

Introduction

“At first all the arrangements for building the Tower of Babel were characterized by fairly good order; . . . as if there were centuries before one to do the work in. In fact, the general opinion at that time was that one simply could not build too slowly.”¹ Thus Kafka begins the narrative of the biblical episode of the tower high enough to reach the sky that ancient generations wanted to build. The story in Genesis is set at the beginning of humanity, which, still close to its original harmony, was “of one language and of one speech.” Yet that unity apparently bore the seeds of its own disunion within it. To ward off their separation, men decided to gather in one place and establish a city, mother of all civilizations. As a symbol of their harmony, they undertook to erect the tower; but the Bible—unlike Kafka’s narrative—makes it clear that the work went very fast, so fast that God became alarmed at that concentration of power in the hands of a single city, which dared to want to rule the world. The unity of language—or, if you like, the transparency of communication—did not resist the division of labor demanded by that superhuman undertaking. The inhabitants of the city were divided, separated, “scattered from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.”² In sum, they had been the victims of the very evil they had wanted to avoid. Perhaps their error had been wanting to consolidate hastily (that is, violently) a unity they already possessed. Or perhaps they were overtaken in spite of themselves by a dispersion more original than any unity.

If, in the Bible, the generation of Babel seemed to have sinned out of impatience, Kafka sees it as the embodiment of hesitation. All the haste and resolve implied by the biblical text turns into slowness and procrastination in Kafka. Indeed, Kafka's narrative completely subverts the biblical fable of its model: instead of evoking the construction of the tower, it tells the history of its nonconstruction:

People argued in this way: The essential thing in the whole business is the idea of building a tower that will reach to heaven. In comparison with that idea everything else is secondary. The idea, once seized in its magnitude, can never vanish again; so long as there are men on the earth there will be also the irresistible desire to complete the building. That being so, however, one need have no anxiety about the future; on the contrary, human knowledge is increasing, the art of building has made progress and will make further progress, a piece of work which takes us a year may perhaps be done in half the time in another hundred years, and better done, too, more enduringly. So why exert oneself to the extreme limit of one's present powers? . . . Such thoughts paralyzed people's powers, and so they troubled less about the tower than the construction of a city for the workmen. Every nationality wanted the finest quarter for itself, and this gave rise to disputes, which developed into blood conflicts. These conflicts never came to an end; to the leaders they were a new proof that, in the absence of the necessary unity, the building of the tower must be done very slowly, or indeed preferably postponed until universal peace was declared. . . . In this fashion the age of the first generation went past, but none of the succeeding ones showed any difference; except that technical skill increased and with it occasion for conflict. To this must be added that the second or third generation had already recognized the senselessness of building a heaven-reaching tower; but by that time everybody was too deeply involved to leave the city.³

As so often in Kafka, this text presents the narrative of its own erasing: from postponement to postponement, the story it intended to tell vanishes, just as by perfecting the means of construction, it is abandoned in the end. The biblical passage turns into its opposite: no longer is it a matter of illustrating the reasons why the tower *must* not be constructed but rather the reason why it *can* not be constructed. That is, if Kafka inverted the meaning of the biblical text, he has preserved its parabolic form. For him, as in the Bible, the Tower of Babel symbolizes both the effort of humanity toward its ideal accomplishment and the failure of that effort. But whereas that failure in the Bible results mainly from the inter-

vention of a force superior to human will, in Kafka, it originates in a deficiency inherent in humanity itself. Here, the failure of Babel somehow refers to an immanent logic of self-destruction or, if you like, to the roots of the death instinct. This seems to express a *breakdown of the link with time*, more particularly of the *link with the future*. For the men of Babel, time seemed unlimited, like a line that could be extended indefinitely or a river that would flow endlessly: “as if there were centuries before one to do the work in.” A neutral time, perceived as an empty form, always available, waiting for human acts to fill it. This is why “one need have no anxiety about the future”; on the axis of time where moments are added to moments, the task to be accomplished loses all urgency, all the nuances of our mental connection to the future—expectation, hope, patience, and impatience—are wiped out in a single indifference: the future, deprived of its essential dimension, the *new*, will occur without surprise, at the stated time, as a necessary stage of an unchanging movement.

In the vision of time of the men of Babel, an allegory of the modern conception of historical temporality is easily seen.⁴ A critical allegory, naturally, intended to expose the contradictions of an Enlightenment idea of history, imposed on the nineteenth century as a virtually natural fact. Philosophers of the eighteenth century saw history as a process oriented from less toward more, from confusion toward order, from darkness toward light. Of course, the existence of historical rhythms accentuating the rise and fall of empires is acknowledged. But beyond those fluctuations, history in its totality is conceived as the vector of constant progress, intended to lead humanity to its final realization. Hence, the notion of an ideal end of history, a telos it is leading to. Moreover, that telos (as in the idea of the natural finality) plays the role of an immanent principle guiding the development of history. There is some sort of historical Reason controlling the course of the human adventure from inside. In Hegel, this teleological vision culminates in the interpretation of history as a dialectical process through which the Absolute itself is realized. Hence, in comparison with that inevitable progress of Reason in the world, the function of human initiative—which must still be seen as decisive—is nevertheless reduced to being a means in the service of an end that is infinitely beyond it. Every human act is contingent; its meaning (that is, its effectiveness) depends on its conformity or nonconformity with the dynamic of Reason at work in

history. The work of Reason is slow, perhaps infinite. How can we know if the time is ripe for the realization of our plans? "Such thoughts," writes Kafka, "paralyzed people's powers." Does belief in the inevitable necessity of progress not lead just as inevitably to a kind of ataraxia, or in any case to the permanent postponement of action? "So why exert oneself from today to the extreme limit of one's powers?"

Kafka's whole text revolves around that "from today." What is excluded by historic Reason is precisely the idea that telos, the completion of all things, can occur "from today." The philosophy of historic progress is based on the belief in an infinite time, the term "infinite" not referring here to the idea of a plethora, a different quality of being, but to the interminable, the endlessness of a series that can be extended indefinitely: "In this fashion the age of the first generation went past, but none of the succeeding ones showed any difference." A perfectly homogeneous duration made of a succession of identical units of time, neutral time, comparable to that of classical mechanics in which the sequence of causes and effects can never produce anything radically new. Significantly, in Hegel, history seems interminably to play out the same scenario of the appearance and disappearance of "historic peoples" on the stage of becoming. In this perspective, the telos of history could not be conceived as a reality that, in principle, can occur at any moment, and perhaps "from today," but rather as a postulate, a controlling idea whose realization regresses indefinitely as we move forward: "The essential thing in the whole business is the idea of building a tower that will reach to heaven. In comparison with that idea everything else is secondary. The idea, once seized in its magnitude, can never vanish again; so long as there are men on the earth there will be also the irresistible desire to complete the building."

With the indefinite postponement of all its ideals, humanity will also have to repel the utopia of a "universal peace" very far into the future. Moreover, extending expectation indefinitely is itself a source of violence. The constant perfection of means becomes an end in itself, making the end initially pursued forgotten; technical progress becomes an instrument of domination and exacerbates rivalries: "the town was embellished in the intervals, and this unfortunately enough evoked fresh envy and fresh conflict." Once utopia is defined as an asymptotic, that is, unattainable, ideal, it dissolves into pure abstraction and no longer stirs anything but discouragement: "the second or third generation had already recognized the

senselessness of building a heaven-reaching tower"; the concept of utopia as an "infinite task" turns against itself here; the notion of a time that can be extended indefinitely, that is, of an endless time, a priori excludes the idea that the world will some day achieve its completion.

Can another vision of history be imagined? Kafka's text does not say so. The descendants of the men of Babel, in any case, can choose only between resignation ("by that time everybody was too deeply involved to leave the city") and the expectation of apocalypse. But no doubt two complementary aspects of a single disenchantment are at issue there: when the social compact no longer rests on anything but the disenchanted awareness that nothing essential will ever change, that is, on the frustration of all hopes, the utopian energy that henceforth has no object will be invested completely—as if in compensation—in eschatological daydreams, in the expectation of the final catastrophe that will destroy the world so that a new humanity may rise from its ruins. That is precisely what is suggested by the last paragraph of Kafka's tale:

All the legends and songs that came to birth in that city are filled with longing for a prophesied day when the city would be destroyed by five successive plows from a gigantic fist. It is for that reason that the city has a closed fist on its coat of arms.⁵

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A novella by Jorge Luis Borges echoes Kafka's tale. The central theme of Borges's novella is also time, but perceived here in a precisely opposite form: not in its endless extension, but in its most extreme condensation. "The Secret Miracle" sometimes seems to respond (probably unbeknownst to the author) to some of the harmonics hidden in "The City Coat of Arms." First because Borges's story is set in Prague, Kafka's city, identified allegorically at the end of the tale with the biblical Babel. And then because the hero of Borges's novella, Jaromir Hladik, is presented as a writer ("Apart from a few friendships and many habits, the problematic practice of literature constituted his life") and a Jew. The denunciation of the bellicose madness of men in "The City Coat of Arms," written in 1917 in the middle of the world war, corresponds in "The Secret Miracle" (written in 1943) to the evocation of the German invasion of Prague in 1939, the virtually immediate arrest of Hladik, and his death sentence (motivated primarily by his works on Jewish mysticism: "his investigation of the work of

Jacob Boehme,” and a translation of the *Sefer Yetsirah*). “The Secret Miracle” concentrates on the ten days when Hladik awaits his execution in his Prague prison. One of the ideas that torments him most is the obsession of not having had time to finish the book he is working on, a three-act tragedy in verse titled *The Enemies*: “He had already completed the first act and a scene or two of the third. The metrical nature of the work allowed him to go over it continually, rectifying the hexameters, without recourse to the manuscript. He thought of the two acts still to do, and of his coming death.” The night before the execution, he asked God to grant him one more year of life: “In order to bring this drama, which may serve to justify me, to justify You, I need one more year. Grant me that year, You to whom belong the centuries and all time.” The day of the execution arrives. It is March 29, 1939, at nine o’clock in the morning:

The firing squad fell in and was brought to attention. Hladik, standing against the barracks wall, waited for the volley. Someone expressed fear the wall would be splashed with blood. The condemned man was ordered to step forward a few paces. Hladik recalled, absurdly, the preliminary maneuvers of a photographer. A heavy drop of rain grazed one of Hladik’s temples and slowly rolled down his cheek. The sergeant barked the final command.

The physical universe stood still.

The rifles converged upon Hladik, but the men assigned to pull the triggers were immobile. The sergeant’s arm eternalized an inconclusive gesture. Upon a courtyard flagstone a bee cast a stationary shadow. The wind had halted, as in a painted picture. Hladik began a shriek, a syllable, a twist of the hand. He realized he was paralyzed. Not a sound reached him from the stricken world.

He thought: *I’m in hell, I’m dead.*

He thought: *I’ve gone mad.*

He thought: *Time has come to a halt.*

Then he reflected that in that case, his thought, too, would have come to a halt. He was anxious to test this possibility: he repeated (without moving his lips) the mysterious Fourth Eclogue of Virgil. He imagined that the already remote soldiers shared his anxiety; he longed to communicate with them. He was astonished that he felt no fatigue, no vertigo from his protracted immobility. After an indeterminate length of time he fell asleep. On awaking he found the world still motionless and dumb. The drop of water still clung to his cheek; the shadow of the bee still did not shift in the courtyard; the smoke from the cigarette he had thrown down did not blow away. Another “day” passed before Hladik understood.

He had asked God for an entire year in which to finish his work: His omnipotence had granted him the time. For his sake, God projected a secret miracle: German lead would kill him, at the determined hour, but in his mind a year would elapse between the command to fire and its execution. From perplexity he passed to stupor, from stupor to resignation, from resignation to sudden gratitude.

He disposed of no document but his own memory; the mastering of each hexameter as he added it, had imposed upon him a kind of fortunate discipline not imagined by those amateurs who forget their vague, ephemeral paragraphs. He did not work for posterity, nor even for God, of whose literary preferences he possessed scant knowledge. Meticulous, unmoving, secretive, he wove his lofty invisible labyrinth in time. He worked the third act over twice. He eliminated some rather too-obvious symbols. . . . There were no circumstances to constrain him. He omitted, condensed, amplified; occasionally, he chose the primitive version. He grew to love the courtyard, the barracks. . . . He brought his drama to a conclusion; he lacked only a single epithet. He found it: the drop of water slid down his cheek. He began a wild cry, moved his face aside. A quadruple blast brought him down.

Jaromir Hladik died on March 29, at 9:02 in the morning.⁶

What happened to Hladik during the tiny moment separating the order to fire given by the sergeant and the shots of the salvo? The text gives us two apparently contradictory indications: on the one hand, it tells us, "The physical universe stood still"; on the other, we learn that time goes on: "He thought: *Time has come to a halt*. Then he reflected that in that case, his thought, too, would have come to a halt." Hladik is not content to think and reflect; he imagines, he wants, he is amazed, he recites Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, he falls asleep and wakes up. Must we conclude that, in the logic of the text, stopping the physical universe would not involve stopping time? But since the sensation of time is closely linked with the perception of change, wouldn't the cessation of all movement ("[T]he men assigned to pull the triggers were immobile. The sergeant's arm eternalized an inconclusive gesture. Upon a courtyard flagstone a bee cast a stationary shadow. The wind had halted, as in a painted picture.") almost necessarily suggest the idea of time stopping? A first answer would consist of distinguishing physical time from mental time: the latter might continue unfolding even if the former were apparently interrupted at least for a brief moment. We might imagine a moment of pause in the world, a sort

of fixing on an image, where nature would hold its breath, but where the consciousness of the condemned man would continue to work at a dizzying speed. Such an explanation might take account of the feeling (or the illusion) that physical time has congealed for a few seconds. But the text tells us that that stopping of the universe stretches, first for a whole day, then another day, and finally an entire year. Hence the reader's impression that this phenomenon lasts much too long to be only a simple sensory illusion. An impression reinforced by the literary procedure employed: the scene is described "externally," as if it were an objective reality, before the narrator intervenes to disclose the phenomenon as the character's mental experience. No, the physical universe did not really stop; it ceased to move only in the mind of the condemned man.

But in truth, the difference between objective and subjective is no longer relevant here. For there is no point measuring physical time itself, the time of watches and calendars, in vain in discrete quantitative units (seconds, minutes and hours, days, months and years); it is still translated into qualitative terms when the mind sees it: what counts here are the contents of awareness, their frequency, their duration, their intensity. To say "physical time has stopped" means that the mind is cut off for a moment from external reality and the instruments that measure it and withdraws completely into itself: a suspension of physical time whose counterpart is an extraordinary intensification of mental time. To speak here of a *contraction of physical time* or an *extension of mental time* amounts to the same thing. For the few seconds that separate the order to fire and the arrival of the discharge, Hladik's consciousness is exacerbated to the point of accomplishing in a few brief moments the work of an entire year. But, in his mind, it is the lived content of an entire year that is condensed in the lightning speed of a moment. "For his sake, God projected a secret miracle": a miracle for, in a flash, Hladik attains an internal intensity that projects him far beyond the usual rhythms of human time; secret, for nothing of this wonder leaks out; no one except him will ever know that the work he lived for was ended. For others, for posterity, he will always be the author of an unfinished tragedy.

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If there is an Angel of History, he would have to stay at the intersection of the time that can be indefinitely extended of Kafka's text and that other,

purely internal and qualitative time in Borges's tale. No doubt he would be one of those angels evoked by the Talmud, according to Gershom Scholem: "angels recreated constantly in countless hosts to chant their hymn to God before being destroyed and disappearing into nothingness."⁷ Those are the ever-renewed angels who, according to Scholem, haunt the work of Walter Benjamin: "Their voice that passes and flees symbolizes the anticipation of the apocalypse at the very heart of history."⁸ Whether utopia can be anticipated, whether it can be lived "from now," or on the contrary, whether it can be conceived only as a simple "governing idea," an asymptotic ideal whose realization recedes indefinitely as we advance, that is what most profoundly opposes the vision of temporality implied in Borges's tale to what characterized the culture of Kafka's men of Babel. The talmudic legend that assigns each moment of time its specific angel, or even its own quality or its irreplaceable messianic potentialities, states on the historical scale the idea of time lived by Borges's character as an eminently personal experience. That paradoxical figure of thought that the end can be achieved "from today," "in the very heart of history," subverts the very foundations of historical Reason. It implies in effect that time is no longer thought of as an oriented axis, where after inevitably succeeds before, or as a river that flows from its source toward its mouth, but as a juxtaposition of unique instants each time, that cannot be summed up, and that, consequently, do not succeed each other as stages of an irreversible process. The past, present, and future no longer follow each other here on a straight line that a spectator could observe from outside, but coexist as three states of permanent awareness: in the lightning flash of the instant preceding the death of Borges's hero, the completion of the work is anticipated, which, in the normal unfolding of time, he might never have finished. Similarly, according to Kafka, the generation of Babel could no doubt have built that tower "which touched the sky" very fast if they had gone to work "from today." The present moment lived in all its intensity interrupts the tedious unfolding of the days and polarizes in its force field the utopian potentials put off very far into the future by historical Reason.

The "angels recreated constantly in countless hosts to chant their hymn to God before being destroyed and disappearing into nothingness" refers to a conception of historical time as a permanent creation, as an incessant emergence of the new. All the energy of history is concentrated

here on the reality of the present. Our experience of time, said Saint Augustine, is always that of the present moment; the past (in the form of memory) and the future (in all forms of expectation: fear and hope, patience and impatience, prediction and utopia) are never anything but modalities of our sojourn in the heart of the present. The same is true of our experience of historical time: for the past to remain alive (so that it does not congeal into simple commemoration), the collective memory must constantly reinvent it; for the future not to appear as the pure forward projection of the tendencies of the past, radical novelty must be foreshadowed in it through the utopian harmonics encrypted in the present constellation. But the present here (that “present of awareness” that Walter Benjamin talks about) has nothing ephemeral: it does not refer to the fleeting passage of the past to the future. Nor is it the synchronic gathering (the re-presentation) of the three dimensions of time. Quite the contrary: that topicality, the principle of “judgment and destruction,” according to Scholem,⁹ undermines from within the coherence of historical time, makes it fly off the handle, crushes it into countless messianic instants. It is that form of topicality, “the only one that is true,”¹⁰ that is embodied by the Angel of History.

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Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem: in Germany in the 1920s, each of these three authors formulated a new vision of history, focusing on the idea of actualizing historical time, or in other words (as Walter Benjamin put it), the idea of *now-time*. All three presented a radical critique of historical Reason and its axioms: the idea of continuity, the idea of causality, and the idea of progress. Each in his own way countered the optimistic vision of a history conceived as a permanent march toward the final realization of humanity with the idea of a discontinuous history whose different moments are not cumulative, and whose crises, ruptures, and rifts are more significant—and probably more promising—than its apparent homogeneity.

That this other vision of history appeared precisely at that period and in three Jewish thinkers is no accident. In all three, reflection on history was engendered by the direct experience of the great upheavals that marked the twentieth century. The original trauma was World War I,

experienced as an irreversible rupture of the historical fabric, the catastrophe heralding an unprecedented era. For Rosenzweig, it meant the end of an idea of civilization based on belief in a Logos that could establish a rational order in the world. Benjamin had seen it as the final collapse of a world controlled by tradition, that is, by a collective memory preserving and transmitting from generation to generation an immemorial treasure of historical experiences. In his journal at that time, young Scholem spoke of the death of Europe and its “entombment.”¹¹ What the world war had ruined for all three was an old model that had previously lent meaning to human experience.

In nineteenth-century middle-class Europe, that model had been embodied in the ideology of progress, which tends to exclude from the collective memory all the flaws and regressions, all the failures that punctuate the unfolding of history. Even in the Hegelian version, the richest and most subtle, since it puts death, the tragic, and the work of the negative at the heart of the historical process, the philosophy of progress ultimately proclaims the triumph of the positive that is destined to conclude the unfolding of history and to confer its meaning on it. What the world war teaches Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Scholem is the impossibility of maintaining the idea of historical progress or of the meaning of history in the face of the irreducible reality of human suffering. The war, experienced as an absolute beginning, cannot be reduced to an episode of the history of Meaning. A founding experience in which the absurdity of every theodicy immanent in history is proclaimed, it wrenches thought from the schema that had been classic since the Enlightenment, of a quantitative and cumulative temporality whose moments add up according to the law of a constant perfection. The war forces us to perceive historical time in its very reality: as a juxtaposition of moments that are qualitatively different from one another and hence cannot be cumulative. Past suffering is not abolished even by a triumphant future, which claims to give them a meaning, any more than thwarted hopes are refuted by the failures that seem to sanction them.

This is a kind of return to a direct experience of historical time perceived in the qualitative difference of each of its instants, since each is loaded with a unique specificity, but hence each also opens toward a multiplicity of possible futures. As soon as the present instant stops being seen

as a simple transition between the preceding one and the subsequent one, historical time can no longer be presented, like physical time, as a homogeneous sequence of formally identical units. Along with its homogeneity, the idea of its continuity also disappears, and consequently the very possibility of a causality that regulates its course. So it must be admitted that the relation of one instant to the following instant—and, more generally, of the present to the future—is not unequivocal; from the present, many divergent paths can lead to different futures. Of course, the number of these paths is not indefinite; each present brings a system of constraints that condition the future and, to a certain extent, limit its elasticity. Nevertheless, those possibles are numerous enough so that, in principle, the future remains unpredictable. What characterizes the vision of history in Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Scholem is precisely that passage from a time of necessity to a *time of possibles*.

Conceivably, negating the idea of progress could lead those three authors to a pessimistic conception of history, since nothing any longer guarantees that history necessarily tends toward the final resolution of all contradictions. Moreover, on the horizon of their life and work all the torments and catastrophes that marked our century stand out: after the war of 1914–1918, Rosenzweig, who died in 1929, watched the gradual ruin of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazism; Benjamin and Scholem subsequently witnessed the collapse of German democracy, Hitler's rise to power, and the persecution of the Jews; with the German-Soviet pact, Benjamin saw the collapse of all his hopes for communism; Scholem experienced World War II, the extermination of the Jews, and with the perpetuation of the Israeli-Arab conflict, the impossibility of the spiritual Zionism he had dreamed of. In truth, it is, thus, in the heart of the civilization that had come up with the idea of the meaning of history that that idea collapsed most spectacularly. Yet, for Rosenzweig, as for Benjamin and Scholem, the end of belief in a meaning of history did not involve abolishing the idea of hope. On the contrary, it is precisely on the rubble of the paradigm of historical Reason that hope is formed as a historical category. Utopia, which can no longer be thought as belief in the necessary advent of the ideal at the mythical end of history, reemerges—through the category of *Redemption*—as the modality of its *possible* advent at each moment of time. In this model of a random time, open at any

moment to the unpredictable eruption of the new, the imminent realization of the ideal becomes conceivable again, as one of the possibilities offered by the unfathomable complexity of historical processes.¹²

This vision of history cannot be reduced to the teleological model characterizing historical thought of the West, either under the religious form of Christian theodicy or under the secularized form of a dialectic of Reason immanent in history. Thus, it is on the horizon of the crisis of Western civilization that the philosophical movement of Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Scholem must be understood, turning back to the Jewish experience of history to discover a radically different dimension of historical consciousness and its utopian dimension. Jewish messianism, in fact, always had to confront the historical experience of catastrophe, deception, and failure. All eschatological attempts known by Jewish history generally ended in bitterness and frustration. This is why Jewish messianism always tried to put the particulars of visible history into perspective so as to emphasize the utopian potentials of the *secret history*: that of procreation and generations, the even more hidden one of souls and their spiritual adventures, and those that are constantly concealed, even the most humble. The Jewish messianic hope—symbolized here by the Angel of History—does not adopt the stages of a historical finality but resides in the rifts of history, where its stitches are unraveled and the millions of threads that form its fabric are exposed.

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On that common horizon, the reflection of those three authors opens out into three different directions, indicating the three central options offered, since the beginning of the twentieth century, to Jews who wanted to break with the spirit of assimilation: religion (Rosenzweig), Zionism (Scholem), and revolution (Benjamin). Even though all three were marginal in terms of the orthodoxy of those various currents, each in his own way still appears as a representative of the great movements of ideas that have stirred our century.

Of the three, Rosenzweig's work is presented in the most rigorously philosophical form. Constantly referring to the political thought of Hegel, which he had studied in his first work, *Hegel and the State* (written between 1911 and 1914, published in 1920), he undertakes in *The Star of Redemption*

(written in 1918–1919, published in 1921) to subvert the Hegelian categories from top to bottom by *taking them literally* and showing that it is in the name of Hegelian ideas (above all, in the name of the idea of a historic mission of nations and states) that Europe has plunged into catastrophe. Rosenzweig countered modern nationalism, which he interprets as a secularized form of messianism, with the concept of a *metahistory*, that is, a sacred time, cut off from the vicissitudes of political temporality, where the Jewish people would live its religious vocation.¹³

Walter Benjamin's reflection is developed in a deliberately unsystematic way through a series of studies on the theory of language, literature, social history, and philosophy of history. Shot through with an incessant questioning about the relations of politics and theology, revolution and tradition, this reflection leads in 1940, in the collection of essays *On the Concept of History*, to a reversal of orthodox Marxist schemes, insofar as the categories of historical materialism are rethought in light of Jewish messianism. With this, Benjamin once and for all rejects all notion of historical progress by countering it with the idea of the sudden interruptions of history: breaks that are so many messianic instants.

Scholem's work, unlike that of Rosenzweig and Benjamin, belongs mainly to the realm of historiography. His innovation in terms of the "science of Judaism" as conceived by historians of the nineteenth century does not concern the legitimacy of the historical method but the nature of the object studied. Reintegrating Kabbalah into the field of historical studies is accompanied by a rehabilitation of religious thought in general as a *symbolic system*. In his interpretation of messianism, Scholem underlines the destructive and apocalyptic element of Jewish eschatology as opposed to the harmonious vision of a constant progress of humanity as conceived by Jewish historians of the nineteenth century. For Scholem, the Jewish tradition always privileged the idea of a sudden eruption of the Messiah into the unpredictable unfolding of human history.

In this sense, the idea of "now-time" is certainly in the center of the vision of history of those three thinkers. In all three, in opposition to the paradigm dominant since the Enlightenment, that idea inspired by Jewish messianism, proposes a model of history that, after the collapse of the ideologies of progress, gives a new chance for hope by locating utopia in the heart of the present.