

Benjamin: To the Rhythm of Theological Concepts

Thursday 17 December 2020

Sommaire

- [The Early Period: A Manifold](#)
- [1920s: The Rhythm of Law, and](#)
- [1940: Now-Time](#)

Nitzan Lebovic is Professor of History at Lehigh University. We thank him and the Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory (Fall 2020) 19:3 for permission to republish his article here.

In his seminar on Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Jacob Taubes argued that for Benjamin theology served specific aims [1]. Because of its insistently teleological quality, theology could help construct a "theory of history . . . [that] is to be conceived from the perspective of the end [of time]." [2] As one of the earliest thinkers to address political theology, Taubes realized not only that theological concepts were both essential and secondary in Benjamin's work—they were serving a broader argument about historical change and the end of time.

Taubes's brief comments proposed, back in the early 1980s, a new path to Benjamin's thought. In what follows I take Taubes's cue to argue that a careful mapping of Benjamin's oeuvre shows that he used theology as a tool to carve out a broad hermeneutics of time, conceived from the opposites of the beginning and end of time, as well as the movement that breaks this polarized structure. A key to Benjamin's theory of theological time is his use of the concept of rhythm. So long as one conceives of time as an inscrutable and linear marker of Jewish and Christian ideas about promise and realization, the rhythmic order of life is shaped in terms of tradition, creation, perfection, messianism. Yet, as Benjamin demonstrated, each and every of those concepts could be conceived from the perspective of a nonlinear rhythm. In that respect, while Taubes identified correctly the importance of theological concepts in Benjamin's theory of history, he missed the function of a theory of history as one possible rhythm of history, conceived retroactively without being realized. In the following pages I intend to move chronologically, skimmiingly, through different periods in Benjamin's output, showing that his use of theological concepts buttressed his understanding of time as a nonlinear rhythm. Furthermore, a close reading of theological concepts points to the growing importance of rhythm in Benjamin's oeuvre, as that body of work evolved from a stress on language during the 1910s to law and power during the 1920s and a theory of history and crisis during the 1930s.

The Early Period: A Manifold Rhythm of Creation in Language

Walter Benjamin's understanding of time evolved out of, and turned against, nineteenth-century hermeneutics, with its deep commitment to historicist linearity, leading necessarily from birth to

death, creation to apocalypse. As Brian Britt showed, Benjamin's understanding of the Western tradition was firmly opposed to idealism and mythologizing, historicism and philology: he had "a notion of tradition as a mediated, layered, and paradoxical phenomenon." [3] More specifically, Benjamin turned against the program laid out by the founder of modern hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who spoke in his lectures of a universal way of "understanding another person's utterance correctly," which meant "in sequence." [4] If Schleiermacher's hermeneutics was the basis of what an expert recently described as "pre-given ontological structures of language," then Benjamin questioned the very basis of this ontology, the sequential order that stirred it, its ideological and political implications. [5] In order to rethink time, history, and tradition, he focused on a distinctive notion of creation and change in language. [6] In "The Metaphysics of Youth" (1913-1914) the twenty-two-year-old Benjamin considered how a set of concepts with strong links to theology—creation, tradition, metaphysics, eternity, messianism—came to shape a modern language of time. His use of theological and metaphysical concepts was accompanied by a distinctive stress on temporal processes. To elucidate divine creation, Benjamin compared it with human creativity: "[Greatness] is to take the rhythm of one's own words in the empty space. . . . In the genius God speaks, and listens to the contradiction of language." [7] What does it mean to speak of the rhythm of words? How does creative greatness—human or divine—overcome the contradiction of language? For Benjamin, such questions are confined to the perspective of the speaker/creator, the very opposite of a logos: "The speaker is always possessed by the present. Thus, he is condemned never to utter the past, which is nonetheless what he means." [8] In other words, Benjamin framed his earliest reflections about creative processes in opposition to both John's determination that "in the beginning was the word" and the Western tradition that was born with it. [9] In Benjamin, the word comes always at the end, and any relation to the past is retroactive. If the present determines the implied meaning of the past, then every system that examines the transition from the past to the present—theological, aesthetic, historical, or philological—is charged with a hermeneutic force that serves "to open both the difference and the otherness of the past." [10]

As these early reflections—which I think of as post-Romantic—revealed, Benjamin had a dynamic understanding of how concepts shaped the understanding of the past; he believed in an open and plural or simultaneous rhythm of change that brought perpetual shifts to our view of the past, as well as of the present and future. In contrast to the usual Idealistic linear progression from earlier to later, past to present, this understanding of rhythm and its duration is retroactive and multidirectional. [11] In "The Life of Students" (1914-1915), Benjamin moved from the untimely existence of the genius to a temporal understanding of the presentness of genius as an "immanent state of perfection," the result of a rhythm of creativity. [12] Here, he pointed out, one found "elements of the ultimate condition [that] do not manifest themselves as formless progressive tendencies, but are deeply rooted in every present." [13] A year later, in an essay on language, he explained that the task of the "creative mind" was not embedded in the living experience of *élan vital*, the argument made by Henri Bergson in *L'Évolution créatrice*, but rather in a rhythmic understanding of time between the poles of creation and catastrophe. [14]

It is essential to Benjamin's system that from the perspective of time, there is no qualitative difference between "perfection" and "catastrophe." Both shaped a course of change that could be appreciated only from a present perspective. "Creation," in contrast to the usual Jewish and Christian tradition, could only be judged from the moment that follows "perfection" or "catastrophe." Hence, the "manifold rhythm of the act of creation" followed "the rhythm by which the creation of nature (in Genesis 1) is accomplished." [15] Here the word "rhythm" explained the integral pluralism of linguistic creation and implied the presence of a present viewer anticipating the completion of the creative process. Benjamin's use of the word "rhythm" warns us away from

thinking of “completion” in realistic or messianic terms. A messianic fulfillment, in that essay, would involve the formation of an imaginary total language that cannot exist. Moreover, such a language would arise in opposition to the creative rhythm, which Benjamin identifies with a moment of shock, a flash. If there is a divine or a superhuman presence in this world, it is embedded in the nowness of time, or what thinkers in the period called a state of “wakefulness” [16] “At stake in this historical dialectic is,” wrote Benjamin’s biographers, “the art of experiencing the present as a waking world, what he will come to call ‘now time.’” [17] In short, Benjamin’s earliest texts expressed a realization that standard philological hermeneutics and progressive historicism were misleading because instrumental. In order to unpack “formless progressive tendencies,” one needs to acknowledge the presentist perspective of any metaphysical structure and develop an alternative and multidirectional rhythm or movement.

1920s: The Rhythm of Law, and Power

From 1916 on, Benjamin, together with Gershom Scholem, worked against Martin Buber’s notion of renewal and completion; during the early 1920s, Benjamin derided a Jewish and Christian “false theocracy.” [18] From the start, this critique employed a broad understanding of “rhythm,” insisting that it could be identified only retroactively from the present; every trace of “realization” was rejected. As Benjamin gradually shifted from a Romantic view of creation, eternity, and other theological concepts to a more urgent vocabulary, the concept of rhythm helped him to keep an open, antilinear focus. In a passage from “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (1919–1922) devoted to architecture, Benjamin reflected on a “rhythmic sequence of representations” that parallels “communal rhythms.” [19] A structure is built from the ground up, but a narrative of its design could belong to any (and all) of the different contexts—communal, economic, political, technical—that contributed to its formation. In “The Right to Use Force” (1920), he contrasted the “violent rhythm . . . in which the law exists and has its temporal order [and] the good rhythm of expectation in which messianic events unfold.” [20] In other words, while he sallied across different fields, disciplines, and worlds, depicting a sequential or repetitive order, a representation or a practical calculation, good or bad morals, a pragmatic or a messianic vision of the world, the concept of rhythm was the shared, “manifold” mechanism that moved them all.

But must an awareness of this consistent return to the idea of rhythm change our understanding of Benjamin or of the function of theological concepts in his work? While a stress on rhythm connected the different periods, after World War I a change set in, as the theological concepts that had been woven into a theory of language came to serve a rhythmic, antihierarchical understanding of law, power, and violence. More specifically, during the 1920s the dialectical force of rhythm—its repetitive movement forward—was combined with a dialectical understanding of identity. Bringing those together allowed him to “possess the present” while avoiding any hint of realizations, any sense of an inevitable progression from word to action, promise to fulfillment. If during the 1910s a major consideration for Benjamin’s insistence on temporality was his opposition to mythical formulations (he reacted disdainfully to Martin Buber’s obsession with national realization), during the 1920s he made of his hermeneutics of time a sharp political weapon. [21]

In a fragment titled “World and Time” (*Welt und Zeit*, 1919–1920), Benjamin not only rebelled against the promise-realization structure of “false theocracy,” mentioned above, but characterized the political in rhythmic terms echoing his early wish “to take the rhythm of one’s own words in the empty space.” The political, like other forms of formation and design, is intervening in a situation of retreat or deficiency, the opposite of messianic redemption:

My definition of politics: the fulfillment of unimproved humanity. We would be wrong to speak of a profane legislation decreed by religion, as opposed to one required by it. The Mosaic laws, probably without exception, form no part of such legislation.... Where [the revealed divine power] retreats, we find the zone of politics, of the profane, of a bodily realm that is without law in a religious sense. [22]

Defining the political on the basis of paradoxes, Benjamin grounded his analysis in the dialectical movement of retreat and fulfillment, between “empty space” (Scholem would call it, a decade later, the “zero point” or “nothingness”) and/of revelation and law. [23] What does move or shape politics? A retreat—the opposite of “realization”—and then an immanent bodily capacity, such as movement. This echoed Benjamin’s better-known “Critique of Violence” (1921), written a year later. In the later piece, Benjamin emphasized the temporality of concepts such as myth, law, power, and violence, and demonstrated how problematic are all forms of collective control—he wrote of the control of human rhythm via preservation or imposition. In this enigmatic piece, he challenged the temporal order of “the eternal forms” that yielded, with secularism, to the “law-preserving” and “law-imposing” formations of violence. [24] If the modern state has seized the once-divine monopoly on violence, any rebellion against it has to offer an alternative rhythm or movement, such as a general strike: “State power, of course, which has eyes only for effects, opposes precisely this kind of strike.” [25] In “Naples” (1925), as in his work on Goethe, he used rhythm to explain the fundamental movement of communal power and the porousness of space, in a passage Kafkaesque in its cracks and intervals:

Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything, they preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definite is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no future asserts its ‘thus and not otherwise.’ This is how architecture, the most binding part of the communal rhythm, comes into being here. [26]

In the spatial crack, in the temporally rhythmic but undefined movement, Benjamin found an answer to “the empty space of language.”

During that period, Benjamin continued to consider the rhythm of the biblical proverb. In a fragment from the early 1930s, he wrote: “Let us lay, at the foundation, the image of the women who carry full vessels on their heads without the aid of their hands. The rhythm with which they do this is what the proverb teaches. From the proverb speaks a *noli me tangere* of experience. With this, it proclaims its ability to transform experience into tradition.” [27] Benjamin felt that the same mechanism underlay the action of the women and the meaning of the proverb; the relation between the two was rhythmic. The proverb, as a textual entity, brought together the rhythm of the situation and the rhythm of linguistic creation: “Proverbs cannot be applied to situations. Instead, they . . . transform the situation.” [28] The proverb, or writing in general, teaches us how to look at the “punctum” of tradition—not its origins or its eschatology, but the rhythm of its movement in daily experience. As Jean-Luc Nancy explained in his close reading of *noli me tangere*, the use of proverbs implies a resistance to indoctrination of any sort, including the idea that we must proceed from beginning to end. [29] The proverb “turns the lesson that has been experienced into a wave in the living chain of innumerable lessons that flow down from eternity.” [30] Focusing on the human rhythm, rather than divine creation or eternity, allows us to see its multidirectionality and its hermeneutic potential. Such investigations allowed Benjamin to focus, in 1935, his “epistemological theory” on the “now of

recognizability.” [31]

1940: Now-Time

There is much more to explore in Benjamin’s understanding of rhythm—and its relation to theological concepts—during the late 1920s and 1930s. Here I shall limit the balance of my comments to Benjamin’s last work, which summarizes those tendencies from the perspective of his own end and now-time.

According to Benjamin’s biographers, his understanding of language was “inseparable from the problematic of time”; the wrong rhythm would deny one the “right mode of dwelling.” [32] His theory of time preceded his research, guiding him toward the Mourning play and the Arcades project because they would enable him to dismantle any form of linearity (mythic, historicist, psychological, nationalist), every form of realization (idealist, utopian), the temptation of messianic hope (political, religious). History and eschatology are at odds. Considered historically, the messianic appears as “the end (*Ende*) of history, as a certain existential intensity beyond chronological reckoning.” [33] As circumstances propelled Benjamin toward a final crisis, his intellectual predilections narrowed the horizon of human experience to a recurrent stress on emergency.

Benjamin explained the paradigmatic role of theology in a small number of statements about interpretation. In convolute N of the Arcades project—an explanation of the methodological grounds of the project as a whole—he explained that modern theology and philology were based on a certain nineteenth-century epistemology; if theology is “a commentary on a reality,” then philology is “a commentary on a text.” [34] As Taubes noted, in this passage theology was meant to serve as a “scientific mainstay” or a metaphysical approach to a world in crisis.

In his last texts, Benjamin tried to develop a theory of political crisis that would bring together his understanding of theological concepts and theory of history. For example, in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” written in the same year as the theses on history, Benjamin explained that modern media, including motion pictures, were shaped by a “rhythm of production” which in turn determined “the rhythm of reception.” [35] Then, in the fourteenth thesis on history, he offered a dictum: “History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*].” [36] In the eighteenth thesis, he elaborated: “Now-time, which, as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation, coincides exactly with the figure which the history of mankind describes in the universe.” [37] Perfection, realization, or messianism, one notes, do not have a specific goal, but rather the hermeneutic force that unites the fullness of time and its end, in the present moment. Comparing the two theses, it is obvious that rhythm is the agent that drives history and movement towards now-time, but without answering the Aristotelian and scholastic logic that hustles every narrative and argument from beginning to middle and end. The fact that now-time moves backwards, in the opposite direction to the one experienced by the “angel of history,” clarifies that every moment of now is rich in parallel rhythms of perfection and crisis. In other words, understanding the “manifold” quality of temporal change forces us to the realization that our own now-time is only one of many. There are different angels of history and many catastrophes and piles of rubble occupying the space under our feet. Accordingly, a theological understanding of messianic realization is just one possible, “useful” understanding of reversed “universal” time.

Footnotes

- [1] This article is based on ideas I develop at greater length in *A German-Jewish Time* (forthcoming)
- [2] Jacob Taubes, "Seminar Notes on Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,'" seminar meeting of 18 October 1984, in *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, ed. by Colby Dickinson and Stephane Symons (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 184
- [3] Brian Britt, *Postsecular Benjamin: Agency and Tradition* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 119.
- [4] Friedrich Schleiermacher, "*Hermeneutics and Criticism*" and *Other Writings*, trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5, 118, 137.
- [5] Jens Zimmermann, "F. D. E. Schleiermacher," in *A Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. by Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2016), 363. Benjamin's stress on temporality changed the way we understand hermeneutics in the present. See the depiction of hermeneutics in Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 73. For the German original, see Reinhart Koselleck, "Erfahrungswandel und Methodenwechsel: eine historisch-anthropologische Skizze," in *Alteuropa, Ancien régime, frühe Neuzeit: Probleme und Methoden der Forschung*, ed. Hans Erich Bödeker and Ernst Hinrichs (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1991), 215-64.
- [6] For an attempt to define the concept of tradition in a literary-temporal way, see my "Tradition," in *Handbuch Literatur und Religion*, ed. Daniel Weidner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2016), 455-58.
- [7] "Grösse ist das ewige Schweigen nach dem Gespräch. Es heisst den Rhythmus eigener Worte im Leeren vernehmen. Das Genie hat seine Erinnerung völlig verflucht in der Gestaltung Immer bleibt der Sprechende von der Gegenwart besessen. Also ist er verflucht: nie das Vergangene zu sagen das er doch meint. Und was er sagt, hat schon lange die stumme Frage der Schweigenden in sich befasst, und ihr Blick fragt ihn, wann er endet." Walter Benjamin, "Metaphysik der Jugend," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 93. The English is quoted from Walter Benjamin, "The Metaphysics of Youth," in *Early Writings: 1910-1917*, trans. Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 146
- [8] Benjamin, "Metaphysics of Youth," 146.
- [9] "In the beginning was the Word [*logos*] and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). As Samuel Weber showed, "The Logos tends to revert to a certain form of Mythos. The ambiguity that characterizes the latter, according to Benjamin, returns in and as the 'antinomies of the allegorical.'" See Weber, *Benjamin-abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 306.
- [10] Koselleck, *Practice of Conceptual History*, 73.
- [11] Michael Rothberg wrote about Benjamin's use of 'shock' or a "flash" of realization: "it allows

the critic to grasp time as dense with overlapping possibilities and dangers—an understanding of the present as, in the vocabulary developed here, the site of multidirectional memory.” See Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 80.

[12] The dense presence of the present perspective, which I call “presentness,” is quite different from François Hartog’s critical understanding of “presentism,” which he accuses of “eating up space and reducing or banishing time . . . without history.” See Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), xix.

[13] Walter Benjamin, “The Life of Students,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 37. “Die Elemente des Endzustandes liegen nicht als gestaltlose Fortschrittstendenz zutage. . . . Den immanenten Zustand der Vollkommenheit rein zum absoluten zu gestalten . . . ist die geschichtliche Aufgabe. Dieser Zustand ist aber nicht mit pragmatischer Schilderung von Einzelheiten (Institutionen, Sitten usw.) zu umschreiben, welcher er sich vielmehr entzieht, sondern er ist nur in seiner metaphysischen Struktur zu erfassen, wie das messianische Reich oder die französische Revolution.” See Walter Benjamin, “Das Leben der Studenten,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), 2: 1, 75. For convenience, I shall henceforth abbreviate Benjamin’s *Selected Writings* and *Gesammelte Werke* as SW and GW.

[14] For Henri Bergson, “rhythm” is a “rhythm of duration.” See Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), 11–12.

[15] Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 68.

[16] “In this triumph over the death of the living soul loved by God, all is said that can still be objectively said about it Mysteriously and groundlessly, it [i.e., the “fleeting strains of the I”] unexpectedly resounds again, again to come to an end. The language of love is only present; dream and reality, sleep of the limbs and wakefulness of the heart are inextricably woven one into the other, everything is equally present, equally fleeting and equally alive.” See Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 217. In his unpublished notes, Benjamin referred explicitly to “the need investigate the way in which my concept of origin, as it is developed in the work on the *Trauerspiel* and in the Kraus essay, relates to Rosenzweig’s concept of revelation.” See Benjamin, “Notes IV of 1932,” in SW, 2: 687.

[17] Michael Jennings and Howard Eiland, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 44.

[18] Walter Benjamin, “World and Time,” in SW, 1: 226.

[19] “The manifold rhythm of the act of creation . . . establishes a kind of basic form, from which the act that creates man diverges significantly.” See Benjamin, “On Language as Such,” 68. For “communal rhythms,” see “Naples,” in *ibid.*, 416.

[20] Walter Benjamin, “The Right to Use Force,” in SW, 1: 231.

[21] For a broad reading of Benjamin's engagement with life-philosophy, the reactionary project carried out in the 1920s and 1930s by Ludwig Klages and Carl Gustav Jung, see my *The Philosophy of Life and Death: Ludwig Klages and the Rise of a Nazi Biopolitics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 79-110.

[22] "Meine Definition von Politik: die Erfüllung der ungesteigerten Menschhaftigkeit. Es darf nicht heissen: durch die Religion erlassene, sondern muss heissen durch die erforderliche Gesetzgebung des Profanen....Und ganz unmittelbar da wo diese Zone sich ihre Grenze setzt, wo sie zurücktritt, grenzt das Gebiet der Politik, des Profanen, der im religiösen Sinne gesetzlosen Leiblichkeit an." See Benjamin, "Welt und Zeit," in *GS*, 4: 99.

[23] Gershom Scholem explains the "theology" of Franz Kafka in those terms. See his correspondence with Benjamin. Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, *Briefwechsel 1933-1940* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 175.

[24] Benjamin wrote here of "the eternal forms [that] are open to pure divine violence" against legislative violence and the executive violence that upholds the law. See Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *SW*, 1: 252.

[25] *Ibid.*, 246.

[26] Benjamin, "Naples," in *SW*, 1: 416.

[27] Benjamin, "On Proverbs," in *SW*, 2: 582.

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] "The proverb . . . does not proceed out of a pedagogy of figuration (of allegory or illustration) but, to the contrary, out of a refusal or a denial of pedagogy." See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere: On the Raising of the Body*, trans. Sarah Clift, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 5. Nancy missed the fragment by Benjamin "On Proverbs," which complements his own dialectical form.

[30] Benjamin, "On Proverbs," 583.

[31] "In these last weeks, I have come to recognize that hidden structural character. . . . I have realized my theory of knowledge—which is crystallized around the very esoteric of the 'now of recognizability.'" Benjamin to Gretel Karplus, 9 October 1935, in *SW*, 3: 424. See also the "Chronology 1935-8," in *GB*, 5: 171.

[32] Jennings and Eiland, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, 91.

[33] *Ibid.*, 129.

[34] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, conv. N2,1, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 460.

[35] Walter Benjamin "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *SW*, 4: 328.

[36] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *SW*, 4: 395.

[[37](#)] Ibid., 396.