

THE TIME THAT
REMAINS

A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans

Translated by Patricia Dailey

Giorgio Agamben

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§ Threshold or *Tornado*

You may recall the image of the hunchback dwarf in Benjamin's first thesis on the philosophy of history—a dwarf is hiding beneath a chessboard and, through his movements, assures victory to the mechanical puppet dressed in the garb of a Turk. Benjamin borrows this image from Poe; however, in transposing this image onto the terrain of the philosophy of history, he adds that the dwarf is in fact theology, who "today, as we know is wizened and has to keep out of sight," and if historical materialism knew how to put theology to use, it would win this historical battle, thus defeating its fearful adversary.

Benjamin invites us to conceive the very text of the philosophy of history as a chessboard upon which a crucial theoretical battle unfolds, and which, we are to assume, is even lent a hand by a hidden theologian concealed between the lines of the text. Who is this hunchback theologian, so well hidden by the author in his theses that not a single person yet has identified him? Is it possible to find clues and traces in the text that would allow us to name what should never be seen?

In one of the comments on section N of his index cards (which contains notes on a theory of consciousness), Benjamin writes, "this work should fully develop the art of citing without citation marks" (Benjamin 1974–89, 5: 572). As you know, citation serves a strategic function

in Benjamin's work. Just as through citation a secret meeting takes place between past generations and ours, so too between the writing of the past and the present a similar kind of meeting transpires; citations function as go-betweens in this encounter. It is therefore not surprising that they must be discrete and know how to perform their work incognito. This work consists not so much in conserving, but in destroying something. In his essay on Kraus we read, "[Citation] summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely thereby calls it back to its origin"; at the same time it "saves and punishes" (Benjamin 1999b, 454). In the essay "What is Epic Theatre?" Benjamin writes, "to quote involves the interruption of its context" (Benjamin 1968, 151). Brechtian epic theater, to which Benjamin refers in this text, proposes to ensure that gesture be citable. "An actor," he writes, "must be able to space his gestures the way a typesetter produces spaced type" (Benjamin 1968, 151).

The German word translated as "spacing" is *sperrn*. It refers to the method in typography, not exclusive to German, of substituting italics with a script that places a space between each letter of that word that is highlighted. Benjamin himself uses this method each time he uses a typewriter. From a palaeographic standpoint, this convention is the opposite of how scribes used abbreviations for reoccurring words in manuscripts that did not need to be read in their entirety (or, as is the case with Ludwig Traube's *nomina sacra*, for words that should not be read). These spaced words are, in a certain way, hyperread: they are read twice, and, as Benjamin suggests, this double reading may be the palimpsest of citation.

If we now turn to the *Handexemplar* of the *Theses*, you will see that Benjamin uses this typographical convention in second thesis. In the fourth line from the end, we read, *Dann ist uns wie jedem Geschlecht, das vor uns war, eine s c h w a c h e messianische Kraft mitgegeben*, "Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a w e a k messianic power." Why is *weak* spaced this way? Which time of citability is at stake here? And why is messianic power, to which Benjamin confides the redemption of the past, *weak*?

According to my knowledge, only one text explicitly theorizes

II

"Zu den bemerkenswertesten Eigentümlichkeiten des menschlichen Gemüts", sagt Lotze, "gehört neben so vieler Selbstsucht im einzelnen die allgemeine Neidlosigkeit der Gegenwart gegen ihre Zukunft." Diese Reflexion führt darauf, dass das Bild von Glück, das wir hegen, durch und durch von der Zeit tingiert ist, in welche der Verlauf unseres eigenen Lebens uns nun einmal verwiesen hat. Glück, das Neid in uns erwecken könnte, gibt es nur in der Luft, die wir geatmet haben, mit Menschen, zu denen wir hätten reden; mit Frauen, die sich uns hätten hüten können. Es schwingt, mit andern Worten, in der Vorstellung des Glücks unversehrlich die der Erlösung mit. Mit der Vorstellung von Vergangenheit, welche die Geschichte zu ihrer Sache macht, verhält es sich ebenso. Die Vergangenheit führt einen zeitlichen Index mit, durch den sie auf die Erlösung verwiesen wird. ~~Es besteht eine geheime Verabredung zwischen den vergangenen Geschlechtern und unsrem. Dem sind Auf der Erde erwartet worden. Damit ist jedem Geschlecht, das vor uns war, eine s c h w a c h e messianische Kraft mitgegeben, an welche die Vergangenheit Anspruch hat. Billig ist dieser Anspruch nicht abzufertigen. Der historische Materialist weiss darum.~~

Walter Benjamin, *Handexemplar of the Theses on the Philosophy of History*, second thesis.

on the weakness of messianic power. As you may have guessed, the text is 2 Corinthians 12:9–10, which we have commented on at length, wherein Paul, having asked the Messiah to free him from that thorn in his flesh, hears the answer, *hē gar dynamis en astheneia teleitai*, "power fulfills itself in weakness." "Therefore," the apostle adds, "I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for the sake of the Messiah: for when I am weak, then I am strong [*dynatos*]." The fact that this is an actual citation without citation marks is confirmed by Luther's translation, which Benjamin most likely had before his eyes. What Jerome translates as *virtus in infirmitate perficitur*, Luther translates, like the majority of modern translators, as *denn mein Kraft ist in den schwachen Mechtig*. Both of the terms (*Kraft* and *schwache*, power and weakness) are present, and it is precisely this hyperlegibility, this secret presence of the Pauline text in the *Theses*, that is signaled discretely by this spacing.

You can imagine that I was moved (to quite a degree) when discovering this hidden (although not so hidden) Pauline citation in the text within the *Theses*. To my knowledge, Taubes was the only scholar to note the possible influence of Paul on Benjamin, but his hypothesis referred to a text from the 1920s, the *Theological-*

Political Fragment, which he connected to Romans 8:19–23. Taubes's intuition is certainly on the mark; nevertheless, in that particular instance it is not only impossible to speak of citations (except perhaps in the case of Benjamin's term *Vergängnis*, "caducity," which could correspond to the Lutheran translation of verse 21, *vergengliches Wesen*), but there are also substantial differences between the two texts. While, for Paul, creation is unwillingly subjected to caducity and destruction and for this reason groans and suffers while awaiting redemption, for Benjamin, who reverses this in an ingenious way, nature is messianic precisely because of its eternal and complete caducity, and the rhythm of this messianic caducity is happiness itself.

Once the Pauline citation in the second thesis is uncovered—(I should remind you that the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* are one of Benjamin's last works and are a kind of testamentary compendium of his messianic conception of history)—the way is open to identify the hunchback theologian who secretly guides the hands of the puppet of historical materialism. One of the most enigmatic concepts in Benjamin's later thought is that of *Bild*, image. It appears several times in the text of the *Theses*, most markedly in the fifth thesis, where we read: "The true image [*das wahre Bild*] of the past *flees* by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (Benjamin 1968, 255). Several fragments in which Benjamin seeks to define this true *terminus technicus* of his conception of history are left, yet none is as clear as MS 474: "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal (continuous), the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical, in leaps and bounds" (Benjamin 1999a, 463).¹

1. In German, Benjamin 1974–89, 1: 1242 ff.

Bild thus encompasses, for Benjamin, all things (meaning all objects, works of art, texts, records, or documents) wherein an instant of the past and an instant of the present are united in a constellation where the present is able to recognize the meaning of the past and the past therein finds its meaning and fulfillment. We already found a similar constellation in Paul between past and future in terms of what we called a "typological relation." Even in this instance, a moment from the past (Adam, the passage through the Red Sea, the manna, etc.) must be recognized as the *typos* of the messianic now, and furthermore, as we have seen, messianic *kairos* is the relation itself. But why then does Benjamin speak of *Bild*, or image, and not of type or figure (the term used by the Vulgate)? Well, in this case, we have one more textual confirmation that permits our referring to an actual citation without citation marks. Luther translates Romans 5:14 (*typos tou mellontos*, "the type of the coming man") as *welcher ist ein Bilde des der zukunfftig war*, "he who is an image of the one who was to come" (1 Cor. 10:6 is rendered as *Furbilde*, and in Heb. 9:24 *antitypos* is rendered as *Gegenbilde*). Benjamin also spaces out words in this text, but he only does so three words after *Bild* for a word that seems to have no need to be highlighted. The passage states: *das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit h u s c h t vorbei* ("the true image of the past f l e e s by"), which may also be an allusion to 1 Corinthians 7:31 (*paragei gar to schēma tou kosmou toutou*, "for passing away is the figure of this world"), from which Benjamin may have taken the idea that the image of the past runs the risk of disappearing completely if the present fails to recognize itself in it.

You will undoubtedly recall that in the Pauline letters, the concepts of *typos* and *anakephalaiōsis*, recapitulation, are tightly intertwined, together defining messianic time. The first is also present in Benjamin's text in a particularly significant place, right at the end of the last thesis (which, after the discovery of the *Handexemplar*, is not the eighteenth, but the nineteenth thesis). Let us turn to the passage concerned: "Die Jetztzeit, die als Modell der Messianischen in einer ungeheuren Abbreviatur die Geschichte der ganzen Menschheit zusammenfasst, fällt haarscharf mit d e r Figur zusammen, die Geschichte der Menschheit im Universum macht (Benja-

min 1974-89, 703) [Actuality, which, as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement, coincides exactly with *t h a t* figure which the history of mankind has in the universe (my translation)]."

Concerning the term *Jetztzeit*: in one of the manuscripts of the theses—the only manuscript in the technical sense of the term, owned by Hannah Arendt—as soon as the word *Jetztzeit* is written for the first time in the fourteenth thesis, it appears in quotation marks. (Benjamin was writing by hand, so it was impossible for him to space the letters out, *sperren*.) This gave his first Italian translator, Renato Solmi, reason to translate the word as "now-time" [*tempo-ora*], which, although it is an arbitrary choice (since the German word simply means actuality), nevertheless embodies something of Benjamin's intention. After all we have said in this seminar about *ho nyn kairos* as a technical designation of messianic time in Paul, we must not overlook the literal correlation between the two terms ("the of-now-time"). All the more so, since recently in German the term harbors purely negative and anti-messianic connotations. Thus, from Schopenhauer ("This one here—our time—calls itself by a name that it bestowed upon itself, a name that is as characteristic as it is euphemistic: *Jetzt-Zeit*. Yes, precisely *Jetztzeit*, meaning, only the now is thought and the time that comes and judges is not even glanced at"; Schopenhauer, 213-14), to Heidegger ("What we call now-time [*Jetzt-Zeit*] is everyday time as it appears in the clock that counts the 'nows'. . . . When [these *Jetzt-Zeit*] are covered up, the ecstatic and horizontal constitution of temporality is *levelled off*"; Heidegger 1962, 474). Benjamin dispels this negative connotation and endows the term with the same qualities as those pertaining to the *ho nyn kairos* in Paul's paradigm of messianic time.

Let us go back to the problem of recapitulation. The last sentence of the thesis—messianic time as an enormous abridgement of the entire history—seems to clearly reiterate Ephesians 1:10 ("all things are recapitulated in the Messiah"). But even in this instance, if we look at Luther's translation, we immediately can tell that this reiteration is actually a citation without quotation marks: *alle ding zusammen verfasst würde in Christo*. Each time, the verb (*zusam-*

menfassen) corresponds to Pauline *anakephalaiōsasthai*.

This should be enough to prove a textual correspondence, and not mere conceptual correspondence, between the theses and the letters. In this light, the entire vocabulary of the theses appears to be truly stamped Pauline. It will not come as a surprise then that the term *redemption* (*Erlösung*)—an absolutely critical concept in Benjamin's notion of historical knowledge—is the term that Luther uses to convey Pauline *apolytrōsis*, just as crucial to the Letters. Whether this Pauline notion is Hellenistic in its origin (from the divine deliverance of the slaves, according to Deissmann), or strictly juridical, or the two together (which is most likely), in any case this orientation toward the past characteristic of Benjamin's messianism finds its canonic moment in Paul.

But there is another clue, an external clue, which allows us to infer that Scholem himself knew of this closeness between Benjamin's thought and Paul's. Scholem's attitude toward Paul, an author he knew well and once characterized as "the most outstanding example known to us of a revolutionary Jewish mystic" (Scholem 1965, 14), is certainly not lacking in ambiguity. Yet the discovery of a Pauline inspiration in aspects of his friend's messianic thought must have bothered him, although he certainly never would have raised the issue himself. Nevertheless, in one of his books—just as cautiously as when, in a book on Sabbatai Sevi, he establishes a relation between Paul and Nathan of Gaza—he seems to actually suggest, albeit in a cryptic fashion, that Benjamin may have identified with Paul. This occurs in his interpretation of *Agesilaus Santander*, the enigmatic fragment written by Benjamin in Ibiza in August 1933. Scholem's interpretation is based on the hypothesis that the name Agesilaus Santander, in which Benjamin seems to refer to himself, is actually an anagram for *der Angelus Satanas* (the angel Satan). If, as I believe to be the case, you keep in mind this *aggelos satana* who appears as a "thorn in the flesh" in 2 Corinthians 12:7, it is not so surprising that Scholem points to this very passage in Paul as Benjamin's possible source. The allusion is a fleeting one and never occurs again, yet if you take into account the fact that both Benjamin's text and the

Pauline passage are markedly autobiographic, this would imply that by mentioning his friend's evocation of his secret relation to the angel, Scholem is implying an identification with Paul on the part of Benjamin.

Whatever the case may be, there is no reason to doubt that these two fundamental messianic texts of our tradition, separated by almost two thousand years, both written in a situation of radical crisis, form a constellation whose time of legibility has finally come today, for reasons that invite further reflection. *Das Jetzt der Lesbarkeit*, "the now of legibility" (or of "knowability," *Erkennbarkeit*) defines a genuinely Benjaminian hermeneutic principle, the absolute opposite of the current principle according to which each work may become the object of infinite interpretation at any given moment (doubly infinite, in the sense that interpretations are never exhaustive and function independently of any historical-temporal situation). Benjamin's principle instead proposes that every work, every text, contains a historical index which indicates both its belonging to a determinate epoch, as well as its only coming forth to full legibility at a determinate historical moment. As Benjamin wrote in a note, in which he confided his most extreme messianic formulation and which will aptly conclude our seminar,

Each now is the now of a particular knowability (*Jedes Jetzt ist das Jetzt einer bestimmten Erkennbarkeit*). In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.) It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but imagistic [*bildlich*]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images. The image that is read—which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. (Benjamin 1999a, 463)