

Messianic time. Redemption and memory in Walter Benjamin

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Abstract. In Walter Benjamin the epistemological structure of the “concept of history”, which presents itself in a monadic dialectical image, is characterized by a non-linear, non-progressive but intensive and ideal temporal dimension, in which the cognitive concept and the idea (of the good, of justice, of liberty) characterized by totality and eternity coincide. Here emerges the link between the theological realm—transcendental and ideal but secretly active in the immanence of redemption—and the immanent setting of the political. In fact, in a fleeting moment, the redeemed past renders the fulfilment of messianic time, the Reign of God, and provides the occasion and direction for praxis, for a revolutionary action that is messianic and theologically motivated, striving toward the construction of a classless society. Political action is rendered possible specifically by its link to the past, by the cognitive capacity of the historical materialist to recuperate forgotten moments and make them explode, and to fuel the destructive, liberatory power of the oppressed class (the subject, like the historian, of historical knowledge)

Keywords: Messianic, Time, Redemption, Memory, History, Benjamin, H. Cohen, Kant.

Riassunto. La struttura gnoseologica del “concetto di storia”, che si presenta in una immagine dialettica monadica, è caratterizzata da una dimensione temporale non lineare e progressiva ma intensiva, ideale, in cui coincidono il concetto conoscitivo e l’idea (del bene, della giustizia), caratterizzata da totalità e eternità. Emerge qui il legame tra l’ambito teologico, trascendente e ideale ma segretamente attivo nell’immanenza della redenzione e del riscatto, e l’ambito immanente del politico. Infatti il passato riscattato e redento rende presente in un momento fugace il tempo messianico, compiuto, del Regno di Dio e dà l’occasione e la direzione per la prassi, per l’azione rivoluzionaria, messianica e motivata teologicamente, tesa verso la costruzione della società senza classi. L’azione politica è resa possibile proprio dal legame con il passato, dalla capacità conoscitiva dello storico materialista di recuperare e far esplodere momenti dimenticati e di alimentare la forza distruttiva e liberatoria della classe oppressa (il soggetto, come lo storico, della conoscenza storica) attraverso l’immagine degli avi asserviti, senza proiettare la liberazione, come fa la socialdemocrazia, in un futuro infinito.

Parole chiave: Tempo messianico, redenzione, memoria, storia, Benjamin, H. Cohen, Kant.

In Walter Benjamin the ethical, political and «historical task» pertaining to the collective agent and subject of knowledge is founded on a conception of time that is not empty and mechanical, but that is full, intensive, and redemptive. This latter is the time of the Bible and prophecy, where historical contingency and the eternity of the idea coincide.

Benjamin’s philosophy of history develops continuously across the entire arc of his production, from *The Life of Students* in 1914/15 (Benjamin [1914/15] 1991, II, 1: 75-87/ Benjamin [1914/15] 2004: 18-36) to the late theses in *On the Concept of History* (Benjamin [1940]1991, II, 2: / Benjamin [1940] 2004: 389-400), in 1940. Throughout, the theological conception of the time of history as *Jetztzeit* (now-time) (cf. Desideri 1995: 153-165) stands opposed to homogeneous and empty mechanical time, the mathematically measurable time of the natural sciences:

«Historical time is infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment. This means we cannot conceive of a single empirical event that bears a necessary relation to the time of its occurrence. For empirical events time is nothing but a form, but, what is more important, as a form it is unfulfilled. The event does not fulfill the formal nature of the time in which it takes place. For we should not think of time as merely the measure that records the duration of a mechanical change. Although such time is indeed a relatively empty form, to

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think of its being filled makes no sense. Historical time, however, differs from mechanical time. [...] Rather, a process that is perfect in historical terms is quite indeterminate empirically; it is in fact an idea. The idea of fulfilled time is the dominant historical idea of the Bible: it is the idea of messianic time. (Benjamin [1916] 1991, II, 1: 134/ Benjamin [1916] 2004: 55-56)

This vision considers time not as a process but as an ideal dimension (the historical idea of the Bible) in which a moment exposes a dimension of totality, eternity and completeness. Benjamin's vision positions itself in the realm of Judaic messianism as a restorative dimension of history, a return to a reign of justice (cf. Fenves 2011: 187-226). In the biblical tradition, Justice is the first attribute of God: "Righteous art thou, O Lord; and upright are they judgments [...] Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and thy law is the truth"¹; and an attribute of the Messiah, a distinctive sign of the messianic age: "And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins"²; "the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness"³.³ Messianism is not to be defined as awaiting a personal Messiah, but rather as awaiting a Messianic reign, "*an intra-historical but total, radical and universal fulfillment [...] linked [...] [to the] contents clearly indicated by the prophets (starting with Isaiah): peace, justice, happiness*" (Cunico, 2005: 14).⁴ The essential character of messianic expectation, as received by Benjamin from Scholem in an intra-historical variation, is immanent and neither eschatological nor univocal, but contains within itself two opposed tendencies. On one hand, the restorative aspect brings equilibrium to a condition of disorder; on the other stands a contrary dimension of rupture and radical novelty that is destructive and apocalyptic (cf. Scholem 1971).⁵ In the *Theses*, a revolutionary leap takes place, in immanence, between world history and redeemed history, through memory and the citation and knowledge of the past; a "tiger's leap into the past" (Benjamin [1940] 1991, 1, II: 70/ Benjamin [1940] 2003: 395):

«History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time fulfilled by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a by-gone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger's leap into the past. The leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution» [Thesis XIV] (*ibid.*).

In Benjamin, the materialist conception of history (before the "historical materialist turn" of 1926 we might speak rather of an anarchist, nihilist vision)⁶ is closely connected to the theological idea of time as *Jetztzeit*. Through the redemption of the past, by its actualization in the present and the critique of the concept of progress, the historian practices a "weak messianic power" (Benjamin [1940] 1991, I, 2: 694/ Benjamin [1940] 2003: 390) and provides a direction for political action. This action is revolutionary and aims at founding a classless society as a secularized Reign, a realm of justice. A thesis (n. XVIIa) found among the preparatory materials for *On the Concept of History* illustrates these concepts: progress is an infinite, linear process, like the Neo-Kantian "infinite task" and democratic socialism, that transforms the representation of the messianic idea as an abrupt realization

¹ Psalm 119;137 and 142 (King James Version).

² Isaiah 11; 5 (King James Version).

³ Isaiah 26; 9 (King James Version).

⁴ Cunico refers here to J. Klausner, 1956.

⁵ The culminating point of Scholem's project on messianism is the work that appeared in 1957 in Hebrew and in 1973 in English, Scholem 1973. On the theological and political doctrine of Scholem and Benjamin cf. Jacobson 2003. Cf. also Weidner 2003. On Benjamin's messianism cf. Khatib 2013 and Desideri 2005.

⁶ On Benjamin's "romantic" and messianic anarchism, cf. Löwy 1983 and Löwy 1988. On the *Theses* see Gentili [2002] 2019. Cf. Löwy 2001.

of the reign of justice in an “ideal”,⁷ which is to say an unachievable goal. For the Neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen the Messiah is significant as a metaphysical and moral idea originating in Judaic prophecy, an ideal projected into the dimension of the future of history (and not toward a life beyond the earthly one) where the individual history of humans will disappear.

Benjamin individuates two concepts of the infinite task, one negative (attributed to epistemology and Neo-Kantian ethics, especially that of Cohen), and the other positive (and Benjamin’s own), that utilizes the Neo-Kantian structure of the relation between a regulating idea and a series of concepts, to construct a concept of metaphysical experience, not empty, but full (*erfüllt*) of spiritual and theological-linguistic content. The time of the infinite task of Neo-Kantianism is conceived, on the contrary, as homogeneous—the time of the physical and mathematical sciences—and empty; that is, not full (*erfüllt*) and achieved by God and through the power of divine violence/authority (*Gewalt*):⁸

«In the idea of the classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing. It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an "ideal" that the trouble began. The ideal was defined in Neo-Kantian doctrine as an "infinite [*unendlich*] task". And this doctrine was the school philosophy of the Social Democratic party – from Schmidt and Stadler through Natorp and Vorländer. Once the classless society had been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogeneous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity. In reality, there is not a moment that would not carry with it *its* revolutionary chance – provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new problem [*Aufgabe*]. For the revolutionary thinker, the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation. But it is equally grounded, for tis thinker, in the right of entry which the historical moment enjoys vis-à-vis a quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked. The entrance into this chamber coincides in a strict sense with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic. (Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately [*endlich*] achieved interruption)» (Thesis XVIIa, Benjamin [1940] 1991, I, 2: 1231/ Benjamin 2003: 401-402).

In the fleeting “slipping away” of a dialectical image, the historian recuperates and recognizes a moment of the past of the oppressed classes, which enters into a constellation with immediate political conditions and makes it explode, providing a direction for praxis. Revolutionary action takes shape through a dialectical leap into the past that takes place in the messianic *now* – in the “now of knowability” (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*) that pertains to the “concept of history”: “The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been (*das Gewesene*) is to be held fast—as an image flashing up in the now of its knowability. The rescue (*Rettung*) carried out by these means—and only by these—can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost” (Benjamin [1933-40] 1991, V, 1, 591-592/ Benjamin 2002: 473).

⁷ On the neo-Kantian theme of the “infinite task”, interpreted by Benjamin in ethical-religious terms, cf. Tagliacozzo [2003] 2013: this text seeks to demonstrate the hypothesis of the influence on Benjamin of the messianism and philosophy of Hermann Cohen. Cf. also Tagliacozzo 2018; Tagliacozzo 2020; Desideri 2015. On the “ideal” cf. H. Cohen [1929] 1988: 291-292/ 1995: 249-250 (translation mine): “29. The messianic future is the first conscious expression of opposition to the conception of the empirical sense of moral values. This may be simply designated as the *ideal*, in opposition to effectual reality [...] the new of a future. [...]. Thus arises the notion of *history* for humanity and its people. [...] Humanity [...] [is] an idea". Benjamin was reading Cohen's *Religion* in 1920 (cf. Benjamin’s letter to G. Scholem, 1-XII-1920, in Benjamin 1996: 107). For a comparison between Cohen’s and Benjamin’s messianism, see also Günther 1974: 352-35. Cf. Fiorato 2005: 133-160. A possible source of Cohen’s messianism for Benjamin may have been the essay *Das Gottesreich*, in which Cohen identified the Reign of God and the Reign of the Messiah, published by Cohen in 1913, in Cohen [2013] 1977, vol. 16: 41-50.

⁸ On the divine *Gewalt* cf. W. Benjamin, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt", in Benjamin [1921] 1991, II, 1: 179-203/ Benjamin 2004: 55-57. Cf. on the theme of violence and divine violence in Benjamin in relation to the political philosophy of Kant, cf. Tomba 2006. Cf. also Tomba 2009: 126-144 and Tomba 2016.

The epistemological structure of the “concept of history”, which presents itself in a monadic dialectical image, is characterized by a non-linear, non-progressive but intensive and ideal temporal dimension, in which the cognitive concept and the idea (of the good, of justice, of liberty) characterized by totality and eternity coincide. Here emerges the link between the theological realm—transcendental and ideal but secretly active in the immanence of redemption—and the immanent setting of the political. In fact, in a fleeting moment, the redeemed past renders the fulfillment of messianic time, the Reign of God, and provides the occasion and direction for praxis, for a revolutionary action that is messianic and theologically motivated, striving toward the construction of a classless society. Political action is rendered possible specifically by its link to the past, by the cognitive capacity of the historical materialist to recuperate forgotten moments and make them explode, and to fuel the destructive, liberatory power of the oppressed class (the subject, like the historian, of historical knowledge) through images of enslaved ancestors, without projecting the liberation into an infinite future, as does democratic socialism:

«The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class in itself. Marx presents it as the last enslaved class – the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacus League, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. Within three generations they managed to erase the name of Blanqui almost entirely, though at the sound of that name the preceding century had quaked. The Social Democrats preferred to cast the working class in the role of a redeemer of *future* generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren» (Thesis XII, Benjamin [1940] 1991, I, 2: 700/ Benjamin 2003: 394).

Benjamin's position on the oppressed class as subject of historical cognition can be read, as Sami Khatib writes, against the backdrop of Kant and Marx:

«Although Benjamin clearly distinguishes the subject of historical cognition from Kant's non-historical transcendental subject, [...] the epistemo-political scope of Benjamin's historical materialist concept of history becomes legible only against the dual backdrop of Marx *and* Kant. If the struggling, oppressed class takes the position of the Kantian transcendental subject, the political-economic standpoint and historicity of this collective subjectivity coalesces with its cognizing vantage point in a transcendental sense»⁹.

The oppressed class takes the place of the Kantian transcendental subject and, through the dialectical image (which contains a historical index, a potential encounter between fore- and after-history, that renders the image legible and usable for political action), overcomes the Kantian vision of knowledge as the relation of a knowing subject to a known object:¹⁰

«Benjamin maintains the basic structure of Kant's transcendental argument, yet expands and radicalizes it by grounding transcendental in a constellation of historical time punctuated by class struggle. In this way, historical cognition is not structured by ahistorical transcendental forms but always already imprinted by a 'historical index' (*AP*, N 3,1), which is bound to the experience of a political subject at a particular time» (Khatib 2014: 23).

⁹ Khatib 2014: 23. Cf. *ibid.*: “In the preparatory notes on the Theses, [Benjamin] [...] adds a further clarification: ‘This subject is certainly not a transcendental subject, but the struggling, oppressed class in its most exposed situation. There is historical cognition for them (this class) only and for them only in a historical instant.’ [GS, I, 1243].” [translation mine].

¹⁰ W. Benjamin, *Erkenntnistheorie* [1920-21] in W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, op. cit., vol. VI, 46; English trans. W. Benjamin, “Theory of Knowledge.” In: *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. Vol. 1.*, op. cit., 276: “Two things must be overcome: 1. The false disjunction: knowledge is either in the consciousness of a knowing subject or else in the object (alternatively, identical with it). 2) The appearance of the knowing man (for example, Leibniz, Kant).”

What is transcendental here is less the subject than the medium of knowledge, a linguistic medium, given that, “the place where one encounters [the images] is language.”¹¹ Language is a medium in that it is not a means of communication but a location of communicability (cf. Weber 2008: 13) in which a cognitive relation is constructed between subject and object, which encounter one another in the now of knowability. When a linguistic, ideal, and messianic image (for example, that of republican Rome for Robespierre, or the French Revolution, or the messianic realm) becomes legible in the now of knowability, time is contained within it as an intensive, messianic and infinitely abbreviated “time differential” (Benjamin [1933-1940] 1991, II, 1, 1038, Q^o 21/ Benjamin 2002: 867) which is curved rather than linear. This logical time stands against chronological time and the time of Newtonian physics and mathematics, although some interpreters argue that it takes inspiration from the new mathematical theories of the early twentieth century.¹² This time is a time of crisis and political decision, a time for revolutionary action, which may entail an interruption and reversal of the course of history, such that the oppressed classes may be both subject of knowledge and political subject. The oppressed classes arrive at a polarized historical moment, represented (*dargestellt*) in the dialectical image, an instant in present time (*Aktualität*), and makes it explode into praxis and struggle.¹³ Subject (the oppressed classes) and object (the image) of historical knowledge unite in the now of knowability, in the constellation of historical concepts that constitute the dialectical image. Both subject and object are not static, but active and involved in the historical events that they undergo and provoke. As we have seen, what permits the dialectical image to become an instrument of knowledge is its “construction” as a concept; that is, as a historical concept. Theory and praxis are deeply interwoven: praxis, provoked by the conditions of the oppressed classes, directs knowledge toward the construction of concepts and the representation of utopian ideals; theory provides direction for praxis, and thus for political action.

The concept of messianic time, opposed to the homogenous and empty physical and mathematical time of modern science which is typical of Neo-Kantianism and democratic socialism—with its vision of the progressive, “infinite” task moving toward the ideal of a classless society—is anticipated here with extraordinary import in the 1914/15 period in the *incipit* of the essay paper *The Life of Students*:

«There is a view of history that puts its faith in the infinite extent of time and thus concerns itself only with the speed, or lack of it, with which people and epochs advance along the path of progress. This corresponds to a certain absence of coherence and rigor in the demands it makes on the present. The following remarks, in contrast, delineate a particular condition in which history appears to be concentrated in a single focal point, like those that have traditionally been found in the utopian images of philosophers. The elements of the ultimate condition do not manifest themselves as formless progressive tendencies, but are deeply rooted in every present in the form of the most endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed ideas and products of the creative mind. The

¹¹ W. Benjamin [1933-1940] 1991; 1, 577, N 2a, 3/ Benjamin 2002; 462: “For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. – Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language.” For Benjamin’s critique of temporal “*continuo*”, cf. Ng 2017: 41-60. Cf. Desideri 2016: 177-184.

¹² Cf. Fenves 2011: 106-113 and 242. Cf. Ng 2017: 41-60. Cf. Khatib 2014: 39, n. 18: “Peter Fenves has suggested that this unimaginable shape of time can be conceived mathematically with reference to the so-called ‘*Weierstraß* function’ and the ‘Koch curve’, which Benjamin was acquainted with.” Cf. Fenves 2011: 111: “Karl Weierstraß [...] surprised his students and colleagues in the 1860s when he constructed a trigonometric function that was so “pathological” that it had no tangent at any point. A curve corresponding to this function is unimaginable in the exact sense of the term: every point consists in a sharp turn [...] Does the course of time have a fractal shape? [...] [Scholem in] his diary entry from August 1916 [...] says ‘perhaps,’ whereas in his book from 1975 he inclines toward ‘no.’”

¹³ Cf. Benjamin [1933-1940] 1991, V, 1, 587-588, N 7a, I/ Benjamin 2002: 470: “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 (*Aktualität*) interpenetrates it.”

historical task is to disclose this immanent state of perfection and make it absolute, to make it visible and dominant in the present. This condition cannot be captured in terms of the pragmatic description of details (the history of institutions, customs, and so on); in fact, it eludes them. Rather, the task is to grasp its metaphysical structure, as with the messianic domain or the idea of the French Revolution» (Benjamin [1914/15] 1991, II, 1: 75/ Benjamin 2004: 37).

As seen here, already in 1915 there is a nexus between the intensive, redemptive time of history, as found in the images of the utopians, and the metaphysical structure as idea, and thus with the epistemological nexus that makes the individuation of the state of perfection and justice (the “final state”, the “messianic reign”, the “French Revolution”) indispensable in the immanence of the present, through the division of phenomena by means of concepts comprehended, in fragments, in the idea (cf. Benjamin [1925] 1991, I, 1: 207-237/ Benjamin 2009: 27-56).

In a passage in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes that “being a dialectician means having the wind of history in one's sails. The sails are the concepts. It is not enough, however, to have sails at one's disposal. What is decisive is knowing the art of setting them”. (Benjamin [1933-1940] 1991, V, 1: 592, N 9, 8/ Benjamin 2002: 473). The concept of the historical object (the hoisted sail that catches the wind of progress and catastrophe) is a word well-disposed in thought through the “sound understanding (*gesunden Menschenverstand*)” (ivi: 595, N 11, 4/ engl. transl. modified 476) or common human understanding (*gemeine Menschenverstand*). In Paragraph 40 of the *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment*, Kant will distinguish common human understanding or common sense – usually identified with *sensus communis* (*Gemeinsinn*) – from *sensus communis* interpreted as communal sense (*gemeinschaftlichen Sinn*): this latter is the capacity for a broad-minded way of thinking (from a universal standpoint).¹⁴ This is also the capacity to use the faculties of *judgment* to find the universal in the particular,¹⁵ which dialectic must have: “What matters for the dialectician is to have the wind of world history in his sails. For him, thinking means setting the sails. What is important is how they are set. Words are his sails. The way they are set makes them into concepts” (Benjamin [1933-1940] 1991, V, 1: 591, N 9, 6/ Benjamin 2002: 473; transl. modified).¹⁶

In the messianic now of knowability, the concept of the historical object, as a well-set word, exposes the “truth” (which is an “intentionless state of being, made up of ideas”)¹⁷ by presenting an image of the past known and saved in a fleeting flash of representation. The monadic phenomenon is a dialectic image of the messianic reign, the representation and symbolic concept of the state of divine perfection and justice.¹⁸ In the “state of fulfillment of the world”, phenomena will no longer be fragmented the way they are in the now of knowability, of immanence, and in history, the conditions of which necessarily entail knowledge and caducity. Revolutionary action inspired by the “hidden” theological-messianic dimension remains conscious of the fact that it produces a transitory political

¹⁴ Cf. Kant [1790] 1990: 144 (157) § 40/ Kant 2002: 173 Cf. ibidem the “Preface”, 3. Engl. Trans 56: “nothing other than this very faculty [of the power of judgment] is meant by the name of sound understanding (*gemeine Verstand*)”. Cf. Kant [1783] 1976: 139 (369) / Kant 2004: 118: “For what is *sound common sense* (*gesunde Verstand*)? It is the *ordinary understanding* (*gemeine Verstand*), insofar as it judges correctly. And what now is the ordinary understanding? It is the faculty of cognition and of the use of rules *in concreto*, as distinguished from the *speculative understanding*, which is a faculty of the cognition of rules *in abstracto*.” Cf. Taraborrelli 2004: 108-112.

¹⁵ Cf. Kant [1790] 1990: 15-16 (XXVI)/ Kant 2002: 66-67. Here: 67: “If, however, only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found, then the power of judgment is merely reflecting.” Sami Khatib identifies the origin of Benjamin’s term *Teleologie ohne Endzweck* (teleology without a final end) in the Kantian term *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* (purposiveness without an end): cf. Kant [1790] 1990: 67, §. 15/ Kant 2002: 112. Cf. Khatib 2013: 383.

¹⁶ Cf. Benjamin [1933-1940]: 591/ 473, N 9, 3: “The concept of ‘rescue’: the wind of the absolute in the sails of the concept (the principle of the wind is the cyclic element). The trim of the sails is the relative.” On the epistemological problems of Benjamin’s philosophy of history cf. Fiorato 2012: 611-624. For a possible relation between Benjamin and Gottlob Frege on the conception of sails as concepts/signs/words, cf. Tagliacozzo 2018, Chapter I.

¹⁷ Cf. Benjamin [1925] 1991, I, 1: 216/ Benjamin 2002: 36.

¹⁸ Cf. Tomba 2006: 206-255, in particular the section *Göttliche Gewalt*, 251-255.

reality not based on an eternal truth. The truth of the past, and the messianic idea of redemption connected to it, is a “fleeting (*vergänglich*) truth” that appears for a moment and then vanishes, just as the unknown, never-realized past is fleeting:

«If [...] [the image of the past] is authentic, it is due to its fleetingness (*Flüchtigkeit*). Precisely because this truth is fleeting (*vergänglich*) and a breath is enough to sweep it away, much depends upon it. Appearance (*Schein*), in fact, which agrees better with eternity, is ready to take its place» (Benjamin [1940], 1991, I, 3:1247, Ms 440).

The concept of history is a construction where the messianic idea, the perfect world, is present in every “now of knowability” in which the monadological “dialectical image” presents itself as the actualization of moments of an unredeemed past that is redeemed in knowledge and afterwards in political action. The relation between past and present is given in the dialectical image, in the concept of history, in a messianic interruption of the course of history. This owes to the Jewish doctrine of the Kabbalah, to Kant and to Marx. This owes also a great deal to Hermann Cohen’s neo-Kantian and Judaic-messianic conception of ethics and his concept of temporality and eternity, his concepts of sanctity, humanity, justice and peace bound to history, and to his ethical antiontologism and anti-eschatologism. Benjamin inverts Cohen’s idea of ethics bound to the future in the actuality of remembrance and the political interruption of the course of history.¹⁹

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¹⁹ Cf. Desideri 2005, Desideri 2015 and Desideri 2016; see Tagliacozzo 2020.

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