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BENJAMIN, METHOD, AND WEAK MESSIANISM

Walter Benjamin's work remains a touchstone for various academic disciplines.¹ In this essay, I want to focus on his ongoing methodological relevance for religious studies. I stress interdisciplinarity here because Benjamin's work in his own time did not fit well into academic categories. This greatly affected his professional aspirations, as well as his editors' publishing decisions, which kept him in relative obscurity and dire poverty throughout his life. In the twenty-first century, religious studies has become widely interdisciplinary, especially following discussions of a postsecular turn, which gives us an opportunity to reflect on Benjamin in a current context.

As is well-known, Benjamin's habilitation, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, was rejected by faculty at the University of Frankfurt in 1925. This prevented Benjamin from being able to make a living as a lecturer, which in turn pushed him into greater considerations of literary aesthetics and writing itself.² As an interdisciplinary thinker myself, I am both drawn and sympathetic toward the difficulties Benjamin faced. As the field of religious studies has exploded into interdisciplinary contexts, including blurred distinctions with theology, Benjamin's work and his promiscuous intellect ought to remind both writers and readers of a spirit of generosity and flexibility we need that nevertheless demands persistent rigor. In 1919 he wrote to Ernst Schoen, the director of Radio Frankfurt, of his "indiscriminate" approach – "reading whatever happens to fall in my lap"³ – as he prepared work on Charles Baudelaire. In what follows, I will thematize Benjamin's continued relevance largely through a reading of Benjamin's "Political-Theological Fragment" in dialogue with some recent work employing Benjamin's concept of weak messianism. In particular, I point to Catherine Keller's recent *Political Theology of the Earth*. While I think Keller's book is very important, I argue that an inherent Christian messianism persists in her account of weak messianism. More crucial than a dispute with a scholar, however, is the invitation to analyze what Benjamin himself was trying to get at through his emphasis on writing as a hermeneutic gesture.

Let me begin by reading the "Politico-Theological Fragment" through the Greek rhetorical concept of *apokatastasis*, "to stand up again" or "to

¹ I am grateful to Sarah Pessin, who invited me – along with Carl Raschke, and Robert Urquhart – to study the "Politico-Theological Fragment" more in-depth, along with graduate students at the university of Denver, following Martin Kavka's visit to campus and his presentation, "Walter Benjamin's Messianic Conception of History," in April of 2018.

² Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss, The Lives of the Frankfurt School* (New York: Verso, 2016): 98-99.

³ Walter Benjamin, "To Ernst Schoen, July 24, 1919," *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*, edited by Gershom Scholom and Theodor Adorno (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 144.

restore," which in its theological sense was taken by Origenism to mean the eventual saving of all creatures (including Satan) at the end of time. It was condemned by Catholics in 543 C.E. The concept in Hebrew, (שׁוּב / shuwb/shuv) "to restore," appears in the context of *Malachi*, the last of the twelve "minor" prophets in the *Tanakh*. As the verb varies in its different forms,⁴ we see not just a sense of "restoration" but of *turning*, as in turning away, repenting, and even death as a kind of "returning." Michael Jennings has noted that Benjamin writes of the "will to apokatastasis"⁵ in *The Arcades Project* as "the resolve to gather again, in revolutionary action and in revolutionary thinking, precisely the elements of the 'too early' and the 'too late' of 'the first beginning and the final decay.'"⁶ I suggest through my invocation of ancient Jewish texts an alignment of Benjamin's work with traditions of midrash, even if "secular," precisely because I believe his focus on writing challenges binaries between sacred and profane, or secular and religious, are important to recent discourse on postsecularism.

As I focus on the concept of weak messianism, I am inspired by a 2008 lecture Alexander Gelley gave at UC Santa Barbara titled, "Weak Messianism: Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project." Gelley notes that Theodor Adorno named the "Theologico-Political Fragment," and the date of composition is likely 1920-21.⁷ This importantly precedes the publication of Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* (1922) and Benjamin's own references to Schmitt's work in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as inspiration for his entire aesthetic concept. Samuel Weber has tracked Benjamin's correspondence with Schmitt expressing his gratitude.⁸ When we encounter a fragment Adorno named, we ought to be wary about lineages of the concept of 'political theology' at work, though Benjamin

⁴ Strong's *Biblical Concordance* counts more than one thousand uses of the word.

⁵ Jennings notes that Benjamin read Origen's theology via Adolf von Harnack in 1923, and he points to the term in Acts 3:21. He contextualizes Origen's theology within Neoplatonism. By returning to *Malachi*, I am signaling perhaps an alternate notion of what restoration might be for Benjamin, which need not necessarily draw on Origen or Neoplatonism. See Michael Jennings, "The Will to Apokatastasis: Media, Experience, and Eschatology in Walter Benjamin's Late Theological Politics," in *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, ed. Colby Dickinson and Stéphane Symons (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016): 102. I am also influenced here by forthcoming work from Sarah Pessin's on covenant-eventuality. Covenant-eventuality is a concept being developed by Sarah Pessin in her forthcoming Emmanuel Levinas studies of what she calls 'covenantal politics' and the 'phenomenology of pardon and pause.'

⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁷ Alexander Gelley, *Benjamin's Passages: Dreaming, Awakening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015): 152.

⁸ Benjamin's correspondence with Schmitt does not appear in Scholom and Adorno's collection. As Samuel Weber writes, Benjamin personally wrote Schmitt, sending a copy of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and thanking Schmitt for thinking crucial to his aesthetic theory:

You will very quickly recognize how much my book is indebted to you for its presentation of the doctrine of sovereignty in the seventeenth century. Perhaps I may also say, in addition, that I have also derived from your later works, especially the "Diktatur," a confirmation of my modes of research in the philosophy of art from yours in the philosophy of the state.

Samuel Weber, "Taking Exception to the Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," *Diacritics*, vol. 22: 3/4 (Autumn 1992), 5.

has been important for the recent explosion of discussions concerning political theology along with the postsecular.

Gelley reads the late Benjamin as returning to ideas of messianism developed in his early writings on language during the last twelve years of his life (1928-1940) to negotiate a reformulation of Marx's idea of superstructure and an attempt to perform a "type of writing that could intervene actively in the contemporary cultural and political crisis."⁹ This would correspond to Jennings's attention to the late Benjamin and the "will to apokatastasis" as "the political will, the will to bring an end to what is in the hope that, in a cosmological turn, something better might succeed it."¹⁰ Benjamin had a metaphysical notion of history in which political revolution and the messianic were interrelated. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin famously characterizes historical materialism as a chess-playing automaton with theology as a hunchback inside the puppet guiding its hands. He says theology "today, as we know, is wizened and has to be kept out of sight."¹¹ Gelley sees Benjamin's writing as an alarm bell, an attempt to identify in advance the collective subject of revolutionary action, a future subject, "the intended subject of the awakening."

I want to especially take seriously the idea that Benjamin believes this is a task that *writing itself* can perform in relation to such a subject, that readers are perhaps theological cylons and do not know it.¹² Cylons, in the twenty-first century television series, *Battlestar Galactica*, have integrated their technology (writing in the form of code) seamlessly with their human creators' biology, much to the humans' own disbelief – perhaps a biopolitical updating of Benjamin's automaton metaphor. Benjamin's approach to writing, and especially literary and rhetorical troping as hermeneutic activity, underlies his ongoing relevance to religious studies discourse.

In the *Tanakh*, the prophet Malachi ("the messenger") is in dialogue with a disbelieving Israel in this hermeneutic endeavor of restoration, while charging Israel to "face up" to its faults. Elijah is to be sent as the redeemer to "turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of children to their fathers" (*Malachi* 4:6). In the "Theologico-Political Fragment," Benjamin opens: "Only the Messiah himself consummates all

⁹ University of California Television, Alexander Gelley, "Weak Messianism: Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project," *YouTube.com* September 11, 2008, accessed February 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r69bGf2DnBY>

¹⁰ Michael Jennings, "The Will to Apokatastasis: Media, Experience, and Eschatology in Walter Benjamin's Late Theological Politics," in *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, ed. Colby Dickinson and Stéphane Symons (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016): 98.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken, 1969: 253.

¹² Perhaps this is also why I am interested in *Malachi*, the messenger, here. As Jennings noted, "Much as Aristotle's spectator experiences through the fall of the hero on the stage, Benjamin's spectator experiences and participates in the actor's triumph against the lower-case apparatus on the screen as a figurative model for the spectator's resistance to the upper-case apparatus – a device for the reproduction of images of control – within which she lives." Michael Jennings, "The Will to Apokatastasis: Media, Experience, and Eschatology in Walter Benjamin's Late Theological Politics," in *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, ed. Colby Dickinson and Stéphane Symons (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016): 97.

history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason nothing historical can relate itself . . . to the Messianic."¹³ Yet it is clear also that *writing* appears to be a kind of conduit for the messianic, what he later calls "presence of mind" in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," though there in reference to an activated spectator. It is in this *restorative* kind of *turning* that the messianic in the form of the prophet works, an alignment between reading and writing in the "intended subject of the awakening."

In the fragment, Benjamin then turns to negation in his second sentence: "Therefore, the kingdom of God is not the *telos* [end] of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal." This resonates with his statement in "The Critique of Violence" that a such a critique cannot be done by seeing violence in relation to an end but *only as a means*: "Mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence pure power over all life for the sake of the living."¹⁴ This rumination leads Benjamin to ponder the distinction between animals and plants, as well as to inquire into the "origin of the dogma of the sacredness of life. Perhaps, indeed probably, it is relatively recent, the last mistaken attempt of the weakened Western tradition to seek the saint it has lost in cosmological impenetrability."¹⁵ There is something violent about messianic engagement, accompanied by chastening fires in *Malachi*. The idea that humans could set as a goal the Kingdom of God would be like a puppet or automaton with no hunchback inside it: "Therefore the order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and therefore theocracy has no political, but only a religious meaning."¹⁶ He then points to Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* (1917) as having come to the same conclusion.

The shift to the second paragraph of the fragment moves to the idea that happiness "*should be*" the rightful ordering principle for the profane: "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, containing a problem that can be represented figuratively."¹⁷ Benjamin's shift to figuration is subtle, yet we see he himself constructing a model, a kind of written automaton, and in that space his language shifts to the conditional or hypothetical:

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 can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic kingdom.¹⁸

¹³ Walter Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment," *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978): 312.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978): 297.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment," *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978): 312.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Like the Israelites in *Malachi*, who give lame animals as sacrifices, it is the move toward profane “happiness” that signals “a decisive category of [the Kingdom’s] quietist approach.”¹⁹

In these past few sentences, Benjamin has paradoxically pointed an arrow at “the direction of intensity,” as if one could point to a forthcoming saturation, but then he shifts to a sonic metaphor of “quietest approach.”²⁰ And then, “For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in good fortune is its downfall destined to find it.”²¹ This sentence strikes me as “getting lucky” in the sexual sense, a kind of profane illumination, of being out on the town, of moving from flirtation to consummation through an orgasm. There is nothing particularly “sexy” in the language; but as we know, Benjamin is fascinated with Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, the urban saunter or “wanderer.” As Bijan Stephen writes, praising the *flâneur*’s continued twenty-first-century relevance, “Since Benjamin, the academic establishment has used the *flâneur* as a vehicle for the examination of the conditions of modernity — urban life, alienation, class tensions, and the like.”²² For Benjamin, the conditions of modernity — historical and thus not properly messianic — the *flâneur*’s aesthetic openness condenses the duration of lived experience in relation to possibility and, dare I say, *prophecy* in relation to the city. The alert, “intended subject of awakening” in Benjamin occupies the turning point between the two arrows through both writing and the illuminations of profane experience. I associate this with a kind of mundane amorousness.

Notice how Benjamin then locates “Messianic intensity of the heart”: “Whereas, admittedly, the immediate Messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner man in isolation, passes through misfortune, as suffering.”²³ I would say, in my libidinal analogy, this suffering is by far the more frequently experienced situation. The suffering of isolation, of loneliness, is felt as the intensity of the heart, an intensity that would still be the earthly seeking its downfall, though perhaps not at the same duration.

The passage moves on:

To the spiritual *restitution in integrum* [the return to the original condition before the crime was committed], which introduces immortality, corresponds a worldly restitution that leads to the eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of Messianic nature, is happiness.²⁴

Happiness here might correspond the futility of “fucking” — in all its vulgarity and non-fecund intentionality: we are born dying; yet restitution introduces immortality precisely by overcoming the generational slippage

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 313.

²² Bijan Stephen, “In Praise of the Flâneur,” *The Paris Review*, October 17, 2013, accessed February 17, 2020,

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/10/17/in-praise-of-the-flaneur/>

²³ Walter Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment,” *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978): 313.

²⁴ Ibid.

by which the covenant, lineage, and trace are forgotten and neglected amid the amnesia of modern, alienated, industrial life. This of course would be different than the Neoplatonist “cosmic” return in Origen. Such is a kind of correspondence to a modern “Israel” (or a secular Jew like Benjamin) that has forgotten itself but is occupied in the *flâneur*. The slippage is the presence of the Messianic itself. The *rhythm* of Messianic nature is the rate of death and the scattering of the species held together intergenerationally: “For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.”²⁵

The shift to the last paragraph of the fragment clarifies intention in relation to the opening line about the Messiah being the only redeemer: “To strive after such passing, even for those stages of man that are nature, is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism.” Here Benjamin is reading something biological into the picture. There is something biologically to be accounted for in world politics, despite its mundaneness. What is left out is an account of what happiness is.

Following Gelley, however, happiness for Benjamin appears to be something like an acceptance of the species’ earthly lot while being aware of oneself without fright. Transience is visible in personal memory but also historical temporality, which is not “free” in any sense, but rather tied to a kind of happiness that is particular to this life while “indissolubly wrapped up with redemption.”²⁶ This is where apokatastasis or restoration comes in. The past is an echo of silent ones, combined with an unknown futurity, and felt in an anonymous desperation. In Gelley’s reading, happiness is to embrace what one is, which cannot be settled cheaply. Utopia ought to be taken seriously, not as a “no-place” that is transcendent, but a possible world.²⁷ This would not be a heroic stance, as in Heidegger’s conception of authenticity (angst) as a response to one’s lot in being-toward-death. It is not a “seize the day” mentality; nor do I see my vulgar characterization of the copulative act as a form of sexual conquest – which would be cheap.²⁸ It is rather more anonymous than romantic desire and promiscuity in its ephemeral openness. Gelley sees in

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken, 1969: 254.

²⁷ Of course, I am signaling what I see as a relevant connection between Benjamin and current anthropological discourse on “possible worlds” here. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro writes: “It is precisely because the anthropologist very easily takes the native to be an other *subject* that he cannot see him as an *other* subject, as an Other figure that, more than subject or object, is the expression of a possible world.” Such possible worlds cannot be mediated by static-transcendent notions of an arrival or descent of a *Basileia* in the Christian, or Pauline sense of a kairoic event. This seats my ambivalence toward Keller’s use of weak messianism in *Political Theology of the Earth*. See: Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “The Relative Native,” 2013 *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic*, trans. Julia Sauma and Martin Holbraad *Theory* 3, no. 3 (2013): 478.

²⁸ Nor do I mean by this economic metaphor to signal what Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “cheap grace.” I am rather signaling what some might see as a biologically procreative act that people engage in mundanely with little or no regard for the propagation of the species. I mean something more like Daniel Boyarin’s characterization of Jewish relationships to sex and flesh. See Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

this a practice of disinterment guided by a present need, *not* a transcendent eschatology.

Here again I want to highlight Benjamin's attention to the ability of writing to perform this task. As in *Malachi*, when the response of righteous people to God's words is to write a scroll, writing itself is active. It is useful to turn to Benjamin's early philosophy of language expressed in the essay, "On Language as Such and the Language of Man" – an essay he wrote for Martin Buber's *Der Jude* in 1916, which gives a rather euhemeristic reading of *Genesis* and the mystical origins of language: "All human language is only the reflection of the word in name. Name is no closer to word than knowledge to creation. The infinity of all human language always remains limited and analytical in nature in comparison to the absolutely unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word."²⁹ Here the creative act of writing is both mimetic and potentially connected to a mystical act that borderlines on a representational transgression.

For Benjamin, and still following Gelley, writing is also a possible intervention in the irruption of the political. Here, bourgeois language is essentially instrumentalist and godless – hence the intention toward the scandalously vulgar that Baudelaire and later Lautréamont would use through sex and "artificial paradises" as a vehicle to critique bourgeois life. These "profane illuminations," which I have characterized in non-procreative sexualized language, extend the mundane and profane bloodbath of the *Trauerspiel* and the quixotic emptiness of *père ubu* from Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* – a non-fecund father and empty throne of sovereignty.³⁰ Benjamin tropically moves from the allegory of the sovereign prince in the court to the anonymous *flâneur* in the "secularized" city throughout his work, yet this move in both writing and hermeneutics inspired by a midrashic³¹ sensibility undermines any binary between

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978): 323.

³⁰ This literary figure is a fascination among modernists from Jarry to Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957). At issue is the sovereign in relation to dramatic tragedy, as the strangely remote dialogue between Carl Schmitt and Benjamin attests when Schmitt, in *Hamlet or Hecuba*, returns to an exchange with Benjamin. *Ubu Roi* (1898) marks not only the emergence of absurdism but also, when read from the angle of political theology, a deconstruction of sovereignty itself. In *Ubusing Culture*, Marieke Dubbelboer writes:

In his *Peintre de la vie moderne* (1859) Baudelaire had of course depicted newspaper illustrator Constantin Guys as the perfect flâneur, who moved through the crowd like a fish through water, 'to become one with the crowd.' Walter Benjamin has turned the nineteenth century figure of the flâneur into an emblematic figure of modernity in his analysis of Baudelaire and the modern city. Ubu's casual stroll in fact becomes emblematic for the way of writing in the *Almanac* and the way modern life is transmitted in the text. In his capacity as flâneur, the 'Ubu Reporter' of the *Almanacs* appears as a mirror of the author figure as receiver of materials from the outside. Furthermore Ubu's walk from one place to another mimics the text as it wanders from one subject to another. Ubu is the 'coincidental' recipient of images and impressions from the city. From there Ubu's apparently random commentary on current events evolves.

Marieke Dubbelboer, "Ubusing Culture: Alfred Jarry's Subversive Poetics in the *Almanachs du Père Ubu*," (Phd. Diss., Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2009): 136.

https://www.patakosmos.com/database-open-access/UBUSING%20CULTURE_Marieke_Dubbelboer.pdf

³¹ Again, I am inspired here by Daniel Boyarin's account of midrash in *Carnal Israel*.

sacred and profane. As I have been suggesting with my attention to the 'shuv' verb as tropic 'turning' and Benjamin's use of writing itself as a method of alertness, it is precisely the "turning" that undermines such a binary. As my colleague, Sarah Pessin, signaled to me, *shuv* is also a cognate with *teshuva* (repentance). In the ancient texts, Israel and 'the city' are poetically feminized, and Benjamin's work on the mourning play and tragedy are informed by his sophisticated take on allegory. While Benjamin famously critiqued the "aestheticization of politics," his own aesthetic conception, though perhaps still emergent in the 1920s, certainly implied a view of politics. For example, as David Pan has argued, Benjamin's aesthetic interpretations surrounding tragedy are importantly different from those of Carl Schmitt, who wanted to hold onto a more mythic account of sovereignty in his reading of tragedy.³² Benjamin's own exploits thematized a modern and profane city through writing, as evidenced by his ongoing love affair with Asja Lācis, and their cowritten essay, "Naples."

In "Naples," the southern European city became a site of revolutionary potential, as Lācis's intellectual and erotic influence swayed Benjamin politically further to the left. In the essay, the vibrant communitarian life, while impoverished, speaks to the potential while being entrenched in the

³² Pan Writes:

Both Schmitt and Benjamin construct models of culture in which political and aesthetic issues are linked to such an extent that the two spheres in fact make up two views of the same unified phenomenon of political representation. I end with the idea that Schmitt rejects a modernization story in which myth gives way to reason. Instead, he affirms the way Hamlet does not overcome myth so much as inaugurate a new English mythic structure for the public sphere.

In other words, Schmitt's reading is historicist while maintaining a eurochristian worldview. Benjamin's conception is more radically open with respect to the past and less providential. Schmitt's reading is insightful because it unabashedly mistakes a eurochristian worldview for being a properly metaphysical interpretation of culture and "the world." For him, there are not other "possible worlds," or if they exist, they are entirely irrelevant. The entire problem of the twentieth-century's shift toward "nihilism," as Schmitt argues in *Nomos of the Earth*, rests on the so-called "discovery of the new world in the fifteenth century." During that period, and largely because of sea warfare, the unifying concept of the *katechon* by which Christians recognized each other against infidels was blurred. Also blurred were distinctions between *hostes* – a known, friendly, or "Christian" opponent – an *inimici* – "an opponent with whom there is no friendship" (163). Debates about how to treat Indians evidenced such blurring. In the breakdown of the old *katechon* nomos, Schmitt sees international law as having emerged as a secular and neutral apparatus. In this way, he accepts a secularization narrative. He completely disregards any idea that "Indians" might have their own concepts of law and nomos, relegating their "destruction" to their utter lack of "scientific power" (132). Pan's article illustrates not only Schmitt's rejection of modernity, but also that in his rejection of modernity persists his adherence to an entirely eurochristian interpretation of the world. Benjamin's tracking of a shift from the sovereign to the *flâneur* maintains no such nostalgia for a mythic order, which leads him to an entirely different political conception, but hearing Benjamin's invocation of weak messianism requires a rejection of the heroic mythology that Schmitt and even less explicitly fascist eurochristians want to advance. See: David Pan, "Tragedy as Exception in Carl Schmitt's *Hamlet* or *Hecuba*," *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 4, Online Publication Date: Apr 2014 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199916931.013.025; Carl Schmitt, *Nomos of the Earth: in the International Law of the Jus Publicum European*, translated by G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2006).

mundane. The influence of Lācis, who worked with children's theater and had revolutionary sensibilities, is clearly evident in the essay's penultimate qualifier. Referring to children living in the streets, they write: "In overpopulated quarters, children are also quickly acquainted with sex. But if their increase becomes devastating, if the father of a family dies or the mother wastes away, close or distant relatives are not needed. A neighbor takes a child to her table for a shorter or longer period, and thus families interpenetrate in relationships that can resemble adoption."³³ Despite such conditions, the lovers end pointing toward an erotic authenticity present in the vibrancy of Naples: "The conversation is impenetrable from the outside. Ears, nose, eyes, breast, and shoulders are signaling stations activated by the fingers. These configurations return in their fastidiously specialized eroticism."³⁴ Profane illuminations are not without ties to romantic mystification.

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), Benjamin wrote that "whereas the modern concept of sovereignty amounts to a supreme executive power on the part of the prince, the baroque concept emerges from a discussion of the state of emergency, and makes it the most important function of the prince to avoid this."³⁵ He then claims, "the theological-juridical mode of thought, which is so characteristic of the [seventeenth] century, is an expression of the retarding effect of the over-strained transcendental impulse, which underlies all of the provocatively worldly accents of the baroque."³⁶ For Benjamin, the focus on the prince as sovereign was the continued site of community holding the physical world and the theological world together. Here the role of the literary, and of rhetoric, remains important and speaks to ways that literary interest in his work might better inform philosophers, who at times take a naïve approach to the writing process itself, substituting the writer's mind for a cohesive metaphysical description. Benjamin's interests are more transient, and his method implies an alert hermeneutical readiness necessitated by modernity.

For example, in Benjamin's work the *flâneur* (re)occupies the princely sovereign in the common person. Literature, and in particular, tragedy provides the occasion to track the transition. As Pelagia Goulimari summarizes with respect to modern tragedy: The multi-perspectivism of liberal modern tragedy is intensified into epistemological uncertainty and breakdown of (self-)perception (disrecognition), while the multiplicity of the self is intensified into roles, performances of the self, in the absence of the unifying rational core self assumed by liberalism (play). Instead of the liberal modern conflict between society and individual, the self is now in a moral vacuum and lacks deep interiority, so that it is no longer possible to distinguish between resistance and compromise.³⁷

³³ Walter Benjamin and Asja Lācis, "Naples," *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978): 172.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London: Verso, 1998, 65.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

³⁷ Pelagia Goulimari, *Literary Criticism and Theory: From Plato to Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2015): 40.

Writing specifically with respect to Baudelaire's emphasis on the *flâneur* in "The painting of Modern Life" and *Fleurs du mal*, Goulimari writes that the modern artist must "distil the eternal from the transitory."³⁸ The profane nature of this literary history is lost on thinkers who re-inscribe Benjamin's "aura" as a writer within a romantic and sublime notion that ironically ignores Benjamin's own characterization of an artistic object's "aura" – a characterization he developed through experimentation with "drugs" following Thomas De Quincey and Baudelaire as "profane illuminations." As Sadie Plant writes:

Benjamin imagined revolution as a moment of a wild and ancient energy, running through the proletariat. The German language gave Benjamin the benefit of the word *Rausch*, which does far more work than the English *trip* and suggests a passionate rush, a rapturous journey, an exhilarating trip. And this would be the rush of revolution, an injection of what Benjamin described as "the intoxication of cosmic experience" into the new consciousness of the revolutionary mass.³⁹

The individualized (and in this case, masculinized) concept of the *flâneur*, however, tempers the facile impulse to read Benjamin as simply romanticizing the bacchanal. In Euripides' play – wonderfully rewritten in contemporary form by Anne Carson to emphasize its gender-bending⁴⁰ – Pentheus, king of Thebes, who appears as a kind of Ubu-influenced sovereign-buffoon, is punished for not recognizing Dionysus's divinity as a son of Zeus by being torn apart by female followers of the god, including his own mother. The gendered element is lost on homogenous conceptions of "the proletariat" as well as those who would situate Benjamin himself within a pantheon of "sublime" theorists. Benjamin's emphasis on writing's ability to charge an "alert subject," who is entirely and simultaneously a hermeneutic subject, suggests that he resists the impulse to read him as an "author function" and rather implies that we ought to become more active writer-spectators.⁴¹ Yet we might still critique Benjamin's rather generic writer-reader-subject, as well as the *flâneur*, for its implicit masculinism.

Benjamin's "weak messianism" as it appears in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" is also gendered. As he writes, "The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption."⁴² One of course wonders what his wife, Dora, might have thought of such lines, let alone his extramarital affairs. The more explicit sexual allusion here is tied to

³⁸ Ibid., 117.

³⁹ Sadie Plant, *Writing on Drugs* (New York: Picador, 1999): 136.

⁴⁰ See Anne Carson, *Bakkhai* (New York: New Directions, 2017).

⁴¹ Michel Foucault famously describes the "author function" in "What is an Author?" to describe an author emergent since the nineteenth-century (think Freud) whose invocation becomes a metonymy to entire modes of thinking. Closely related, Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" invoked a "birth" of a "reader-scriptor" that is resonant with Benjamin's attention to a writer-spectator who has "presence of mind."

⁴² Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken, 1969: 254.

generational fecundity and an entirely masculinist frame of the proletariat: "Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. Historical materialism is aware of that."⁴³ We, considering Benjamin's legacy in the twenty-first century, might ask how the Fourier-inspired "delivering" from Nature's "womb" perpetuates an idea that conceptions of labor, even if not reduced to technological "progress," remain implicitly patriarchal?⁴⁴

In current religious studies, Benjamin's "weak Messianism" presents as a metaphysical description by which writers believe we should comport our concerns for the world. For example, let me turn toward Catherine Keller's recent book, *Political Theology of the Earth* (2018). In the book, Keller describes her concept of *amorous agonism*, which she develops from "respectful" agonisms offered by Chantal Mouffe and William Connolly. Responding to environmental concerns, Keller seeks to lay out a more expansive form of political theology by confronting flaws within the broader Christian tradition. Her agonism is framed in contrast to the Schmittian-inspired, friend-enemy *antagonism* of zero-sum politics, an antagonism characterized by impulses toward strong decision-makers amid liberal-democratic crises. In doing so, Keller relies heavily on an interpretation of Benjamin's "weak messianism," yet in my reading Keller is unable to move beyond an inherent transcendent and eurochristian arrogance.

The arrogance I see is not only what Keller herself describes as the antagonist-oriented Christianity that aspired to Empire in the time of Constantine and in decision-making "strong sovereign" aspirations today. It is something I see in Keller's own method use of "weak Messianism."⁴⁵ Beyond Keller alone, I see this tendency throughout process-oriented theologies that serve as the backbone for the second half of Keller's book (including her own constructive theological position), despite her own self-critique of historical injustices in the name of Christianity and her attention to issues of race and ethnicity in passing moments of her text.⁴⁶

Keller does give an important qualifier in her opening pages. As *theology*, Keller writes:

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 259.

⁴⁵ This arrogance is a more subtle form of the enculturation that Barbara Mann (Seneca) has called "Euro-forming," and it affects even well-intentioned Christians who see themselves on "the left" or as performing in the mainline liberal traditions of social gospel following Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907). According to Mann in *Iroquoian Women: the Gantowisas*, Euro-forming is a whitely, colonizing form in which "universalist" and "archetypal" interpretations create facile readings based on analogy. Barbara Alice Mann, *Iroquoian Women: the Gantowisas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006): 62.

⁴⁶ If it seems strange for me to paint in broad strokes by referring to Christianity as if it were one "thing," this is because I am trying to elucidate something at the heart of Keller's attempt to write a political theology of the earth, which would necessarily include non-christians and non-humans. It is also because, following Tink Tinker's (wazhazhe, Osage) Native American perspective, I tend to read "eurochristianity" as a social movement and not as a 'religion'. In Tinker's view, the very concept of 'religion' is rooted within christian-dominated worldview. The same can be said for "theology" and discourse that relegates "religion" to "belief" or "faith," something that can, in the Lockean liberal tradition, be discreetly privatized.

political theology does not perform the Messiah or announce her coming. Indeed, “the messianic thwarts the teleological unfolding of time (the Messiah will never appear in time).” That is Judith Butler thinking with Walter Benjamin. The pretensions of a predictable chromosome fail us. They do not come in time. But neither is the Jewish messiah timeless, enthroned beyond time itself. The messianic, perhaps even Paul’s messiah, called *ho Christos*, is always “coming” – never captured in a final revelation of gore and glory.⁴⁷

Keller follows this by invoking a third option: “If the moment of crisis is open at its edge, its *eschatos*, as *kairos*, it seems that a specter of ‘messianicity’ (Derrida) starts to materialize within it. A historically worn yet inexhaustible possibility shoots – like the shuttle out of the loom – through the tangles of impossibility. It might make up in creativity what it lacks in power.”⁴⁸ Ideas of temporality, condensed and *kairotic*, are already doing some formation work here.

For Keller, creativity is distinguished from power in a way that echoes the usurpation of *potestas* by medieval kings from the Holy Roman Emperor. While perhaps full of ingenuity, such power-grabbing would not be in any way part of the divine creativity to make and sustain the earth. This kind of ingenuity would later be the “secularizing” power of the intriguer, the player of politics as a game – a bad dream in Hamlet’s “infinite space” within a nutshell – and that theme of sovereignty is the groundwork for both Walter Benjamin’s thesis in *On the Origins of German Tragic Drama* and the exchanges he had with Carl Schmitt regarding sovereignty, which exhibit very different conceptions of the political.

Beyond Benjamin, Keller sees a “spectral” possibility for Derrida’s ‘messianicity’ in her concept of amorous agonism. Drawing on Mouffe and Connolly, she bases her descriptions on a split concept of charisma. Pulling from Max Weber, Keller sees one concept of charisma in lineage with a sovereign exceptionalism as described by Carl Schmitt. This charismatic leader is a form of “superman” whose unique qualities enable him to be just the right *man* for the job. This is a form of charisma that informs white masculine privilege and the *antagonistic*, zero-sum kind of thinking expressed by advanced capitalism and current arrogant leaders. I am generally with Keller here.

The second messianic form of charisma Keller describes is also based on Walter Benjamin’s notion of “weak messianism,” and this is exactly the kind of messianism she thinks ought to underwrite the ‘political theology of the earth’ her book is developing. She holds up civil rights leadership as an example: “Such messianic agape as Martin Luther King’s, even while not left to angels, does not take the place of politics. But neither can this love be captured in apolitical privacy. With its history of effects, limited but indelible, it refutes the presupposed antagonism of Schmitt’s political theology.”⁴⁹ This would be another example of the “weak messianism” of Keller’s amorous agonism, and a very practical one at that. Yet while

⁴⁷ Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

many writers are keen to see such collaboration as evidence of the possibilities for shared civic space, fewer are willing to question the foundations of what people assume to be “civic” and “civilized” space as a eurochristian derivation. Similarly, communitarian Naples, for Benjamin and Lăcis, participated in an entirely Catholic (still eurochristian) culture of carnival.

For Keller, the current environmental situation puts all life—or at least all *qualified* life—on earth in a time-crunch, a real state of emergency that charismatic leaders mask in their strutting about. In such a context, citizens of their increasingly nationalized nations consume and mirror back reaction-formation politics. Keller goes on to write:

If that weak power has also been encrypted as crucifixion (not in Benjamin’s writings) it is because, despite its later triumphalism, the cross endlessly recalls an agony that cannot be erased. In fact the cross performs politically a double-coding: of both the sovereign antagonism and the amorous agonism, of the opposed world schemas intersecting. The former nails above the suffering body of Jesus a sign, *The King of the Jews*, in sovereign ridicule of the messianic promise; the latter inspires a long history of struggles for the *basileia theou*, the kingdom of the least, the parody of power.⁵⁰

Yet I do not think that Keller’s “double-coding” corresponds to Benjamin’s activated writer-spectator or the pushing-pulling “turning” trope integral to the two “arrows” in his figuration articulated in his “Politico-Theological Fragment.” Still, Keller follows this with her own brief genealogy of messianic weakness. She begins with Ernst Bloch’s linking of messianism to Marxist revolutions in *Atheism in Christianity*, followed by Bloch’s influence on José Esteban Muñoz’s “queering of hope” in *Cruising Utopia*.⁵¹ Muñoz suggests the plural use of utopias-of-presence to counter Anglo heteronormativity, resisting any “queer exceptionalism” and thus joining in amorous agonism. Keller writes, “Similarly, process theology fosters a political pluralism of interconnected differences.”⁵² The emphasis on process theology remains, for me, too transcendent to account for what Benjamin means by weak messianism following my reading of the “Politico-Theological” fragment.

Keller goes on to discuss Bloch in relation to Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope* (1967), describing a hazardous hope that does not have either an optimistic or a pessimistic outcome in mind. Remember that Benjamin himself had pointed to Bloch in his fragment. This temporality, Keller believes, is indicative of condensed kairotic temporality in St. Paul’s (and Paul Tillich’s) work, the “gathered together” *sunestalemnos*.⁵³ She calls this “hazardous hope,” meaning to critique standard liberal progress narratives: “So then, not in trust of any progress but by insistence on just process, might we strengthen, radicalize, even socialize democracy?”⁵⁴ Despite her longing to socialize democracy, Keller is pessimistic about political movements of leaders like Bernie Sanders who claim a political

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 56.

⁵² Ibid., 178.

⁵³ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 63.

revolution, instead predicting a different generational trend: “Democratic Party dogmatism will not galvanize the youthful public that supported Bernie Sanders; they would rather drop out than sell out,” and “no broad enough U.S. public will ever yield to socialist orthodoxy.”⁵⁵ It is, rather, in the “apophatic darkening” and the contradictions that she says her political theology of the earth is to be formulated along with an amorous agonism quietly informed by her take on weak messianism. Keller’s pessimism concerning Bernie Sanders has been at least partially evidenced by his dropping out of the presidential race in 2020, yet despite calls for an “apophatic darkening,” in my reading of Keller hope persists in a Christianized form of amorous agonism based on a flattened and universalizing notion of *agape*.

Returning to Benjamin, who was a leftist critic of liberalism, there is a much more profane notion of weak messianism, which I have characterized through ephemeral promiscuity infused within literary traditions critiquing bourgeois culture while maintaining an implicitly masculinist frame. I am in no way sure that Benjamin’s concept of weak messianism lends itself to the kind of democratic values that Keller seems to want. And while Keller distances her own articulation of weak messianism more than any strict adherence to Benjamin’s conception, I would argue that it is precisely in the ways that his conception of weak messianism remains incongruent to Keller’s that he remains relevant to religious studies discourse. In contrast, Keller’s constructivist theological method remains rather romantic, even if it promotes itself as “hazardous.”

What do I mean by “romantic”? There remains something hopeful in Keller’s flirtation with the hazardous. A specifically Christian theology seems to underwrite her political theology of the earth. Despite a fleeting reference to Miguel De La Torre’s *Embracing Hopelessness*, hope persists in Keller, although with the following qualifier: “So, instead of confusing it with optimism, I would rather hold hope’s feet to the fire of its most amorous – most remaining – desire. Its present tense then contracts our past with our possibility. And every possibility is a lurch into a future present. But when hope ex-cpts itself from the thick copresence of what matters, pronounce it ‘hype.’”⁵⁶ For me, eurochristian *agape* – as well as “amorous agonism” – remains “hype” because its inherently eurochristian universalizing persists in arrogantly asserting its own benevolence beneath its attempt to make the entire world into the *basileia theou*. There is no systematic or process-oriented theology that does not invoke this aspiration in some way, even if it is a kind of “becoming theology.” There remains in the eurochristian tradition a waiting for an “arrival,” a descent of a kairotic event. *Agape* in its eurochristian sense always seems temporalized in this regard, despite the rhetorical usefulness of emphasizing *desperation* in its relinquishment of hope.

Despite my own criticisms of Keller, I am not sure that Benjamin himself escapes a kind of hopefulness. Yet for the question of his relevance to contemporary religious studies, I believe his method of emphasizing a writing-reader-scriptor who is hermeneutically engaged remains relevant. I thoroughly believe writers such as Keller, who is merely one example in this piece, contribute thoughtfully to the field of religious studies and the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 90.

discussion of political theology while drawing on Benjamin's work. In a larger sense, however, what Benjamin continues to contribute – despite my criticism of gender in his concept of weak messianism – is his sense of intellectual and interdisciplinary promiscuity. If we are going to take that seriously, we must inevitably examine the ethics of promiscuity (beyond amorousness) itself in its more profane and mundane sense in our methods. One way to do this might be to situate profane illuminations against the Keller's amorous agonism based in Christian notions of agape. This might better account for the various *turnings* thematic to current religious studies in the era of the postsecular and particularly the porosity of urban settings.