letzten Grunde auch nicht miteinander reden. . . in [dem Geschwätz] vermischen sich in unterschiedsloser Weise alle Dinge und verkehren sich: Zion zum Zukunftsstaat, das Judentum zur Geist [...] Der Jugend die Sprache wiederzugeben ist die Aufgabe. [B I:463]

Little can be more representative of a retreat from concrete political life than silence and nothing which connotes a greater sense of reflection without action. But out of this transitive moment of reflection in which politics can be thought anew, not based solely on general directions but on the understanding of the difference between essentials, will youth finally be able to return to language. For the strength of the youth movement is not determined "in ihrem Auftreten und ihren Ansprüchen, sondern in der Zurückgezogenheit, in der sie ihre Aufgabe erfaßt, und in der Große des Verzichtes, in dem ihre Fülle Gestalt annimmt." [B I:466] For such a youth movement would have Hebrew as its highest goal and "Zion [wäre] keine symbolische Metapher mehr."¹³³

¹³² Other commentators have also remarked on the particularly fundamentalist tone of Scholem's text. Gert Mattenklott sees it as a "Kritik am Gemeinschaftskult der Jugendbewegung" but equally a call to establish "intellektuellen Eliten" with "ordensähnliche Disziplin von Einzelgängern." See his "Mythologie Messianism Macht" in *Messianism. Zwischen Mythos und Macht*, ed. by E. Goodman-thau and W. Schmied-Konarzik, Berlin: Akademie, 1994, 193.

¹³³ [B I:464]. This assertion, that "Zion kommt hier nur metaphorisch vor," appears twice in "Abschied," lending emphasis to the concept and particularly to the difference with Benjamin. See also [freund:94].

Nihilism, thus, is a *Verzicht* from political engagement out of a desire for a new political idea. Although it rejects direct participation, it would be wrong to assume a full rejection of politics as such. On the contrary, it was born from considerations of an expressly political nature and is still undoubtedly entwined in a utopian anarchism of the earlier period. Scholem continued to be moved by the changes taking place around him. In a letter to Werner Kraft from Bern, he articulates this enthusiasm for the events in Russia which were felt by many at the dawn of the revolution, not the least of which the Russian anarchists abroad.¹³⁴ He writes: "In meinem Leben habe ich noch keine so menschliche ergreifenden und wahren politischen Schriftstücke gesehen wie die Dokumente der maximalistischen [Bolschwisten] Revolution." [B I:125] But this embrace of the revolution is buttressed by a nihilism which is only to be transcended by redemption:

Die Differenz meiner Haltung zum Krieg und zur Revolution ist sehr klar: Zwar in beiden Fällen beteilige ich mich nicht. Aber dort wandte ich mich ab und hier sehe ich zu. Ich nehme diese Revolution, die zweifellos historische Legitimität besitzt, in mein Gesichtsfeld auf — nicht mehr, aber auch nicht weniger. Solange die Stellung des Geistes in der neuen Ordnung der Dinge noch nicht durchaus verletzt ist, ist es meine Pflicht eine 'wohlwollende Neutralität' nicht zu verlassen. Da aber natürlich die Revolution, an der mich zu *beteiligen* die größte Aufgabe wäre: die theokratische Revolution gewiß nicht mit dieser Identisch ist (auch wenn sie irgendwo natürlich etwas Messianisches hat) kann ich nicht mehr tun. [B I:184]

¹³⁴ Peter Kropotkin, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, to name just three who returned to Russia embracing the revolution. All, including Scholem, were terribly disillusioned. Kropotkin, however, was saved from the worst aspects, having died a few years before Lenin.

CATAclysmic ANARCHISM

The crucial moment in which Scholem would leave the shores of Europe behind for the 'Orient of the future' finally arrived in 1923, bringing to a end a period embroiled in the causes and concerns of a Berliner youth culture. New problems, unanticipated from the distance of Jena, München or Berlin, began to emerge: on Zion, the Hebrew language, the formation of a Jewish state and Jewish-Arab co-existence.¹³⁵ So too with his conception of anarchism. If it was going to continue to be meaningful, anarchism could no longer be based solely on the events and thinkers of Europe and would have to undergo a transition to correspond to this new phase in Scholem's program of Jewish renewal.¹³⁶ This transition was no less radical than the former and Scholem's new-found conception was once again at odds fundamentally with the very formulations which preceded it.

Although the terms anarchism and nihilism rarely appear in the years following Scholem's emigration, they were surely to be compelling forces in the subterranean grottos of his research. With the publication of his 1936 Hebrew essay "Mitzva haba'a be'avara" or "Redemption through Sin," however, these categories resurface once again with renewed vigor as his interest in the messianic figure of Sabbatai Zevi¹³⁷ and the movement surrounding his pronouncement in 1666 to be the Messiah took definitive form.¹³⁸ Rather than the "well-meaning neutrality" we

¹³⁵ Scholem's later views on these matters are complex and deserve much more attention than I am capable of providing here. His growing dissatisfaction with the Zionist movement in Palestine, from the emergence of Hebrew as a truly secular language to the Arab-Israeli conflict (particularly his activities with the group Brit Shalom) mark distinct turns in his development. In contrast to his earlier messianic Zionism, he develops a distinctly anti-messianic approach when arriving in Palestine, ascribing such views to the followers of Jabotinsky and the right-wing. On his post-European views, see Scholem "Ist die Verständigung mit dem Arabern gescheitert?," *Jüdische Rundschau*, No. 92, 20 November 1928; "Zur Frage des Parlaments," *Jüdische Rundschau*, No. 11, 8 February, 1929; "On Our Language: A Confession," in *History and Memory*, Vol. 2, No. 6, Winter 1990; *Od davar. Explications and Implications. Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992, (Hebrew), pages 68-71 and 85-90 on Brit Shalom, esp. 88-89 for a critique of messianic Zionism and "Achad Ha'am v'anachnu," 72-72.

¹³⁶ Since this period extends beyond the scope of the thesis (which is focused on the German years), I have decided to only sketch briefly the development that was to take place in Scholem's thinking after his arrival in Palestine in order to attempt to bring some thematic closure to the political ideas discussed in this chapter.

¹³⁷ Evidence, however, of a growing interest in the subject dates back from the earliest journal entries from 1914 [tag I:31-32] on through to the essay on Sabbationism in *Der Jude 9, Sonderheft 5* (1928) and again in his article for the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1932) on Kabbalah. There has been some confusion concerning the date of "Redemption through Sin," identified as either having appeared in 1936 or 1937. From a letter to Hans-Joachim Schoeps dated 3.I.1937 in which Scholem mentions enclosing a copy the article, it would now seem to have appeared in 1936.

¹³⁸ Some have interpreted this essay (as well as Scholem's interest in Sabbatianism) as a critique of political Zionism, leaving aside its scholarly importance in reviving one of the most earth-shattering

encountered in the previous chapter, anarchism comes to the fore as the most intense partiality, a nihilism of violent and destructive forces so extreme that they inevitably turn back on themselves. A messianic tendency is here expressed in its most apocalyptic form, in a vision of a "allgemeinen Umbruchs und Kataklysmus," far removed from the weak messianic drive, lodged in the enlightenment idea of progress.¹³⁹ Destruction as an end in itself serves as the explanation for the conflagration which Sabbatai Zevi and his apostle, Natan of Gaza, ignited in Jewish history, the embers of which still smolder in corners of the Jewish world.

In the early years of Scholem's emigration, a marked transition occurred in his conception of anarchism and nihilism. But despite the fact that he borrowed quite heavily from these terms in his 1936 essay on the Sabbatian movement, Scholem failed to address these terms as such. It wasn't until a renaissance of interest in the utopian dimension of religion and revolution that anarchism and nihilism were once again brought to the forefront of his thinking and categorically addressed. Thus a short historical detour is due. In his 1974 essay "Der Nihilismus als religiöses Phänomen," Scholem portrays the nihilist in a somewhat different light than we have seen so far. Here he is conceived as a Russian revolutionary, a "grundsätzliche Bestreiter jeglicher Autorität, der keinerlei Prinzipien auf Glauben hin annimmt, ganz gleich welche Achtung solches Prinzip umgeben möge."¹⁴⁰ The nihilist here takes the form of a modern rebel who rejects the contradictions of feudal and pre-capitalist Russian life and, as a consequence, becomes a legislator over his own norms and behavior. Nihilism — Scholem notes while drawing on Nietzsche's *Wille zur Macht* — is the "unheimlichste aller Gäste" which lies before the doors of bourgeois society in wait, ready to launch itself upon the hypocrisy of its ways out of its own professed logic.¹⁴¹ This feat was ascertained, first and foremost, by its implicit relationship to anarchism:

Die Anarchisten nahmen den Begriff aktiv in ihre Propaganda auf und wurden so für das Bewußtsein weiter Kreise die klassischen Vertreter des Nihilismus, bevor noch Nietzsche, ganz jenseits der politischen Sphäre und im Durchdenken der Implikationen des Zusammenbruchs der Überlieferung

and radically suppressed events in annals of Jewish history. On the history of the debate, see David Biale, *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 172-3, 187-194. Perhaps the only thing to add to Biale is Scholem's own comparison of Frank to a "Territorialist" in "the language of modern Zionism." [j4:181] See also [j5:122-124]

¹³⁹ See "Die Metamorphose des häretischen Messianismus der Sabbatianer in religiösen Nihilismus im 18. Jahrhundert," *Judaica* 3, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984, 212. Henceforth [j3]

¹⁴⁰ See "Der Nihilismus als religiöses Phänomen," *Judaica* 4, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987, 130. Henceforth [j4]

¹⁴¹ [j4:139]. This occurred without succumbing to the instrumentalism of positivism.

der autoritären Wertsysteme, den Nihilismus als jenen steinernen Gast erkannte, der an der Tür unserer Feste wartet. [j4:130]

The withering of meaning of the authority structures which engulfed Russian nihilists at the end of the last century left little alternative, in their view, than to embark on their complete destruction. In this way, the establishment of a connection between the nihilists and the revolutionary transformation sought by the anarchists was a natural development: if reconstruction was to take place, then the wreck of an edifice which masqueraded as a regime had to be fully pulled down. For this young generation, nihilism meant "die Zerstörung aller Institutionen, um herauszufinden, was etwa als guter Fonds in ihnen solcher Zerstörung widersteht," with whom the sentiments of Bakunin's motto of destruction being a creative act were certain to reverberate. [j4:131] The proximity of Kropotkin's formulation of the nihilist impulse to anarchism, notes Scholem, is based on the fact that both movements advocate "der konsequente Kampf für die Freiheit des Individuums gegen tyrannische und heuchlerische Institutionen und zugunsten des freien Zusammenschlusses einander helfend beistehender Gemeinschaften [...]" [j4:131] Both their radical critique of society and its authority structures facilitated a unity of causes, which extended inwards through the purity and radical application of this critique to everyday life. Therefore, the transition of the term nihilism from secular revolt to radical theology followed a course which religious movements had already set:

Der Verfall der alten autoritären, noch auf Offenbarung gegründeten Wertordnungen der Religionen wurde dann, im Verfolg jener religionskritischen und philosophischen Strömungen als Nihilismus, als die Folge des Zusammenbruchs der religiösen Welt ausgerufen. [j4:130]

But how is this form of nihilism related to the anarchist nihilism established in the last section? In this late essay, Scholem differentiates between two forms of nihilistic revolt: a 'quietistic nihilism' and a 'nihilism of the deed.' The former is distinguished from the later through the fact that:

nicht Institutionen oder gar die Realität schlechthin im aktiven Aufstand, sondern in der Kontemplation und von einem metaphysischen archimedischen Punkt her negiert oder auch zerstört werden. [j4:131]

If the conception of nihilism in the previous section referred to a retreat from worldly affairs into the realms of a "metaphysical anarchism," the term was now to be used to refer to a radically active and historical movement which was ready to turn the world upside down. The principle that "the violation of the Torah

could become its true fulfillment (bittulah shel torah zehu kiyyumah)"¹⁴² is deemed a hallmark of this active form of nihilism of the deed, what Scholem understood as "dialectical outgrowth" of the solipsistic Messianism inherent in Sabbatianism. "Just as a grain of wheat must rot in the earth before it can sprout, so the deeds of the 'believers' must be truly 'rotten' before they can germinate the redemption."¹⁴³ The act of sinning became the very act which was to bring on the redemption, the destruction of the existing order would bring on a new, just order. It was, however, in the works of Natan of Gaza that radical paradox was canonized as the basis of Sabbatian theology. Contradiction became a "lasting characteristic of the movement: following upon the initial paradox of an apostate Messiah, paradox engendered paradox."¹⁴⁴

The figure which Scholem attributes to having brought paradox to its farthest extremes was the late Sabbatian Messiah Jacob Frank of Poland, an even more radical "reincarnation" of Sabbatai Zvi a generation later. Advocating a nihilism and a "mystical theory of revolution" with "rare authenticity," Frank's utopian vision was founded on the quest for "a life of anarchic liberty."¹⁴⁵ This mystical revolutionary idea carried with it a mission that was to extend beyond the demands of Lurian Messianism which requires the redemption of Jewish "sparks" and the congregation of the Jewish world before the dominion of exile for all people could be ended. [j3:200] In Sabbatianism, a universal dimension of the messianic task was revealed:

Ständig wiederholt [Frank] das doppelte Grundmotiv seiner Lehre: *Abschaffung* aller Werte, positiven Gesetze und Religionen im Namen der Befreiung des *Lebens*. Der Weg dazu führt durch den Abgrund der Zerstörung. Dieser Begriff des Lebens stellt für Frank ein Schlüsselwort dar, in dem sein anarchisches Pathos sich ausdrückt, Leben ist für ihn nicht die harmonische Ordnung der Natur und ihr sanftes Gesetz; er ist kein Anhänger der Rückkehr zur Natur im Sinne Rousseaus. [...] Leben ist Freiheit von Bindung und Gesetz. Das anarchische Leben ist Gegenstand und Inhalt seiner Utopie, in der ein primitives Streben nach einem gesetzlosen Begriff von Freiheit und von der Promiskuität aller Dinge sich ankündigt. Dies anarchische Leben rauscht von dem 'großen Bruder' und erhält bei Frank alle positiven Töne und Obertöne, die dieser Begriff sonst in der religiösen Überlieferung, wenn auch in ganz anderem Sinne hat. Hundert Jahre vor

¹⁴² "Redemption though Sin," 84.

¹⁴³ "Redemption though Sin," 116.

¹⁴⁴ "Redemption though Sin," 88.

¹⁴⁵ "Redemption though Sin," 127,131. Scholem writes elsewhere: "Frank war ein Nihilist, und sein Nihilismus besaß ein seltenes Maß von Authentizität [...] Er stellt nicht etwa einen Mystiker, einen Visionär oder einen Staatsmann als Messias vor, sondern einen Kraftmenschen, wenn man so sagen dürfte, einen Athleten-Messias [...]" [j4:171]

Bakunin hat Frank die erlösende Macht der Zerstörung ins Zentrum seiner Utopie gestellt. [j4:178]

Life was no longer to be governed by the rules of the past: what was once particularized was now to be made universal, what was once restricted was to now be permitted; everything which existed before was to have been a prehistory of suffering, everything that existed now, the striving for "life." A pure experience as such, unmediated by external authority, was the cardinal hymn of Frankist anarchism and what, in many ways, bares striking resemblance to more contemporary anarchist figures. "To live is the rarest thing in the world," once wrote Oscar Wilde . "Most people exist, that is all."¹⁴⁶ Rather than the socialist individualism of Wilde, Scholem envisioned Frank in light of Michael Bakunin and the uproar which he sought to instigate at every opportunity across Europe in the revolutions of 1848. The destructive nature of such uprisings were met with little remorse, for Bakunin's destructive rationale was equally drawn from an idea of negation, originating out of dialectical necessity. The conviction that revolution could only be created out of the ashes of the old were conclusions which led him to ferment uprisings everywhere he went, in the open and in secret societies. The affinity which Scholem was to find in Frank's program of destruction, however, was distinctly more poignant, in the sense that Frankist nihilism was able to be focused to a far greater extent than secular nihilism was ever able to achieve. In Jacob Frank's own words: "Wo ich gehe, wird alles zerstört. Ich muß zerstören und annihilieren — was ich aber bauen werde, wird ewig stehen."¹⁴⁷ But this period of destruction has not yet reached its conclusion, as Scholem states, "Vorläufig ist die Zeit für solches Bauen aber noch nicht gekommen. Vielmehr ergreift das Ringen um die Zerstörung, ein ursprünglicher und echter Anarchismus, alle Schichten unserer Existenz." [j3:207]

The anarchist idea is here identified with a religious yearning for freedom from law whose nihilist content is fully exposed years before Bakunin. Frank's mystical theory of the "real, anarchist life" necessitates the victory over all law and every religion, where "die Vision der nihilistischen Erlösung" is contained within "die Aufhebung aller Gesetze und Normen. . ." [j3:207] In a separate passage, he formulates the Frankist conception of law:

¹⁴⁶ "For what man has sought for is, indeed, neither pain nor pleasure, but simply life." [184]. Compare the opening lines of "The Soul of Man under Socialism," *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, volume 8, New York, 1972, 121-185. The quotation above is from page 134.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. [j3:207].

Diese Welt wird von 'unwürdigen Gesetzen' regiert. Daher besteht die eigentliche Aufgabe darin, der Herrschaft dieser Gesetze — *aller* Gesetze dieser Welt — ein Ende zu bereiten, die ja Gesetze des Todes sind und die Würde des Menschen verletzen. [j4:177]

Nihilism of the Frankists sought the complete abrogation of everything in Judaism and ultimately, the complete abrogation of the self, what Scholem refers to as a "Nichts der Religion" [j3:208] or "das Nichttheologische."¹⁴⁸

For the Sabbational anarchists, immanent revolution meant complete destruction. Theirs was a release from messianic expectation that had evolved not only from their own agitation but from generations of expectation whose hopes were dashed by the terrible irony of a Messiah whose greatest redemptive act consisted of converting to another religion. But rather than resignation, the apostasy, conversion and "descent" of the Messiah gave a whole new dimension to the messianic idea which, instead of provoking a retreat into disarray, was greeted with a doctrine and later practice of "contradictory acts."¹⁴⁹ Those who in every outward manner suggested the most devout practice of Jewish tradition had, through Sabbatianism, "begun to embark on a radically new inner life of their own" in which the apparently most observant were often the most radical believers in a new era ushered in by Sabbtai Zvi.

Anarchism here, just as in the traditional conception with which this chapter begins, is wedded to the "desire for total liberation," where destruction is conceived of as a catalyzing force.¹⁵⁰ Paralleling other revolutionary movements, Sabbaionists too "desired to prolong the novel sensation of living in a 'restored world' by developing attitudes and institutions that seemed commensurate with a new divine order."¹⁵¹ But this very act of forming new ritual and structure, even a new Torah, meant destroying the ritual and structure of an old Torah, and this triggered in Scholem a fearful aspect in his conception of the revolutionary idea, in which he sought to make "the instincts of anarchy and lawlessness that lie deeply

¹⁴⁸ [j3:209] One sees in this formulation a parallel to the "Nichts der Offenbarung" which he used to characterize the 'kabbalistische Sprachwelt' of Kafka's struggle with the disappearance of God. Would this imply that a nothingness of religion born from the condition of the nothingness of revelation is "das Nichttheologische" or theological nihilism?

¹⁴⁹ Rather than signaling the end of the movement, the great messianic act of Sabbatai Zvi in his conversion to Islam, as Scholem points out, was actually in many ways its beginning. See Scholem's, *Sabbatai Svi: The Mystical Messiah*, Princeton University Press, 1973.

¹⁵⁰ "Redemption through Sin," 84.

¹⁵¹ "Redemption through Sin," 89.

buried in every human soul"¹⁵² responsible for an outburst which sought the destruction of Judaism as such.¹⁵³ As he writes:

Traditionally Judaism had always sought to suppress such impulses, but now that they were allowed to emerge in the revolutionary exhilaration brought on by the experience of redemption and its freedom, they burst forth more violently than ever.¹⁵⁴

Repression was the critical force which maintained rabbinic Judaism as a cohesive and viable tradition, concludes Scholem. Like other religions in this respect, Judaism is understood here as having to continually provide new avenues for heretical elements, derived from the inherent paradox of religion which, by being part of the phenomenon of mysticism, questions the divine right of all authority.¹⁵⁵ So long as tradition exists, it will be necessary for it to provide "vents" which lead outside of itself, whose variability is dependent on the norms which govern it just as much as the age in which these impulses emerge.¹⁵⁶ The outcome of this conflict determines how the messianic idea is to be reinterpreted in a given age, based on its own internal ventilation and the period in which it takes shape. A nihilistic outcome of this conflict thus stands in explicit relationship to repression:

Solange kein positiver Weg sichtbar war, durch den eine messianische Revolte gegen das G[h]etto und seine Umwelt von innen her vollzogen werden konnte, nahm diese Revolte einen nihilistischen Charakter an. [j3:211-212]

The destruction of the Ghetto stood at the center of the Frankist vision. The 'impulse' which was to drive the movement outwards transformed its own messianic calling into a nihilistic one. "In der Umwertung aller Werte der jüdischen Überlieferung, die der Nihilismus der Frankisten propagierte," explains Scholem, pointing to the external restrictions of Polish Jewry, "verkoppelte sich die historische Erfahrung des polnischen Juden mit einer intensiven Sehnsucht gerade

¹⁵² "Redemption through Sin," 109.

¹⁵³ See [jjc: 32] where Scholem refers again to his fear of the terror unleashed by absolute freedom based on optimistic, trans-historical assumptions concerning human nature.

¹⁵⁴ "Redemption through Sin," 109. Scholem was to support these conclusions many years later in his essay of nihilism, published in honor of Adorno: "Wenn wir unsere Aufmerksamkeit auf das Judentum richten, so ist von vornherein das Auftreten antinomistischer und bis ins Nihilistische gehender Tendenzen besonders unerwartet. Stellt doch das historische Judentum, wie es sich in dem festen Gefüge des Gesetzes der Tora und der Halacha kristallisiert hat, eine Religionsverfassung von ungewöhnlicher Disziplin und Festigkeit dar, die in jedem Stück auflösenden und die festen Ordnungen abbauenden Bestrebungen sich entgegenstellt." [j4:161]

¹⁵⁵ On mysticism and authority, see Scholem's "Religiöse Autorität und Mystik" in *Zur Kabbala und Ihrer Symbolik*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1973.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. [j3:198].

nach der Welt, die ihm versagt war." [j4:182] Two worlds were closed to Frankism in the course of its activities: rabbinical Judaism, which vehemently opposes anything perceived as being 'Law-destroying' and the external vents of Christianity and Islam, which met Frank's conversions with scepticism and repression.¹⁵⁷ Isolation and containment left the nihilistic impulse little choice but to turn inwards, explaining the movement of religious nihilism into the main territories of observant tradition, governing the most fundamental aspects of religious life: moral restrictions. "Da [Frank] der weg der politischen Aktion versagt ist, betont er vorläufig den moralischen Aufstand gegen die herrschenden Wertordnungen." [j4:180] Scholem was to formulate this tendency more generally in his late essay on nihilism:

Der Aufstand gegen die Gesetze, die der Nihilist gerade ihres Ursprungs wegen verwirft und mit dem er zugleich den Eintritt unter ein höheres Gesetz vollzieht, fand seine nächstliegende und sichtbarste Anwendung auf das Moralgesetz, das zu brechen Verdienst wurde. [j4:138]

Since moral law stands at the center of a tradition whose very authority is challenged, the nihilist impulse is directed not simply at the question of morality itself but rather at the basis of law and the force which sanctions it.¹⁵⁸ This directed the messianic drive to overturn law altogether through the performance of its reversal; for example, the Sabbatian prayer which transformed the traditional blessing of *Matter Assuriem* (Blessed is He who frees all slaves) to *Matter Issuriem* (Blessed is He who permits the forbidden). According to Scholem, the more repressive rabbinical Judaism reacted to such movement of reversal, the greater the eruption of destructive impulses. The conversion to Islam became the farthest break from rabbinical tradition possible:

Dies wurde aber eher als eine Maskierung des eigentlichen messianischen Inhalts angesehen, der in antinomistischen Ritualen der Sektierer verwirklicht wurde. Hier verbanden sich unverkennbar machtvolle religiöse Emotionen mit anarchischen Neigungen, wie sie tief im Menschlichen verborgen liegen.

¹⁵⁷ Frank spent over thirteen years as prisoner of the Catholic Church in Czestochowa. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, Meridian, 1978, 301.

¹⁵⁸ This is quite evident in the theology of Baruchja Russo, a leader of the Döhme sect at the beginning of the 18th century, whose teachings sought to overturn all the laws that would pertain to a Torah of creation, particularly those which would be deemed 'civilization-forming' or necessary. These would include, following Moses 3:19, "die Sexuellen Tabus und Inzestverbote. In der neuen Ära seien diese Verbote nicht nur aufgehoben, sondern würden vielmehr zu Geboten, die dem neuen Weltzustand entsprächen [...] Die Propaganda der Abrogation der Schöpfung-Tora und ihrer Ersetzung durch eine mystisch-libertinische, die dem neuen Stand ertsprache, wurde begreiflicherweise von den Hütern der Überlieferung als totaler Umsturz gewertet und dementsprechend bekämpft. In der Tat war der Weg von hier zu einem konsequenten Nihilismus auf religiöser Grundlage nicht weit." [j4:170]

Je stärker die Disziplin war, mit der das rabbinische Judentum solche Impulse gebändigt hatte, desto wilder war ihr Ausbruch im Verfolg des radikalen Messianismus und seiner Botschaft eines Anbruchs der Freiheit und Erlösung, selbst wenn diese Freiheit sich nur im Untergrund und geheimen bestätigen konnte. [j4:166]

As in the example of Jacob Frank, the explosion which was caused by the encounter of nihilistic impulses as 'law-destroying' and the 'law-generating' impulses in rabbinic Judaism, presented in acute form a radical clash of forces which harbored no room for their opposites. Scholem offers a classical dialectical explanation for these phenomenon:

Die ungeheuren Energien, die in den Aufbau religiöser Strukturen gingen, in denen die Erfahrung der Welt mit der der Transzendenz sich verbinden sollte, ließen keinen Raum für den Abbau dessen, was erst im Prozeß der Kristallisation sich befand. [j4:134]

The explosion (or implosion as the case may have been) which was caused by this confrontation, was to yield new constellations of Judaism never seen before. Sabbatianism, through its sheer negativity, was able to help "pave the way for the Haskalah and the reform movement of the nineteenth century, once its original religious impulse was exhausted."¹⁵⁹ A new historical constellation formed, according to Scholem, engendered by a "crisis of faith" which was able to penetrate the most remote corners of Jewish society by the very fact that the emergence of Sabbatianism coincided with a lifting of medieval isolation generally for Jews.¹⁶⁰ Thus the Bakuninist principle that destruction can also be a creative will returns to garnish this rather negative moment in Scholem's conception of anarchism, expressed in messianic terms as "'Aufhebung der Tora als deren wahrer Erfüllung'"¹⁶¹

The emergence of Sabbatianism, and later Frankism, as an "ungewöhnliche Explosion neuer produktiver Kräfte" [j3:198], were seen by Scholem in expressly dialectical terms. In the case of nihilism, these unyielding destructive forces, working to undo all the binds of Jewish tradition, were to have an historical effect far beyond their intentions:

The desire for total liberation which played so tragic a role in the development of Sabbatian nihilism was by no means a purely self-destructive

¹⁵⁹ "Redemption through Sin," 88.

¹⁶⁰ "Redemption through Sin," 84.

¹⁶¹ "Ursprünge, Widersprüche und Auswirkungen des Sabbatianismus" (Einleitung zu Sabbatai Zwi aus dem Nachlaß) *Judaica* 5, 130.

force; on the contrary, beneath the surface of lawlessness, antinomianism, and catastrophic negation, powerful constructive impulses were at work.¹⁶²

The category of nihilism takes on a whole new meaning in light of Sabbatianism. It, together with anarchism, were to become purely negative categories — negative, however, with purely unintentional and ultimately creative effects which were to branch off into the concerns of the enlightenment. "Was sie aber selber vorbringen," remarks Scholem on the nihilist contribution to rationalism, "stellt einen Übergang der revolutionären Bilderwelt in die der Aufklärung dar." [j4:187] In this sense, Scholem was to link cataclysmic formulations to the 'quietistic nihilism' and traditional anarchism of the earliest period by posing the necessity of negation. This connection is most poignantly illustrated in an (until recently) unpublished first introduction to his large work on Sabbatai Zvi. In the following passage, we can see once again the influence which the early political-theological ideas were to have on Scholem's life-long research:

Ein Verständnis der sabbatianischen Bewegung hängt meiner Ansicht nach davon ab, ob der Versuch gelingt, das irdische Reich — das Gebiet der Geschichte — mit dem himmlischen Reich — dem Gebiet der Kabbala — zu verbinden und das eine im Licht des anderen zu deuten. Denn 'das irdische ist wie das himmlische Reich'. Beide bilden ja in Wahrheit ein einziges 'Reich' — das Reich der Bewegung, in der die menschliche Erfahrung sich entfaltet, die sich weder allein 'geistig' noch allein 'gesellschaftlich' verstehen läßt, sondern viele Grundbewegung offenbart. [j5:130]

In this third phase of Scholem's conception of anarchism, we have witnessed a startling new usage of the term which, although bearing many of the hallmarks of the first two categories, embarks on an entirely new discussion. Anarchism represents the dialectical necessity of destruction, expressed here in purely religious terms. Scholem was here to stress the truly religious desire which Sabbatianism embodies. Once expressed in the language of his own early religious-anarchist sentiments¹⁶³ "die Flamme des wahren Glaubens brennt ihrem Wesen nach nur im verborgenen." [j4:166] Scholem concludes both of his late essay on Sabbatianism with a testament to the authentic religious nature of their nihilism and their own anarchist pursuit of the "divine world:"

¹⁶² "Redemption through Sin," 84.

¹⁶³ See the debate with Werner Scholem in this chapter.

Aber die Anhänger dieser Bewegung waren echte Gläubige, die in den Verheißungen einer anarchistischen irdischen Utopie eine Erlösung fanden, die ihnen das rabbinische Judentum versagte.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ [j3:217] Scholem repeats this same sentence in the last lines of his "Der Nihilismus als religiöses Phänomen." Here he leaves out the word "irdischen" in the phrase "einer anarchistischen Utopie." See [j4:188].

CRITICAL ANARCHISM

In this final transition of the anarchist idea, we can now turn to a formulation which was to find expression late in Scholem's career. Just as Judaism was to pay a heavy price for its Messianism — in the same way that every historical movement has to pay a price for its activities — the cataclysmic moment was to have a lasting impact on the conception of anarchism. As we have seen in the previous section, the nihilistic impulse led to the Sabbatian explosion which itself paved the way for an age of Enlightenment in Jewish thought in the 18th century. After the onslaught of 'law-destroying' tendencies, the rigid hold which rabbinic authority exercised over Judaism was no longer as mighty as it once had been, and the Haskalah was to add a good deal to the decline in influence of 'law-abiding' Judaism as such.¹⁶⁵ Slowly the very heart of Jewish law was being brought into question. If this was not to take place explicitly, then at least unintentionally: for the undisputable basis of lawful Judaism was being undermined, according to Scholem, by the growing disbelief in the divine origins of Scripture (or in the avoidance of the question altogether). A transcript of Scholem's comments suggests the startling impact that this phenomenon was perceived to be having on Judaism. As he explains:

The Torah is the sounding of a supernal voice that obliges one in an absolute manner. It does not acknowledge the autonomy (autonomiah) of the individual. To be sure, Jeremiah was promised a "Torah of the heart," but only at the end of days. The hasidim, in fact, did make an attempt to prepare the "Torah of the heart." A hasidic work interprets a passage in Deuteronomy 17 [18f] on the king of Israel — "and he shall write for himself in a book a copy of the Torah [...], and it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life [...]" — such that the king will read the Torah within him, that is, within himself. This autonomous conception of the Torah, however is not compatible with the traditional one. Torah has two meanings: the designation of a path, and the transmission of something. Everything in the world, even a person, can be "Torah," but there never is Torah without supernal authority.¹⁶⁶

A resolute proposition of rabbinic Judaism is that the Torah is the absolute word of God, as is with most forms of Judaism. This proposition naturally requires nothing less than total compliance to the Torah to whose laws a Jew is unquestionably subjected. This is to say that unless one speaks of another conception of Torah,

¹⁶⁵ This implicit critique of enlightenment did have a precursor in the Jewish rationalism of the 12th and 13th centuries, which emerged at the same time as the Kabbalah.

¹⁶⁶ Translated from the Hebrew by Paul Mendes-Flohr in *Divided Passions*, 344-345.

there is no autonomy from its laws. However, there is a great difficulty in fulfilling the laws of the Torah. The Written Torah which Moses received is alone not enough to render its laws comprehensible. Scholem continues:

Were we to desire to restrict the Torah to the Torah, transmitted in writing, we would not be able to read even the Pentateuch, only the ten commandments. I[t] follows that even the Torah is already Oral Torah.¹⁶⁷

Thus, the divine authority of the Torah is always mediated by the understanding which oral tradition gives to it, expressed in the Talmud as a "fence around the Torah" which defines it, giving it shape and comprehensibility. From this, he concludes that "the Torah develops and changes, and according to its very nature it cannot be rendered a unified system. The Torah is rather a continuum of questions and answers."¹⁶⁸ Despite the sweeping nature of this statement, there is nothing arbitrary in his notion of the Torah as a "continuum;" rather that little in the Written Torah is "fixed without the exegesis of the Oral Torah." Scholem concludes his comments with the following three points: "There is no Torah without revelation (maton Torah), and there is no Torah without heteronomy (hetronomiah), and there is no Torah without an authoritative Tradition."¹⁶⁹ This conclusion can be expressed further as: (a) the Torah is revelation in the giving of the Torah to Moses, (b) but revelation in the Torah is accessible through interpretation, (c) and this interpretation has to be authoritative if it is to be capable of explaining the Torah, which is divine. It is this last proposition which has opened the door to what Scholem has termed "religious Anarchism."

Unlike other periods in Jewish history, this final proposition on the interpretive authority of divine Scripture has been subjected to intense skepticism and doubt. With the consequential rise in the academic study of Judaism, skepticism concerning divine interpretive authority has been extended to the Torah itself. Scholem was to articulate this pervasive doubtful atmosphere in an article entitled "Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time" in uncompromising terms:

whoever is unprepared or unable to accept this principle [of the divine origin of the Torah], who lacks the absolute faith of the early believers, having found other beliefs or having been diverted into historical criticism (for many and varied are the forms of doubt in the infallibility of the Torah), is also an anarchist.

¹⁶⁷ Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions*, 345.

¹⁶⁸ Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions*, 345.

¹⁶⁹ Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions*, 345.

Thus, as far as religion is concerned, we are all [...], to some extent, anarchists today, and this should be plainly stated. Some know it and admit it fully; others [...] twist deviously to avoid facing the essential fact that in our time a continuity of Jewish religious awareness is beyond this principle of the "Law from on High." Such a conclusion inevitably leads to anarchic forms of religion.¹⁷⁰

Suddenly anarchism is to be used to describe a condition and no longer a set of ideological principles, a critical retreat from history or the internal combustion of 'law-destroying' tendencies. It is now a historical moment, brought on, in part, by these three prior anarchic stages. Since we are no longer capable today of identifying where "religious authority" lies, an anarchic moment must be brought into discussion. In an interview which he gave shortly after the publication of this essay, he formulated the problem along similar lines: "Someone who has lost his faith in the divine origin of the Bible must today resolve the question to the best of his understanding [... Nonetheless] all of us are anarchists because we do not have an agreed upon authority."¹⁷¹ In comparison to the orthodox, whose "conviction of the divine character of the Torah" is "beyond historical questioning," contemporary trends in Judaism are burdened by the anarchic condition.¹⁷² Until our present age, the notion of revelation was still bound to the "fundamentalist thesis" of a divine Torah "as the absolute word yield[ing] an absolute system of reference." [jjc:270] Scholem terms this system absolute but by this he is referring to the faith or the means to speak of revelation as aggregate rather than the worldly knowledge of each particular moment. Indeed, it was this absolute system of reference which enabled an uncensored degree of freedom. Since "revelation was an absolute, its application was impossible without mediation." [jjc:270] Emerging from the divine word, a subjective element was seen as being both essential and at the same time, nearly inexhaustible:

the infinite meaning of Revelation, which cannot be grasped in the one-time immediacy of its reception, will unfold only in continued relation to time, in the tradition which is a tradition about the word of God and which lies at the root of every religious deed. Tradition renders the word of God applicable in time. [jjc:270-1]

The objective basis of individual interpretation gave Oral Torah its "metaphysical legitimation." [jjc:270] In relation to mysticism and the "fundamental thesis," a

¹⁷⁰ Scholem, "Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in our Time," *Ariel*, No. 26, Jerusalem: Spring 1970, 50.

¹⁷¹ "Zionism—Dialectic of Continuity and Rebellion: Interview with Gershom G. Scholem, April/July 1970" in *Unease in Zion*, ed. by Ehud Ben Ezer, New York: Quadrangle/NY Times Books, 1974, 279.

¹⁷² "Reflections on Jewish Theology" (1974) in: [jjc:263]

very similar independence is created in the conviction that a hidden meaning of the divine word has yet to be understood: "This commitment gave firm support to religious individualism without going out of the established framework of the Torah."¹⁷³ Today, this fundamental thesis, the groundwork of an absolute system which, nevertheless, created the opportunity for individual mystical traditions to emerge, have been completely undermined by "historical criticism and by the philosophies which supported it,"¹⁷⁴ in other words, enlightenment and rationalist thought. In the context of whether mysticism in our age is possible from the perspective of the individual, Scholem was to conclude that:

Anyone who tries to bring to the community the fruits of his inspiration and mystical awareness, but does not consider himself to be in conscience bound to the one great fundamental principle of the "Law from on High," without any reservations, word for word as written — such a person may be considered to be an anarchist.¹⁷⁵

Thus in his assessment, since most Jews no longer hold this fundamental thesis to be true, Jews and Judaism are "confronted with the fact of religious anarchism."¹⁷⁶ This confrontation has both an affirmative and negative dimension: Some defy it, but are "anarchists" nonetheless — involuntary anarchists, so to speak; others take this anarchism on as a part of their condition, as Scholem did personally. Voluntary anarchists recognize the void created by the lack of a system of fundamentals; hence Scholem's claim of not being able to judge whether a given Jewish tradition is "right or wrong."¹⁷⁷ This inability may be seen in an affirmative light, for it is also, in effect, a definite standpoint in relation to the state of knowledge, divorced from its foundations. Thus the voluntary anarchist advocates an orientation to what is here seen as an inherent condition. Scholem grounds this foundation-less thesis in the following way:

The entire legitimacy of my outlook resides in the fact that I have related to the Judaism of the past, and relate to the Judaism of the future, as a living undefined phenomenon, whose development possesses a Utopian dimension.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ "Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in our Time," 49.

¹⁷⁴ "Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in our Time," 49.

¹⁷⁵ "Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in our Time," 50.

¹⁷⁶ "Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in our Time," 50.

¹⁷⁷ See "Zionism—Dialectic of Continuity and Rebellion," 278, 282. This represents what David Biale refers to as Scholem's concept of anarchism which only reflects a part of his Scholem's use of the term. See his book, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, and the discussion on pages 7,9,65,90,102-3,112,115, and 186.

¹⁷⁸ "Zionism—Dialectic of Continuity and Rebellion," 291.

Scholem's voluntary renunciation of a foundation for Judaism as such facilitated an ability to examine all forms of Judaism, especially those which were consciously neglected by the scholars which came before him. Scholem's religious anarchism enabled an undogmatic view towards Judaism. Seeing it as a living force bearing contradictory messages, none of which too alien to explore, his stance towards this generational loss of divine faith was engaged. He also was always quite aware of the fact that even his own final category of religious anarchism could not be considered permanent due to the transitional nature of Judaism. Despite his conclusions on its anarchic state, he always upheld the belief that "Judaism contains utopian aspects that have not yet been revealed,"¹⁷⁹ thus positing a utopianism up and beyond what even he himself could envision. This was expressed as early as 1939 (however much laconically) in a meeting with other like-minded founders of the Hebrew University:

[...] we are all anarchists. But our anarchism is transitional, for we are the living example that this does not remove us from Judaism. We are not a generation without *mitzvot*, but our *mitzvot* are without authority [...] We are no less legitimate than our forefathers; they merely had a clearer text. Perhaps we are anarchists, but we oppose anarchy.¹⁸⁰

To be an anarchist was based on principle — but the state from which it arose was not necessarily agreeable. After the tribulations that the concept was to undergo, Scholem returns to an anarchism which was to express his own religious politics and, despite aspects of this politics which he viewed as destructive, his final category of anarchism was one which he could subscribe to: "the only social theory that makes sense — religious sense," as he once stated in an interview.¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, within the complex analysis of anarchism and the drastic changes it was to undergo, Scholem always left the door open to the possibility of a condition which was, in effect, beyond anarchism as such and was ready to embrace a utopian dimension as soon as it revealed itself.

¹⁷⁹ "Zionism—Dialectic of Continuity and Rebellion," 276.

¹⁸⁰ Mendes-Flor, *Divided Passions*, 346.

¹⁸¹ See [jjc:33]