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# A Non-Nullified Nothingness Walter Benjamin and the Messianic

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## **A Non-Nullified Nothingness: Walter Benjamin and the Messianic**

### **Abstract**

This article discusses Walter Benjamin's thought-figure of the messianic. Reading his enigmatic "Theological-Political Fragment" (ca. 1921), I argue that the messianic is an inaccessible relation, an unmediated non-relation "in between" the historical and the messianic. Taking my cue from Giorgio Agamben's reading of messianic time as the remaining time that lies and insists within the "cut of the cut" of the realm of the profane and the messianic, I examine the nature of this messianic "in-between-ness" through Benjamin's early studies on Hermann Cohen, co-founder of the Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism. It is in Cohen where we can find a philosophical structure that allows us to think the messianic as an *a-relation* simultaneously separating and connecting the historical order of the profane and the coming of the messianic kingdom (section I). Reading the messianic as an *a-relation*, I trace back the structure of this separating connection to a messianic nothingness. This non-reflexive "non-nullified nothingness" un-mediate, and, ultimately, short-circuits the historical and the messianic, relating the former *to* the latter by introducing a minimal cut—an irreducible nothing, a messianic crack—into the order of the profane (section II). If the order of the profane has to be

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established on the idea of happiness, and the messianic rhythm of this profane order is happiness as the eternal downfall of everything worldly, the task of a truly *profane* politics is to strive nihilistically for this a-teleological downfall, that is, for the unbinding, the liberation of the messianic nothingness that groundlessly grounds the a-relation of the messianic and the historical (section III).

### Keywords

Giorgio Agamben, Hermann Cohen, messianism, nihilism, Walter Benjamin.

*If action (“doing”) is—as Hegel says—negativity, the question arises as to whether the negativity of one who has “nothing more to do” disappears or remains in a state of “unemployed negativity”<sup>1</sup>.*

### Introduction

“Classless society is not the final goal [*Endziel*] of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately [*endlich*] achieved interruption” (SW, 4: 402; GS, I: 1231)<sup>2</sup>. Walter Benjamin noted this sentence in the context of preparing his final and now celebrated theses “On the Concept of History” (“Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” 1940). This work, along with the collection of material in the uncompleted *Arcades Project* (*Passagenarbeit*), represents Benjamin’s attempt at nothing less than a materialist revision of historical materialism. “Now-time” (*Jetztzeit*), “remembrance” (*Eingedenken*)<sup>3</sup>, “dialectical image” (*Dialektisches Bild*), and the “now of

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, “Letter to X, Lecturer on Hegel” (Bataille 1997: 296).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations of Benjamin’s work in English translation are taken from Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1996–2003 (henceforth abbreviated “SW,” followed by volume and page numbers). References to the original German texts are to Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Hermann Schweppenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann, 7 vols., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–1989 (henceforth abbreviated “GS,” followed by volume and page numbers). This article is a translated, re-edited, and abridged version of two subchapters from my doctoral thesis, “*Teleologie ohne Endzweck*”. *Walter Benjamins Ent-stellung des Messianischen*, submitted on July 6, 2012, to the Department of Political and Social Sciences, Freie Universität Berlin.

<sup>3</sup> *Eingedenken* is a neologism first coined by Ernst Bloch. *Eingedenk* normally exists only as a preposition meaning “mindful of,” found in such expressions as *eingedenk der Tatsache* (“bearing in mind the fact”) The noun *Eingedenken* thus means not only remembrance or memory but also an act of bearing in mind.

recognizability” (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*) are the names given to the theoretical figures in which Benjamin evolved a new *concept of historical time*, directed against bourgeois historicism, scientific positivism, vulgar Marxism, and the socialist belief in progress. According to this concept, historical time is no longer chronological time, the “homogeneous, empty time” (SW, 4: 395; GS, I: 701) form of spatial events, but rather an anachronistic, kairologically intensified, three-dimensional “space-time.” This contracted “space-time” encompasses a monadologically constructed totality of historical time, which Benjamin sought to capture in infinitely abbreviated images—dialectical images. Access to these images, which can no longer be represented in chronological terms, never opens up through intellectual and contemplative intention, but is available only to the politically involved collective subject at the incalculable moment of historical crisis. Thus, the subject of history is not a “transcendent subject,” but “the struggling oppressed class in their most exposed situation. There is historical cognition only for them [this class] and for them only in the historical instant” (GS, I: 1243)<sup>4</sup>. At the intersection of Marx and Proust, Leibniz and Kant, Bergson and Freud, theories of knowledge and revolution are intertwined. The moment of collective awakening from capitalism’s “dream-filled sleep” (Benjamin 1999: 8; GS, V: 494), the moment when the dialectical image appears in the now of recognizability, is both surreal, super-real recognition of the real and the expression of revolutionary political praxis. The messianic nodal point to which this complex epistemo-political construction is attached is a notion of redemption that cannot be directly addressed either theologically or politically. This structure of messianic reference is conceived in a strictly a-teleological manner. Neither the classless society nor the messianic kingdom can be intentionally posited as the telos of human action. Benjamin’s invocation of the theological figure of the messianic is, nevertheless, not a mere metaphor in which a revolutionary and romanticist rhetoric of the absolute is conveyed.

In an early, pre-Marxist note to which Theodor W. Adorno gave the title “Theological-Political Fragment,” Benjamin interprets the messianic as the *relation* of the historical and the messianic: the messianic *is* itself this relation and only exists from a messianic perspective. Notwithstanding this differentiation in terms of perspective, it is possible in the profane Now to speak of an *inaccessible messianic reference* that is not of an exclusively religious character.

Jacques Derrida, drawing critically on Benjamin, has suggested speaking of a “messianité sans messianisme,” a “messianism without religion,”

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Benjamin’s original German: “Dieses Subjekt ist beileibe kein Transzendentalsubjekt sondern die kämpfende unterdrückte Klasse in ihrer exponiertesten Situation. Historische Erkenntnis gibt es allein für sie und für sie einzig im historischen Augenblick.” (Translation mine.)

a “messianic without messianism,” and in this way withdrawing the messianic from a purely theological interpretation (Derrida 1994: 74). In contradistinction to Derrida, however, my concern is not to claim that Benjamin’s figure of the messianic has the strict “quasi-atheistic dryness of the messianic” (Derrida 1994: 211). Rather, I am concerned with a *materialist notion* of the messianic, which may well draw upon theological sources but is not totally congruent with them. In this context, it should be remembered that Benjamin did not pose the question of the messianic as a religious problem, but understood it as a *modern* articulation of a genuinely historical, that is, non-mechanistic, non-mythical concept of history without belief in progress. In its state of profaned displacement, the messianic can neither be written in terms of the theological concepts nor translated into purely secular conceptions. The messianic is neither theological dogma nor a modern, secular figure of the utopian. Accordingly, *messianic time* does not refer to the non-place, the u-topos of the politically existing order, but to a different notion of *historical time*, which attaches itself not to the future but to the urgency of the Now. Derrida rightly differentiated between this feature of messianic thought and utopian thinking:

Messianicity (which I regard as a universal structure of experience, and which cannot be reduced to religious messianism of any stripe) is anything but Utopian: it refers, in every here-now, to the coming of an eminently real, concrete event, that is, to the most irreducibly heterogeneous otherness. Nothing is more “realistic” or “immediate” than this messianic apprehension, straining forward toward the event of him who/that which is coming. (Derrida 1999: 248)

However, the messianic as a universal structure of experience is for Benjamin, unlike Derrida, *not* bound up with a philosophy of alterity and “messianic care.” As an intensive state of tension, a pure relation, the messianic has neither a “firm” grounding nor does it refer to an ontological difference between (the messianic) Being and (profane) being. Philosophically speaking, the messianic for Benjamin does not pose an ontological question of existence and essence, but rather the problem of an inaccessible relational concept within the (post-Kantian) fields of epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and the philosophy of history. A *modern* experience of “transcendental homelessness” coalesces in the messianic in a non-logocentric figure of loss, privation, and displacement (*Entstellung*).

The urgency of the messianic is not the expression of an apocalyptic and transcendent intrusion *into* historical time, but of a surplus of pressure, a “too muchness” (Santner 2001: 8) *within* the historical itself. Consequently, the messianic and the historical, the transcendent and the immanent are not congruent. It is not that the messianic as *tension*, *intensity*, and *weak force* only breaks into the profane order of the historical from outside. It is itself the index of a transcendent dimension situated in the

innermost kernel of the profane. Thus, the messianic stands in a paradoxical relationship of *internal exteriority* to the profane order and its historicity. From the viewpoint of the profane, the messianic cannot be located between the immanent and the transcendent by means of the conjunctions *either/or* or *both/and*. In the messianic, we encounter the threshold of the radically immanent, a dimension in the immanent representing a “more” *in* the immanent that is not induced from outside. In this sense, the messianic is a name for the surplus, inaccessible or “extimate”<sup>5</sup> kernel in the interior of profane life, in which the latter always proves to be a “more” than “bare life.” This more has no quantitative gradations and no measure or absolute value, since it is conceived as a pure relation. The only media in which the messianic is operative are history and language—“linguistic historicity [*Sprachgeschichtlichkeit*]” (Hamacher 2001: 179).

## I. A-Relation

In the “Theological-Political Fragment,” mentioned above, two crucial thoughts are already present that are decisive in Benjamin’s later, materialist work as well: the destruction of idealistic and theological objectives in politics and the redemption of an a-teleological, messianic striving within the historical.

Only the messiah himself completes all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates his relation to the messianic. For this reason, nothing that is historical can relate itself, from its own ground, to anything messianic. Therefore, the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be established as a goal. From the standpoint of history, it is not the goal but the terminus [*Ende*]. Therefore, the [order of the profane] cannot be built on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and theocracy has no political, but only a religious meaning. [...] The [order of the profane] should be erected on the idea of happiness. The relation of this order to the messianic is one of the essential teachings of the philosophy of history. It is the precondition of a mystical conception of history, encompassing a problem that can be represented figuratively. If one arrow points to the goal toward which the [profane] dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the messianic direction. But just as a force, by virtue of the path it is moving along, can augment another force on the opposite path, so the [order of the profane] promotes the coming of the messianic Kingdom. (SW, 3: 305; GS, II: 203f.)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The expression “extimate nucleus” derives from Lacan and denotes the psychoanalytical phenomenon of the unavailability of the subject’s real kernel.

<sup>6</sup> The translation has been modified for the purposes of this essay.

Even the first sentence of the “Fragment” indicates the impossibility of secular *and* theological gestures in establishing the messianic. If the messiah completes all that historical happening in the first place, in the sense that he *redeems, completes, and creates* the relation of historical events to the messianic itself, then he cannot be the object of theological or political postulates. It is only the messiah himself who creates the relation between the messianic and the historical. And yet it is not the case that this relation will only come into being once the messiah has come, since the infinite approach of the messianic kingdom does not stand in any temporal relation to historical events. It is rather the case that the relation between the historical and the messianic exists only in the absence of the messiah, who as the sole groundless ground of this relation can complete and terminate it. The redeeming messiah’s *absence* from historical events thus coincides with a *presence*, however weak, of a paradoxical relation or reference between the historical and the messianic.

Benjamin’s rejection of theocracy’s political meaning, and of all attempts to build the kingdom of God in the sphere of the political itself, means that politics is left only with the task of keeping free the *empty place of the messianic* within the profane<sup>7</sup>. A messianic politics, a politics of the messianic is out of the question, for the messianic never enters into a direct relation to the historical, due to the messiah’s actual<sup>8</sup> non-presence. Moreover, the messianic-historical relation is not preceded by any relation that would have to be connected. To put it another way, the messianic is itself the relation or the non-relation that links the historical and the messianic even as it separates them. *The messianic is an a-relation*. My choice of the expression “a-relation” is based on the awkward circumstance that the relation between the messianic and the historical cannot be grasped either as a *negation* (non-relation) or as an affirmation (rela-

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<sup>7</sup> This empty place can neither be represented nor appropriated. It constitutes the opposite of what Claude Lefort wrote about the empty place of power within democratic societies: “[S]ociety can achieve a quasi-representation of itself. [...] [P]ower makes a gesture toward something outside, and [...] it defines itself in terms of that outside. Whatever its form, it always refers to the same enigma: that of an internal-external articulation, of a division that institutes a common space, of a break that establishes relations, of a movement of the externalization of the social that goes hand in hand with its internalization. I have for a long time concentrated upon this peculiarity of modern democracy: of all the regimes of which we know, it is the only one to have represented power in such a way as to show that power is an *empty place* and to have thereby maintained a gap between the symbolic and the real” (Lefort 2006: 159).

<sup>8</sup> “Actual” relates to the opposition between *actus* and *potentia*. In the context of the messianic, it is not an equivalent of “real” but denotes something that has a degree of reality, a lower level of actuality than full actuality. “Actual” is used here mainly to indicate degrees of actuality “between” full actuality and sheer potentiality.

tion). The privative “a” of the a-relation expresses this inaccessible messianic structure of *referring*. This referring presents itself, depending on the perspective, as a deficiency (from the historical viewpoint) or as a privation (from the messianic viewpoint). There is a rupture, a discontinuity between these two non-identical perspectives<sup>9</sup>.

This a-relation is established by its subject, the messiah, in *threefold* fashion: redeeming, completing, and creating. Even if the messiah is *not* a part of the historical, then his absence leaves behind the messianic signature of an empty imprint, of a structure of redemption to which the historical is referred. The messiah, whose advent is eternally coming but is in actual terms not yet present is therefore not to be confused with the definite negation of his presence in historical events, as a negative theology of the messianic would assert. The “Fragment” equally disputes the possibility of a positive theology of the messianic, on whose basis some religious meaning might be distilled. Instead of waiting for the messiah, as in Orthodox Judaism, or of actively anticipating him as in mystical Sabbatianism<sup>10</sup>, all that remains is the breakup of the historical’s relation to the messianic from within itself. Any further definition of the messianic is impossible in the order of the profane. In this way, with a theological premise (“it is only when the messiah ...”), Benjamin introduces a *profaned* figure of the messianic, which despite its having borrowed some

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<sup>9</sup> The privative “a,” as against the negating “non-” or “not,” is borrowed from a distinction drawn by the Neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen: “ $\alpha$  privativum, the prefixes ‘In’ and ‘Un.’ The German form ‘Unendlich’ is itself an expression and a result of the judgment that it denotes. The Latin ‘infinitem’ is another example. Like the privative  $\alpha$  in Greek, the prefix ‘In’ in Latin and the prefix ‘Un’ in German tend in the same direction. In German, however, ‘Un’ and ‘Nicht’ exchange roles, so that sometimes it is only by ‘Un’ that this direction is represented” (Cohen 1977: 87). If this reading is followed and, with it, the finding that in German *Un* (infinite judgment) and “not” (definite judgment) sometimes exchange roles, then the definite negation of a relation—a non-relation—could be read privatively as an infinite judgment—in the sense of an in-relation or *Un-Beziehung*. In order to avoid this ambiguity, I am employing the designation a-relation, with the privative “a,” to express an infinite judgment. In making this internal differentiation, I am not concerned with some mere hair-splitting in Cohen’s logic of judgment but with a crucial distinction relating to Benjamin as well. For what separates the non-relation of the messianic and the historical from their complete relation cannot be ascertained by means of definite negation or contradiction. Rather, there is an infinite, immeasurable interval between relation and non-relation. This interval shall be expressed with the privative “a.”

<sup>10</sup> Sabbatianism refers to Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676), the “false messiah,” and is a messianic strand of Jewish mysticism that, in sharp contrast to Rabbinic Judaism, saw the messianic completion of the Torah not in obedience to religious laws but in the opposite direction—as an act of antinomy—in sin, in the breaking of religious laws.

motifs is structurally transversal to the orthodox, mystic, and apocalyptic messianisms in the Jewish and Christian tradition.

Having rejected theocracy's political meaning, the relation of the messianic and the political can no longer be described along the lines of simple oppositions such as sacred-profane, religious-political or theological-atheistic. Every combination of theology and politics, of whatever type—and even if it is only the hyphen of the “Theological-Political Fragment”—ignores this radical separation. It follows from this, as Werner Hamacher puts it, that “it is only that organization of historical life that realizes that all theological aspirations are denied it that is genuinely political” (2006: 179). With respect to this programmatic abandonment of political theology, the question arises: what is the significance of the messianic for politics and, thus, for the profane order?

If “nihilism” is supposed to be the method of world politics, as stated in the enigmatic final paragraph of the “Fragment” (cf. GS, I: 204 and SW, 3: 306: “the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism”), then this significance lies literally in nothing, *nihil*. The messianic kingdom cannot be declared the profane order's regulative idea; a messianic teleology can be founded in *nothing*; and as to whether the messiah will come or not, *nothing* can be said. The extent of this messianic and nihilistic abandonment of religious and political theologies of the messianic can only be hinted at here. Benjamin's later historical materialist concept of history, which is made most clearly explicit in the late *Arcades Project* and in the theses “On the Concept of History,” operates equally with an a-teleology of the messianic, which de-teleologizes the modern concept of history and thus returns it—profaned—to political use. Far from opposing messianic-theological and modern-secular concepts of history to each other, Benjamin in this way rescues the modern concept of history's profane content from the modern. The archaeological excavation site of this destructive rescue and salvational destruction is, from the end of the 1920s, nineteenth-century Paris and its historical myths. Benjamin's abandonment of any political teleology of history—however secularized it may be as a “regulative idea” (Neo-Kantianism, social democracy) or a utopian perspective on the future—logically follows the tendency, already taken in the “Theological-Political Fragment,” towards separating the spheres of applicability (“order”) of politics and theology. As will be shown, the messianic is, nonetheless, not a type of negative theology.

When it comes to expounding Benjamin's figure of the messianic beyond positive and negative theology, a starting point is offered by his demand for a nihilism as the method of world politics. This *nihil* is the nothingness of the messiah within the historical, from which the messianic-historical a-relation derives in the first place. The *non-nullified nothingness* of the messiah is the messianic, the separating connection between the messianic and the historical. The messianic is not a reflexive concept;

it is not a definite negation of historical being. Nor is it possible to claim the “existence” of the messianic positively. Nevertheless, there does exist an inaccessible relation between the messianic and the historical. This relation arises in the blank space produced by the messiah’s absence from historical events. It is only with the messiah’s advent that this relation will be terminated, completed, and redeemed. *In this way, the messianic constitutes a purely relational figure—indeterminate in its content and without substance—that stands in an asymmetrical relationship to its relata, the historical and the advent of the messiah.* Whereas this relation remains inaccessible to the historical, the messiah (in his absence) precedes this relation; in fact, he creates it in the first place. But we know nothing about the messiah, and still less about his advent. However, a negation of all his attributes in the manner of a negative theology of the messianic is precisely what Benjamin does not have in mind, since despite all the separations between the messianic and historical, he asserts a *positive* relation, however weak it may be, between the messianic and the historical. A logical representation of this asymmetric relation is not possible, since the heterogeneous nature of the orders to which the two relata belong pushes the concept of relation itself to its limit.

In *The Time That Remains* (2005), his commentary on Saint Paul, Giorgio Agamben suggests a more complicated relation between the messianic and the historical by whose means a third way is conceivable between the apocalyptic absence of relation (non-relation) and teleological approximation (relation). If our aim was to grasp spatially the a-relation set out above, one option is the image cited by Agamben of a partition of the division, the “cut of Apelles” (Agamben 2006: 62–68)<sup>11</sup>. This cut di-

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<sup>11</sup> In speaking of the “cut of Apelles,” Agamben refers to a formulation from Benjamin’s *Arcades*: “The fore- and after-history of a historical phenomenon show up in the phenomenal itself on the strength of its dialectical presentation. What is more: every dialectically presented historical circumstance polarizes itself and becomes a force field in which the confrontation between its fore-history and after-history is played out. It becomes such a field insofar as the present instant interpenetrates it. [...] And thus the historical evidence polarizes into fore- and after-history always anew, never in the same way. And it does so at a distance from its own existence, in the present instant itself—like a line which, divided according to the Apollonian section, experiences its partition from outside itself” (Benjamin, 1999: 470; *Convolute N7a*, 1). Agamben suspects that Benjamin “misread” the Apollonian section, a partition of a line from outside itself, “for there is never any ‘cut of Apollo’ in Greek mythology or elsewhere” (Agamben 2005: 50). Agamben assumes instead that Benjamin is alluding to the “cut of Apelles.” Apelles, who lived in the fourth century BC at the time of Alexander the Great, was one of the most celebrated painters of antiquity. His painting was distinguished, above all, by his shading technique: he painted from dark to light, not from light to dark. The following characterization has come down to us from Pliny: “[Apelles]

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vides the otherwise symmetrical distinction between the profane and messianic aeons. The profane age now no longer ends on the last day (*eschaton*), since in this end itself there is inserted another—messianic—“interim period”: “the messianic is not the end of time, but *the time of the end*” (Agamben 2005: 62). The latter is not the last day, but an internally divided, non-identical, compressed, intensified time. “[Messianic time] is not the last day, is not the instant in which time ends, but the time that contracts itself and begins to end [...], or if you prefer, the time that remains between time and its end” (Agamben 2005: 62). In the messianic interim, contrary to the dualism of the fallen versus the redeemed world, *chronos* and *kairós* come together in a constellation, without establishing a third age, a messianic interim aeon between the profane and messianic aeons. This messianic time is not merely situated “between” two ages, but opens up a zone of indifference in which the intensive tension prevailing between the profane and the messianic is cleaved within itself in an intensified, compressed time. Such an understanding of messianic time as the time which time needs to come to an end can be represented in simplified form in a diagram (see Agamben 2005: 64f.).

PROFANE AEON (NON-MESSIANIC TIME)		MESSIANIC AEON (NON-CHRONOLOGICAL TIME)	
profane chronological time (linearity)	<b>éscha</b> ( <b>last</b> messianic time (time of the end)	<b>ton</b> <b>day</b> messianic time (time of the end)	messianic non-chronological time (eternity)
NON-NON-CHRONOLOGICAL TIME		NON-NON-MESSIANIC TIME	

The arrangement of the boxes is not to be understood in a linear chronological way—from left to right—but as a topological distribution of non-causal relations running through three stages from top to bottom. The initially binary division between profane and messianic aeons (first line) is transformed by a partition of the division (second line) into the indifference of chronological and messianic time (third line), which cannot be represented in the register of the first line: non-non-messianic time and non-non-chronological time merge in compressed, intensified kairological time—messianic time. The time of this merging is not predictable but is in the truest sense of the word *con-tingent*—an event (*con-tingit*). Messianic time is the contingent transformation of *chronos* into

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painted what cannot be painted, thunder, flashes and lightning” (quoted in Gombrich 1976: 17). The anecdote to which Agamben refers, also handed down by Pliny, concerns Apelles’ ability to draw lines of extreme thinness, thus allowing him to re-divide a dividing line already drawn on a painting between two colors (see Gombrich 1976: 14f., and Illustration III, “Reconstruction of the ‘line of Apelles,’” 18f.).

*kairós*, that time which time needs to come to an end. Agamben has pointed out in earlier writings that this time as the basis of a genuine historical concept of time can no longer be visualized in the register of point, line, and section (cf. Agamben 1993). Benjamin's later figure of now-time from the historical theses can be read as such a concept of *historical* time and a model, an anticipation of *messianic* time.

## II. A Non-Nullified Nothingness

Agamben's interpretation of messianic time as time in the time during which a binary division is divided once again can be understood as a spatial representation of the a-relation of messianic and historical suggested here. The messianic operation of partitioning the separation does, nevertheless, require the notion of a non-reflexive, non-dialectical interpretation of the messianic and the historical. Such a notion is constituted by the operative concept of nothingness. To put it another way, between the messianic and the historical there "is" literally "nothing"—a messianic nothingness. But what kind of nothingness is it?

Drawing on Kant, four meanings of nothingness can be distinguished, arising from the division into cognition and object as well as intuition (*Anschauung*) and concept: "Nothing as 1. Empty concept without object, *ens rationis*. 2. Empty object of a concept, *nihil privativum*. 3. Empty intuition without an object, *ens imaginarium*. 4. Empty object without concept, *nihil negativum*" (Kant 1998: A 292). Of the three definitions of nothing based on deficits (concept *without* an object, intuition *without* an object, object *without* a concept), the positive definition of the deficit, the concept of a lack (Kant mentions shade and cold as examples), occupies a special position. The *nihil privativum*, the empty object of a concept, is not the concept of the void. It is, rather, the case that this empty object still contains a formal reference to that which it lacks for complete wholeness (the full object of a concept). This *indeterminate* reference is only an indexical structure without any trace of concrete content. Every object A, B, C ... can in this way be written as an infinite judgment—as an indeterminate negation of privative nothingness: A = non *nihil privativum* A; B = non *nihil privativum* B; C = non *nihil privativum* C, etc. The contents of the right-hand side of the equation are indeterminate, since the emptiness of every object A, B, C... does not allow a definite distinction to be made. A *nihil privativum* can, therefore, never be negated in a determinate way. By recourse to the *nihil privativum*, all objects A, B, C ... can thus be related without a relation (in an empty manner). The *nihil privativum* is not a detached third entity (in the sense of an abstraction); it does not create any higher, overarching unity, but represents an indeterminate non-thing—a nothing, which nevertheless relates *unmediatedly* to every something, that is, every object A, B, C, etc., without a relation.

The privative nothing opposed to the something is not the Hegelian nothing: “*Nothing, pure nothingness*; it is simple equality with itself, complete emptiness, complete absence of determination and content; lack of all distinction within. [...] Nothing is therefore the same determination or rather absence of determination, and thus altogether the same as what pure *being* is” (Hegel 2010: 59). In contrast, nothing is here indeterminate in its content and yet “determined” in its pre-position insofar as it is opposed in each case to a determined something. Nevertheless, the privative nothing, indeterminate in its content, and the determined something can never enter into genuine contradiction: a determined content in something cannot be denied by the privative nothing. The idea of an indeterminate, pre-predicative connection through emptiness, preceding every determinate judgment, can be usefully applied to the variant of the messianic as an a-relation (relationless relation) here proposed.

The Neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen, with whose seminal publication *Logic of Pure Cognition* (1902/14) Benjamin was acquainted<sup>12</sup>, understood nothingness as the source of the something. The point of Cohen’s logic of origin lies in making every *sensual* something derive in *real* fashion from a *non-sensual* nothingness, without presupposing an ontological determination of nothingness. In an early publication, *The Principle of the Infinitesimal Method and Its History* (1883), Cohen recognized that “reality cannot proceed from the zero, but just as little can finite magnitude”<sup>13</sup> (Cohen 1984: 93). However, reality can very well proceed from a non-nullified nothingness, insofar as nothingness is not interpreted as the negation of being. What Kant grasps as *nihil privativum* does not for Cohen have a negative character, if for no other reason than because, in contrast to Aristotle, he makes a sharp distinction between privation and negation (Cohen 1977: 109). In this way, Cohen, following Kant, can conceive of the opposition (not contradiction) of privative nothingness and the something not merely in logical, but in *real* terms as real repugnance without contradiction<sup>14</sup>. Here, nothing and something do not can-

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin and Gershom Scholem studied this work by Cohen jointly in 1918 during Benjamin’s time in Berne (cf. Scholem 2000: 272).

<sup>13</sup> “Magnitude” here translates the German term *Größe*, as originally used by Kant. Other translations of Kant render *Größe* as “quantity.”

<sup>14</sup> In his pre-critical work “Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy” (1763), Kant introduced this term. He distinguished two forms of opposition (repugnance): the logical and the real. “The first opposition, namely logical opposition, is that upon which attention has been exclusively and uniquely concentrated until now. The opposition consists in the fact that something is simultaneously affirmed and denied of the very same thing. The consequence of the logical conjunction is *nothing at all* (*nihil negativum, irrepraesentabile*), as the law of contradiction asserts”

cel each other as a logical contradiction to zero. As a means of achieving the something's identity, Cohen suggests proceeding via a non-negating, operational nothingness. Only prior annihilation of this "origin-nothingness" without content (as against negation determined by content) can in reality cause the something to arise.

The crux of this train of thought is Cohen's distinction between not and nothingness. "First, *the nothingness [Nichts] is not to be confused with the not [Nicht]*. It is just a mediating concept, an interim thought; in no way does it have independent, distinct content" (Cohen 1977: 104)<sup>15</sup>. Nothing (Nichts) here has the function of an intermediate stage between nothingness and the something, an operative concept occupying the place of an *origin-something (Ursprungs-Etwas; Cohen 1977: 105)*. With the aid of Cohen's logic of origin it is possible to conceive of a nothingness that, as distinct from an ontological understanding, has no independent content, no existence of its own, and no being: nothingness is pure movement, a leap, an operation on the path to the something, and yet it is not an empty thought but rather denotes the empty object of a concept. In this way, nothingness as origin-something unites two traits that at first sight are at odds. On the one hand, as an operational device, it has no separate content, is thus indeterminate in its content, and does not relate to any definite object. Nevertheless, for every something it is

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(Kant 1992: 211; Kant 1912: 171). The second case, however—real opposition, real repugnance without (logical) contradiction—is not nothing at all, but zero, nil: "The second opposition, namely real opposition, is that which where two predicates of a thing are opposed to each other, but not through the law of contradiction. Here, too, one thing cancels that which is posited by the other, but the consequence is *something (cogitabile)*. [...] The consequence of the opposition is also nothing, but nothing in another sense to that in which it occurs in a contradiction (*nihil privativum, repraesentabile*). We shall, in future, call this nothing: zero = 0. Its meaning is the same as that of negation (negatio), lack, absence" (Kant 1992: 211; Kant 1912: 171). Even if the opposition of something and nothing is not the same as the opposition of two real predicates of one and same thing, it is possible to extract a crucial definition of the *nihil privativum* from this passage. With regard to Kant, privative nothingness can be conceived as a real force; however, it remains finite, the collision of opposed finite magnitudes resulting in nil, zero. Radicalizing Kant, with Cohen the *nihil privativum* can be thought of as both a real force and infinite for every something can be opposed to a nothing as an infinite judgment without resulting in zero. Reading Kant with Cohen, hence, the assertion "A is not nothingness (*nihil privativum*)" is to be distinguished from "A is not nil."

<sup>15</sup> Scholem sees cabbalistic links operating in Cohen's distinction. On February 22, 1918, he notes in his diary, "Distinction between not and nothingness [...] of the greatest scope in philosophy. The cabbala and this fundamental idea (which recurs in Cohen) <:> Creation from *nothingness* is a philosophical thought" (Scholem 2000: 137f.).

possible to conceive of a relative nothingness, albeit indeterminate in content, as its pre-positional origin-something. Using this difficult construction, Cohen radicalizes the monotheistic principle of *creatio ex nihilo*, which from his perspective remains tainted by determination (existence, the basis of being): he therefore proposes, not *creatio ex nihilo*, but rather *ab nihilo* (Cohen 1977: 84). As an illusory (*scheinhaftes*) substantive this nothingness is inherently “empty”; it is entirely absorbed in its unmediated mediating function. “Nothingness has the form of a substantive,” Cohen writes, “for although it is a non-thing, it is still an operative concept” (105).

The backdrop to this construction, which is based on a strict distinction between *not* and *nothingness*, is constituted by Cohen’s rejection of the definition of a something by its direct negation, for between A and non-A there can be no relation, above all, no dialectical relation (Cohen 1977: 107). The path to identity therefore leads only via nothingness as origin-something. However, in order to progress from nothingness to the something, without presupposing content determinants, which could certainly be denied, Cohen introduces the *activity* of judgment and thus an “*annihilation authority*” (107), which carries out an indefinite negation before each content-determined judgment:

The not [Nicht] enunciated by this authority is thus of a quite different kind from that nothingness [Nichts] which is the source of the something. It is the activity of judgment; it is judgment itself which denies to any content presuming to become the content of the judgment the right to do so. The ostensible non-A is in no way content in itself, but only claims to be such. The denial deprives it of such value. *There is no non-A*, and there cannot be any non-A which, as distinct from the nothingness of the origin, has a closed content. (Cohen 1977: 107)

Cohen terms this destruction or negation of nothingness (origin-something) *annihilation*. It is only through this annihilation that “the authentic true nothingness of the not arises” (107). This last, the “true nothingness of the not,” is no longer merely operational, contentless nothingness (in the sense of the origin-something), but expresses a kind of original negation, deriving from *activity*, from the positive *deed* of the judgment: “Negation is *not*, as has been supposed, a *judgment on a judgment*, but rather, if you like, a *judgment before a judgment*” (Cohen 1977: 106). This more precise definition is crucially important, since the original negation of operational nothingness (origin-something) cannot be a judgment on a judgment already determined in its content. In order to ensure the identity of a particular A, without allowing for a dialectical contradiction to a non-A, no positive content is negated, only a *nihil privativum*. The radical absence of relation of each something (A, B, C ...) to its respective negation (non-A, non-B, non-C ...) can thus at the origin only

be “bridged” indirectly and indeterminately, with the aid of the origin-something: A = not-nothingness, B = not-nothingness, C = not-nothingness, etc.<sup>16</sup> he determinate singularities A, B, C ... can never enter into a reflexive relationship as mutual negations. The formula *omnis determinatio est negatio*, which Hegel ascribed to Spinoza, is not valid here, for in the pre-predicative activity of judgment every determinate A, B, C ... is sealed off from a reflexive negation.

The radical absence of relations between every something and all others, and, corresponding to this absence, nothingness’s direct mediating function as origin-something of each determinate something, provide the logical structure for decoding Benjamin’s figure of the messianic. The messiah’s nothingness, the messianic as the a-relation between the messianic and the historical (“Theological-Political Fragment”) and the Apellesian “cut of the cut” between the messianic and profane aeons (Agamben) are contentless operational concepts *preceding* every possible messianic predication. The messianic and the historical do not enter into any relationship, do not act like positive and negative, but are radically devoid of relations and yet at the same time are directly mediated by each other, related to each other, in the messiah’s nothingness. As the expression of the a-relation between the messianic and the historical, the messiah’s nothingness does not imply any *negative* theology of the messiah, but as an operative concept it allows for the *positive* notion of a pure messianic relation preceding the phenomena to which it relates—historical events

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<sup>16</sup> The ethical and political scope of this structure, which is essentially directed against a logic of adequation, was spelled out by Franz Rosenzweig in his letter to Ehrenberg, dated November 18, 1917, from which the core thought of his seminal *Star of Redemption* subsequently arose. Rosenzweig’s core thought is the reflection that between every identical A–A, B–B, etc., no equation of the unequal, A = B, is possible. In a structurally pantheistic (pagan) cosmos, by contrast, there are no radical incommensurables. “All B’s are fraternally related, for all are interchangeable amongst themselves, every B can become another’s A. From B = B there is not even a bridge of thought leading to B = B<sup>o</sup>; the bridge, the = sign, is in fact established in the B–B itself and does not lead out of it” (Rosenzweig 1937: 365). Rosenzweig is however concerned with the demolition of this bridge, of this equals sign of immanence. Eric Santner has examined the background to this rejection of adequation relations and decoded it as the form of value of commodities as discovered by Marx: “Every B can become the A to the other”—with this formulation, Rosenzweig is perhaps alluding to Marx’s elaboration of the commodity form (which was, in turn, prefigured in Schelling’s generative theory of predication and Hegel’s theory of judgment). For Marx, one will recall, the entire problem of value begins with a contingent equation or identification: one commodity is posited as being of equal value to another commodity. And as Marx notes, the ‘whole mystery of the form of value lies hidden in this simple form,’ in this initial ‘contraction of value’” (Santner 2001: 93).

and their end in the messiah's real advent. The messiah's nothingness is the inaccessible void, the lacuna within historical happening that the messiah will one day have filled and annihilated. This nothingness constitutes the pure, unmediated mediating authority between historical events and the messiah's entrance. From the historical perspective, the messiah's nothingness is not negation of the messiah (in the sense of negative theology), but a nothingness about to leap into (a messianic) something, which in Benjamin's "Fragment" is termed "relation to the messianic" (SW, 3: 305). This relation's completion and redemption is the entrance into the messianic kingdom: as the annihilation of messianic nothingness. This annihilation returns to the origin of the messianic reference structure of the messianic and the historical insofar as it annihilates this relation "anchored" in messianic nothingness. The messiah does not apocalyptically cancel every something that forms part of the historical, but "completes all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates his relation to the messianic" (SW, 3: 305). Again, messianic completion is not the cancellation of the historical, but annihilating redemption, the dissolution of this relation of the messianic to the historical that it has itself created. Were this dissolution still to be conceived as a negation, it would be the negation of a privation, of a *privative nihil*. By his advent, the messiah "pronounces" an infinite judgment on a messianic nothingness that is privatively opposed to the historical something. This messianic annihilation—the indeterminate negation of the privative nothingness—is not to be confused with the reduction of every historical something to empty nothingness, since here a messianic nothingness is annihilated that is situated "before" every profane something. From the historical perspective, this nothingness is the inaccessible, unobliterable ground of its a-relation to the messianic—a nothingness that is, so to speak, "less" than zero, without being a negative magnitude in the Kantian sense<sup>17</sup>.

Cohen and Benjamin are thus structurally close, but we cannot ignore essential differences. Messianic nothingness, the messiah's nothing-

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<sup>17</sup> Kant understood negative magnitudes (*Größen*) as quantities that can be canceled (annihilated) by their positive opposite. "A magnitude is, relative to another magnitude, negative, in so far as it can only be combined with it by means of opposition; in other words, it can only be combined with it so that the one magnitude cancels as much in the other as is equal to itself. Now this, of course, is a reciprocal relation, and magnitudes which are opposed to each other in this way reciprocally cancel an equal amount in each other. It follows that, strictly speaking, no magnitude can be called absolutely negative; 'a+' and 'a-' must each be called the negative magnitude of the other" (Kant 1992: 213f.). This symmetry of opposed magnitudes does not apply to messianic nothingness, which is neither nil nor a negative magnitude that can be cancelled, but (one might say) an absolutely negative magnitude which cannot be cancelled and which transcends the concept of magnitude and quantity.

ness within historical events does not assert a messianic logic of origin, but articulates the paradoxical attempt to “underpin” the messianic as a pure (a)relational tension in a non-essential, non-creationist, and non-foundationalist nothingness. The purely relational reference structure of the messianic is “grounded” groundlessly in a nothingness that does not permit any further predication of the a-relation between the messianic and the historical, but nonetheless makes a “positive” concept of the messianic possible. With the help of Cohen’s “nothingness,” the philosophical possibility opens up of conceiving the messiah’s nothingness beyond negative theology and mysticism without assigning positive or negative predicates to the a-relation between the messianic and the historical. Thus, for the messianic, a predicative logic on the model of statements such as “the messianic is ...” or “the messianic is not ...” is ruled out. By means of a purely relational nothingness, it is possible to conceive a non-actual, non-sensuous, and yet real, non-nullified nothingness of the messiah in historical events. This nothingness is not taken to be either essential, as the fundamental primal ground (*Urgrund*) of all existence of the existing, or the result of a theoretical postulate. Rather, it simply cannot be presented within the limits of opposing definitions such as presence/absence or actuality/potentiality. The messiah’s nothingness thus fits into an intermediate space between act and potency that cannot be represented by traditional conceptual logic. This intermediate space (which, seen temporally, lies between “always already” and “not yet”) contains no guarantees in terms of salvation-history (*Heilsgeschichte*). The perspective of salvation-history, from which history can be related to an end, to a cut-off point, exists *only* for the messiah. The messiah’s perspective is, however, inaccessible to human beings—an inaccessibility that also applies to the conditions by which such a perspective is possible *within the historical*. The perspective of salvation-history, which always thinks of the historical in terms of the “end of history” or judges it from the position of the “Last Judgment,” is impossible *within the historical*: world history is never judgment of the world, but “every moment is a moment of judgment concerning certain moments that preceded it” (SW, 4: 407).

### III. Messianic and Methodical Nihilism

Benjamin’s *political* answer to this *messianic* nihilism is contained in the *methodical* nihilism demanded in the final passage of the “Fragment”:

To the spiritual *restitutio in integrum*, which introduces immortality, corresponds a worldly restitution that leads to [the] eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is messianic by reason of its eter-

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nal and total passing away. [...] To strive after such a passing away—even the passing away of those stages of man that are nature—is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism. (SW, 3: 305–306)

Nihilism as a method for world politics does not mean striving for nothingness, but a mode of indirect reference to messianic nothingness as the aspiration towards the eternal downfall in happiness. This sort of nihilism does not belong to the history of modern nihilism as essentially shaped by Nietzsche. The insight that the course of the world as a whole has no historically immanent or transcendental meaning is for Benjamin reflected in terms of content and method. His nihilism is based *first* on literally nothing in terms of content, and, *second*, pursues the immanent dissolution of idealistic forms of politics as a method of politics. The first of these aspects concerns the groundless and simultaneously non-nullified “foundation” of the messianic. Viewed theologically, a *messianic nihilism* follows from this, since no positive doctrine of the messianic can be derived from this construction. The second aspect concerns the order of the profane and a profane concept of politics.

If the order of the profane has to be erected on the idea of happiness (cf. Benjamin, SW, 3: 305), politics cannot declare the fixed point of this orientation an end in itself. Politics is not the political organization of the teleological striving for happiness (e.g., the liberal-utilitarian “pursuit of happiness”), but a directed praxis without *telos* that dissolves instrumental means-and-end relations. This nihilism of ends has, according to the “Fragment,” to take courage from the *idea* of happiness, whose structure has to be conceived not in the sense of a nihilistic variation on the Kantian “regulative idea,” but as a non-formalistic *movement towards* happiness that is incapable of finally reaching its goal. For happiness cannot be possessed or “grasped” intentionally. Happiness is manifested only in missing the target and in the transience of this missing. Jonathan Lear’s perceptive reading of Freud and Aristotle can be related to Benjamin’s idea of happiness: “Happiness [...] is not the ultimate goal of our teleologically organized strivings, but the ultimate ateleological moment: a chance event going well for us—quite literally, a lucky break.” In English, this understanding of happiness harks back, as Lear adds, to the older usage of the word happiness in the sense of “happenstance,” chance, a fortunate circumstance (Lear, 2000: 129).

Not only is “the image of happiness we cherish [...] thoroughly colored by time” (SW, 4: 389), but time—historical time—is also punctuated, rhythmically interrupted by moments of happiness and unhappiness. History exists only in discontinuity. Happiness, as an idea incapable of teleologically approaching its goal, and historical time, as discontinuous and erratic, correspond to each other. It is only in the entanglement of happiness and historical time that the rhythm of the eternal downfall of everything living arises as a movement (directed towards happiness) without

an ultimate goal. This a-teleology of happiness, whose messianic vector arrow “aims” not at achieving happiness or maximizing it, but at the downfall of everything earthly, free of ends or purposes, removes any transcendent fundamental axiom from politics. To this extent, the nihilist method of world politics demanded in the final paragraph of the “Fragment” “works” towards its own dissolution. This tendency to the amorphous could be termed nihilism as method or “methodical nihilism” (Hamacher, 2002: 101), insofar as it never contests a position from an external opposite position. Rather, it pursues an “unworking”<sup>18</sup> of political aims, ultimate foundations, and assurances always from within a political positioning. Methodical nihilism has no political content of its own: it is not one distinct form of politics amongst others, but the paradoxical work of the unworking of all forms of politics that create teleological meaning and seek ultimate foundations.

With regard to the philosophical background of the meaning of *nihil* in Cohen’s philosophy, this unworking nihilism does not perform any definite negation of something (programs, final purposes, laws, institutions, etc.), but relates every something to an opposing messianic nothingness inaccessible to it. The aspiration in world politics to redemption, dissolution, and release from everything earthly is not attached directly to the profane something, which would have to be converted into nothingness, but functions via the methodical detour of reference to messianic nothingness. In this way, the messianic as a-teleological detour, relational deviation, and operational method is a non-nullified nothingness, which groundlessly grounds the a-relation between the messianic and the historical<sup>19</sup>. The release of a profane something thus never aims at noth-

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. the expression “unworking” as used by Jean-Luc Nancy, whose thinking evinces a kinship with Benjamin’s messianic figure of deforming (*Entstaltung*). Nancy links unworking to the modern form of the concept of community: “This is why community cannot arise from the domain of *work*. One does not produce it, one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude [...] Community necessarily takes place in what Blanchot has called ‘unworking’ [*désœuvrement*], referring to that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension.” Such a community no longer aims at synthesis and fusion, but is an “incessant *incompletion* of community” (Nancy, 1991: 31, 38). Similarly, Benjamin’s eternal downfall of everything earthly does not aim towards the final erection of the messianic kingdom, but towards a messianic drift into the amorphous, unworking non-completion of the profane order.

<sup>19</sup> As I have argued above, this non-nullified nothingness (*nicht nichtige Nichts*) is unstable and cannot be located. However, it never dissolves itself fully; it never perishes completely but persists as a relational figure. In this sense, it has to be strictly distinguished from what Hegel called self-annihilating nothing. Engaging, in his lec-

ingness as the ultimate goal and every striving's tension-free zero level (as a messianic "nirvana principle" would have it), but points to the comprehensive annihilation of the relation maintained by messianic nothingness to every profane something within the historical. In this way, the profane movement of release indirectly promotes the advent of the messianic kingdom: its vector "points" in paradoxical fashion, via the detour of messianic nothingness, to the annihilation of this nothingness in a "higher" messianic unity (the messianic kingdom). "This [Benjamin's] methodical nihilism is the political complement of the operational, methodical 'nothing' of Cohen's theory of judgment" (Hamacher 2002: 101). Nihilism as method in this way pursues a political "survey" of the infinite interval that separates messianic nothingness (as a privation of the personal messiah from the historical) from its overcoming, its annihilation in the messianic something (the full presence of the messiah and entrance into the messianic kingdom).

Benjamin's nihilism does not denote movement into nothingness, but the mode of political action towards or vis-à-vis messianic nothingness that marks out the historical's paradoxical point of attachment to the messianic. Benjamin thus does not belong to the tradition of affirmative nihilism, which aims at devaluing and abstractly negating all historical value and ultimate goals, whether the motivation for this negation is conservative or revolutionary. Benjamin's position has to be strictly distinguished from those stances that Jacob Taubes has characterized, with reference to Paul Tillich, as a "revolution of nihilism"<sup>20</sup>. Benjamin's nihilism has no

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tures on aesthetics, with the Romantic concept of irony, Hegel harshly criticized Schlegel for "the ironic dissolution of the determinate" (Hegel 1975: 69). Insofar as ironic self-detachment is attributed to the Romantic subject's vanity, irony is a self-annihilating concept, which appears as "null in its self-destruction [*Nichtiges in seinem Sich-Vernichten*]" (Hegel 1975: 67). In contrast, the messianic *nihil*, as a non-nullified nothingness, cannot be attributed to a subject. In his reading of early Romanticism, Benjamin, implicitly criticizing Hegel, distinguished between "formal irony" and irony as attached to individual sentiment. "Formal irony is not, like diligence or candor, an intentional demeanor of the author. It cannot be understood in the usual manner as an index of a subjective boundlessness, but must be appreciated as an objective moment in the work itself. It presents a paradoxical venture: through demolition to continue building on the formation [*am Gebilde noch durch Abbruch zu bauen*]" (SW, 1: 165; GS, I: 87). Building through demolition, deforming the formed (*Entstaltung des Gestalteten*, cf. GS, VI: 114): these paradoxical formulae contain the basic method of Benjamin's messianic nihilism.

<sup>20</sup> "If the telos of revolution declines, however, so that the revolution is no longer a means to an end, but becomes solely a creative principle, then the pleasure of destruction becomes creative pleasure. If the revolution never points beyond itself, then it ends in a formal and dynamic movement that disappears into empty nothing-

place in the simple opposition, in the philosophy of history, between high-tension eschatology and tension-free nihilism. Nihilism here does not lead to a satanic pleasure in destruction, but to the methodical annihilation within the political domain of transcendent suppliers of meaning.

Benjamin's physical-metaphysical answer to a world of "transcendental homelessness" (Lukács) consists in the radical affirmation of mortality and transience. Nihilism as method is the *political* striving to achieve the eternal transience (*ewige Vergängnis*) of everything worldly in happiness<sup>21</sup>. This affirmation (striving to achieve) of annihilation (transience) bears an unmistakable correspondence to Nietzsche, but trans-values his late overcoming of nihilism. More precisely, the affirmation of the eternal downfall of everything worldly avoids Nietzsche's discrimination between active and passive nihilism. While active nihilism attains its "maximum of relative force [...] as a violent force of *destruction*," its opposite is "weary nihilism that no longer *attacks*: its most famous form, Buddhism: as *passive nihilism*" (Nietzsche 1999: 351)<sup>22</sup>. Benjamin's nihilism is neither active nor reactive nor passive, but encloses activity and

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ness. A 'revolution of nihilism' does not strive towards any telos, but finds its goal in the 'movement' itself and thus approaches satanism" (Taubes 1991: 10).

<sup>21</sup> It is in this sense that our political strivings are always a-teleologically directed towards a goal. In this context, it is instructive to consider the crucial difference between goal and telos in the psychoanalytical mode. In his Eleventh Seminar, Lacan elaborated extensively on the difference between aim and goal: "Here we can clear up the mystery of the *zielgehemmt*, of that form that the drive may assume, in attaining its satisfaction without attaining its aim—in so far as it would be defined by a biological function, by the realization of reproductive coupling. [...] When you entrust someone with a mission, the *aim* is not what he brings back, but the itinerary he must take. The *aim* is the way taken. The French word *but* may be translated by another word in English, *goal*. In archery, the *goal* is not the *but* either, it is not the bird you shoot, it is having scored a hit and thereby attained your *but*" (Lacan 1981: 179). The parallel to Benjamin's messianic-nihilist a-teleology becomes apparent. The *telos* (*Ziel*) has to be differentiated from the *goal* of our political strivings. The messianic kingdom is not the *Ziel*, but the way, the itinerary our profane strivings take. Only this a-teleological route or traversing of the profane can be called the messianic. This itinerary's goal is not the arrival in the messianic kingdom or, as Lacan puts it, "the bird you shoot," but the downfalling passing-away-ness of the profane. It is in this sense that the profane's messianic goal is eternal transience. Benjamin's notion of nihilism as method is thus the theoretical expression of the way—the itinerary taken—to pursue this goal.

<sup>22</sup> Both forms of nihilism, active and passive, are for Nietzsche an expression of the same ascetic ideal, as Alenka Zupančič has persuasively shown: "Active and reactive nihilism are mutually co-dependent and, *as such*, they constitute what is generally called nihilism. [...] In other words, one kind of mortification (the one that takes the path of surplus excitement) is regulated or moderated by another kind. The 'will to

passivity together irreducibly in the striving (*Erstreben*) to achieve eternal transience: as an active-passive movement of de-striving (*Ent-Strebung*). The knowledge that “existence, as it is” is “without meaning and goal” (Nietzsche 1999: 213) has no epistemological or ethical significance for messianic transience and the political striving to achieve it. In Nietzsche, by contrast, a radical nihilism leads to the insight by which the course of the world is grasped as “unavoidably recurrent, without any finale leading into nothingness: ‘eternal recurrence’” (Nietzsche 1999: 213)<sup>23</sup>. Nietzsche’s ethical gesture of affirming eternal recurrence, uttered, above all, by the figure of Zarathustra, has therefore to be distinguished from Benjamin’s striving for eternal transience. The difference is that the eternal downfall, striving towards nothingness but never becoming congruent with it, cannot be addressed intentionally and deliberately, and by this token cannot be taken as the starting point for an ethics of recurrence as the affirming rebirth of the self. From the eternal downfall of everything earthly, nothing, *nihil* can be derived; nor can an ethics of the new (super)man be derived, either. The profane striving for happiness proves to be a category of the messianic kingdom’s faintest approach only insofar as the messianic end of this downfall cannot be addressed *for mankind*—cannot be either denied reactively or affirmed actively. To this extent, even Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence, as self-affirmation of life and overcoming of nihilism, is not conceived nihilistically enough for Benjamin’s notion of the eternal downfall: human beings cannot *desire* eternal transience, because they can only fail to achieve it on purpose. “All absoluteness of will,” he writes in an early fragment, “leads down into evil [...] [the] will must burst into a thousand bits.”<sup>24</sup> So the striving for the eternal transience of messianic nature is not the absolute will to downfall either, but is its exact reverse: the dissolution, dismantling, and unworking of this will. Striving (*Erstreben*) is conceived here in quite un-Nietzschean fashion as a striving for dissolution, as a paradoxical de-striving (*Ent-streben*). The striving to achieve happiness in the eternal downfall does not implement the over-affirmation, the intensification of this downfall in its drop into nothingness, but a retreat, a turning back, a decreased potency, something withdrawn within the interior of this striving itself: in the striving for happiness, the paradoxical unworking of all striving—and with it, every will identical with itself—is at work, as the unworking of every working of the will.

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Nothingness’ is combined with the ‘narcoticization’ of the will—exciting stimulant combines with sedating tranquilizer” (Zupančič 2003: 67).

<sup>23</sup> The original German reads: “unvermeidlich wiederkehrend, ohne ein Finale ins Nichts: ‘die ewige Wiederkehr’” (Nietzsche 1999: 213).

<sup>24</sup> The original German reads: “Alle Unbedingtheit des Willens führt ins Böse hinab [...] [Der] Wille muß in tausend Stücke zerspringen” (GS, VI: 55).

By recourse to a fragment written during the same period as the “Theological-Political Fragment,” we can demonstrate the fundamental difference between Benjamin’s messianic nihilism and Nietzsche’s radical nihilism. In “Capitalism as Religion” (1921), Benjamin sketches the outlines of an incriminating religious cult, which he claims has emancipated itself like a parasite from its historical “host,” the mythical-pagan elements of Christianity, in order finally, in capitalism, to install its own cult as a mere cult, as cult praxis without theology.<sup>25</sup> This capitalist “religion of pure cult, without dogma” (SW, 1: 289) is located in the descent of a totalizing movement towards the incrimination (*Verschuldung*) of everything living. “A vast sense of guilt that is unable to find relief seizes on the cult, not to atone for this guilt but to make it universal, to hammer it into the conscious mind” (SW, 1: 288). This capitalist guilt (*Schuld*), which, as Benjamin writes, implicitly quoting Nietzsche, is based on the “demonic ambiguity of this word” (SW, 1: 289), recognizes no higher goal outside itself, is nihilistic, and is designed purely in terms of praxis and cult.<sup>26</sup> The capitalist cultic religion is, however, not a pure praxis of immanence, but produces its own fallen transcendence, its own god. God is therefore not dead, but “incorporated into human existence” (SW, 1: 289). The self-affirmation of this consciousness of *Schuld* (guilt/debt), in which the immanent God itself participates, consists in the immeasurable intensification and totalization of this simultaneously moral and material culpability. Benjamin sees this gesture of outdoing, drawn from immanence—a deeply inculcated incrimination without any atoning end—adumbrated in Nietzsche’s figure of the superman:

The paradigm of capitalist religious thought is magnificently formulated in Nietzsche’s philosophy. The idea of the superman [*Übermensch*] transposes the apocalyptic “leap” not into conversion, atonement, purification, and penance, but into an apparently steady, though in the final analysis explosive and discontinuous intensification [*Steigerung*]. (SW, 1: 289)

The superman is the over-intensifying self-affirmation of capitalist man, who wants his incrimination [*Verschuldung*], radicalizes it, and pushes it beyond himself. Irrespective of the arguments one might advance against this polemical reading of Nietzsche, what interests us is the figure of conversion, reversal (*Umkehr*), the figure that Benjamin brings

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Benjamin, SW, 1: 288–290. This thesis represents Benjamin’s direct reaction to Max Weber’s famous thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1988).

<sup>26</sup> Drawing on Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, Benjamin refers here to the double meaning of the German word *Schuld*, which denotes both guilt in the moral sense and debt in the economic-capitalist sense.

into play against the Nietzschean gesture of breaking open and outdoing. For Benjamin sees the desperate hopelessness of “capitalism as religion” precisely in the fact that every retribution on the part of *Schuld* (guilt/debt) increases the sum total of *Schuld*. The more there is “invested” in capitalism’s psycho-social guilt-nexus (whether this amortizes or increases the guilt/debt), the more man becomes guilty/indebted. Atonement and expiation are therefore, for Benjamin, as much irreconcilably opposed as law (*Recht*) and justice (*Gerechtigkeit*). Instead of escaping via intensification, breaking out via self-affirmation, there remains the expiatory path backwards, the termination of all guilt/debt economies, in order to fall prey no longer to the concatenations of guilt and retribution. In the fragment “World and Time” (ca. 1919/20), in opposition to the “breaking open [of] the heavens by an intensified [*gesteigerte*] humanity” (SW, 1: 289), which a little later, in “Capitalism as Religion,” Benjamin would ascribe to the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, he puts forward his own “definition of politics”: “the fulfillment of an unimproved [*ungesteigerte*] humanity” (SW, 1: 226). In this paradoxical definition, fulfillment is achieved through unfulfillment, unimprovement, which arises from the movement of dissolution through withdrawal.

Messianic nihilism is not the deliberate affirmation of nothingness, but the impossible relation (a-relation) to a messianic nothingness that presses for annihilation of this nothingness. In this sense, the messianic *nihil* is closer to the Freudian figure of the death drive than to Nietzsche’s overcoming of nihilism. In contrast to Nietzsche’s anti-Christian and yet theologically contaminated nihilism of affirmation, Slavoj Žižek has pointed to another nihilistic dimension, whose Freudian and Lacanian name is the death drive.

[W]hat Nietzsche denounces as the “nihilistic” gesture to counteract life-asserting instincts, Freud and Lacan conceive as the very basic structure of human drive as opposed to natural instincts. In other words, what Nietzsche cannot accept is the radical dimension of the death drive—the fact that the excess of the Will over a mere self-contained satisfaction is always mediated by the “nihilistic” stubborn attachment to Nothingness. The death drive is not merely a direct nihilistic opposition to any life-asserting attachment; rather, it is the very formal structure of the reference to Nothingness that enables us to overcome the stupid self-contained life-rhythm, in order to become “passionately attached” to some Cause—be it love, art, knowledge or politics—for which we are ready to risk everything. (Žižek 2001: 108)

If the messianic can be read as the historico-philosophical expression of the death drive attached to life in its “supernatural” quality, then the “excess of the Will over a mere self-contained satisfaction,” which Žižek understands as the death drive, has to be grasped, in the case of

Benjamin's eternal downfall in happiness, as a "reversed excess," with-  
drawal, reduction. Reversed excess—"decess"—as the dynamic of the pro-  
fane, the striving for happiness, finds its goal, happiness, only in the pro-  
cess of downfall (*decedere*), in missing the target, in eternal transience.  
Thus, a decomposition that constitutes the real structure of this search  
for happiness as the failure to find it, always inheres in our intentional  
relation to happiness. The eternal transience of everything earthly  
"found" in happiness represents, from a historical point of view, as we  
might paraphrase Žižek here, the formal structure of the inaccessible rela-  
tion to the messianic, the messiah's nothingness. The aspiration to hap-  
piness does not strive towards nothingness, but is the paradoxical manner  
in which to relate to, to point towards, nothingness—the messiah's noth-  
ingness. From the historical viewpoint, this relation is never directly but  
only indirectly possible, in a profane direction in happiness, in the eternal  
downfall of everything earthly. In the profane, this indirect, counteracting  
relation to the messiah's nothingness groundlessly "gives grounds for"  
a nihilism of final ends as a method of world politics. The latter does not  
articulate the will for nothingness—whether life-denying or life-affirm-  
ing—but in terms of the philosophy of history it is the interruption of all  
teleological striving: *désœuvrement*.

*Translated, from the German, by Richard Littlejohns*

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