

## Foreword

### The Holy, Life, and the Creaturely

A letter Walter Benjamin sent to Gershom Scholem in Jerusalem in June 1938 contains a remark that allows an essential clarification of his attitude toward the *Holy*. It comes in the form of a rhetorical figure, as if it were superfluous to devote a word to it: “Is it necessary to state that holiness is an order reserved for *life* and that artistic *creation* does not belong to it under any circumstances? And does it need to be pointed out that the epithet of holiness is nothing more than a novelist’s empty phrase when used outside a traditionally established religious framework?” (6/106; CBS 220; ital. S.W.) This distinction, uttered *en passant*, throws light on a possibly principal misunderstanding in the engagement with Benjamin, as it is found throughout the critical reception of his work.

The dimension of the sacred in his theory was for decades discussed primarily in relation to his handling of writing, literature, and images. Only recently has the significance that the divine holds for his concept of life stepped to the center of the debates about Benjamin’s work, particularly in connection with the rediscovery of the concept of mere natural life (*bloßes natürliches Leben*) in the essay “The Critique of Violence” (SelWr 1.236). Although this concept, with which Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* begins, stretches back to Benjamin and indeed plays a central role in his writings (far beyond the essay on violence), the current debate seems largely to fail to grasp the very meaning of Benjaminian concepts. To him, it is precisely *not* about the holiness *of* life; on the contrary, he considers the “dogma of the sacredness of bare life” as the “last mistaken attempt of the weakened Western tradition.” Thus he sees in it a reaction to the loss of the saint and interprets the proposition that bare life is indeed sacred as being the mythical replacement for the divine that originates in “cosmological impenetrability” (II.1/202; SelWr 1.251). In contrast to this dogma, his assertion that

holiness is an order reserved for life means that the concept ‘life’ refers precisely to that dimension that transcends *mere natural life* to the order of the holy. It is through a reference to the divine order that the concept of life first accrues a meaning that makes it more than bare life. This *super-natural* (*über-natürliche*) dimension of the concept of life relies on the biblical notion that human life is part of divine Creation. It maintains its particular contours within the idea inherent to this tradition that man was made in the divine image, even when this ‘more-than-natural-life’ has then been transformed into philosophical, ethical, or other principles after the bible lost its claim to authority and validity (Chapter 3). A world apart, human activity is fundamentally different from Creation: the fruits or products of human production are artifacts, or as Benjamin says, formed structures (*Gebilde*).

Yet as a part of creation, itself a creature (*Geschöpf*), the human has a share in the world of creaturely<sup>1</sup>—so long as humans are situated in the state of Creation. The concept, understanding, and interpretation of humans as creaturely are leitmotifs in the ideas, texts, and images from both the baroque and modernity that are Benjamin’s objects of investigation. In his commentary on the topic, he interprets the concept of the creaturely as both an expression and an indication (*Anzeichen*) of a “counter-historical” stance—not a-historic, but rather an attitude in contradiction to a historical understanding. It comes from the wish to return to the state of Creation, and to this end it leads to history’s conversion back into a kind of state of nature. The concept of the creature is, in this way, a symptom of a confusion of the state of Creation with the state of nature (Chapter 1).

His remark that the attribute of holiness is but a belletristic cliché certainly does not mean that in Benjamin’s view the holy is unimport-

1. During the constitution of the German language, when Latin words were translated by inventing new German words, it often happened that the Latin word got integrated into the lexicon as well, with the result a semantic differentiation between the foreign word and its German equivalent. The translation of Latin *creatura* into ‘Schöpfung’ (Creation) and ‘Geschöpf’ (creature) is part of Luther’s German and refers to a biblical context; its connotation stems from the expression ‘Gottes Geschöpf’ (God’s creature). In distinction to ‘Geschöpf’ the word ‘Kreatur’ has acquired another connotation that is more linked to the natural, bodily, or animallike state of living beings, including humans. Since the difference between the meanings is central for the whole argument of the book, we will use *creation* for ‘Geschöpf,’ *creature/creaturely* for ‘Kreatur,’ and *Creation* for ‘Schöpfung.’

ant for poetical works (*Dichtung*).<sup>2</sup> Quite the opposite. Benjamin's critique is in fact aimed against programs of art that sacralize poetic creation and thereby attribute a *divine mandate*, as it were, to the poet. Benjamin, rather, sees the poet as a descendant of cultic practices that are lost in history (understood as the distance from Creation) and considers *Dichtung* more as a refuge for concerns that have slipped away from theology. The latter is less due to the poet than it has to do with language, because every language (at least in European history) to some degree stands in the lineage of biblical language, which is the medium of revelation, although this is the case mainly in the mode of loss, translation, and conventionalization, that is, in the mode of distance and disfigurement (*Entstellung*).<sup>3</sup> Benjamin treats the distance from Creation, in which language also partakes in history, as a structural distinction between it and revelation. If, however, poetic engagement with language is reminiscent of the *Heiligung des Namens*, because the words are "called by their names," poetic works become the site of a breach through which meanings that originate in a higher order can enter. Nevertheless, poetic works never become identical with the higher order; nor do they become its secular substitute (Chapter 4).

Taking center stage in this book is Benjamin's recognition of the fact that not the least, but actually the weightiest, concepts and ideas in European thought (such as life, the human, and justice) arise from biblical tradition. Also of primary concern, however, are the consequences that this recognition has for the formation of his theory and his engagement with language and history, and with literature and art. Today, Benjamin's rhetorical question, quoted above in the letter to Scholem, demands a clear and decisive answer: it is necessary. Considering the fact that he actually considered commentary on the holy to be superfluous, it is surprising how heavily the reception of Benjamin troubles itself with his engagement with theology, religion, and the divine (Chapter 1). In this regard, a structural

2. Benjamin uses both words 'Dichtung' and 'Literatur,' the latter having a more profane meaning and including all sorts of texts, whereas 'Dichtung' is reserved for art and discussed in respect of its complex relationship to sacred scriptures.

3. The Freudian term for dreamwork *Entstellung* will be translated in this book as 'disfigurement' instead of 'distortion,' which belongs to the repeatedly criticized translated terms in *Standard Edition* of Freud. As regards the other two terms of dreamwork, this book follows the *Standard Edition* in taking 'displacement' for *Verschiebung* and 'condensation' for *Verdichtung*.

configuration can be observed, one that pervades his writings (sometimes clearly, sometimes concealed), particularly in his engagement with terminology. Its matrix persists in the ineluctable distinction between the world of *Creation* (there) and the world of *history* (here), which forms a fundamental epistemic function in Benjamin's writings. It literally represents the foundation of his thinking: "history comes into being simultaneously with meaning in human language" (II.1/139). This epistemic figure found one of its first linguistic expressions in the early essay on language in the image of *the Fall of language-mind* (*Sündenfall des Sprachgeistes*). From the biblical scene of man's expulsion from paradise, Benjamin formed the *epistemic distinction* fundamental for his writing and thought. Through the simultaneous emergence (*Gleichursprünglichkeit*) of history and signs, human acting and speaking always already takes place in the interval between creation and revelation. Thus the historical subject is situated in a state of ir-resolvable disfigurement (*Entstellung*), while at the same time the subject's concepts always remain based on that from which they were differentiated: law is based on and springs up from justice, the word on the name, images on semblance, and art on the cult. In this respect, there is for Benjamin no thought free from some kind of reference back to ideas that originate in the tradition of the history of religion.

### Neither Theological nor Secular

Thus Benjamin's own stance can in no way be called *theological*. It is rather obliged to the questions that were removed from theology, the latter having lost its privileged claim to meaning. Yet it also cannot be described as *secular*, at least not in the terms with which Hans Blumenberg characterized this term in his critique of the paradigms of secularization: as a "*reoccupation* of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated," in whose transmission, however, a "continuing acceptance of the religious sphere in which language originates" can be discerned (1988, 65, 104). When Blumenberg justifiably judges such practice of secularization as the last Theologoumenon, Benjamin's critique is as well directed to such Theologoumena. This becomes especially clear in his engagement with the interpretations of Kafka available to him at the time (Chapter 6). Perhaps Benjamin's manner of thinking and writing can best be described as *postbiblical*, since it arises from a

consciousness for biblical language, holy orders, and the idea of salvation without being tied to it through confession. That the terms of the divine order have singular meanings that may not be transferred into the secular order of human action and social communication is a fixed point within his thought. This acceptance of biblical language absent faith may be described as *Jewish thinking in a world without God*, to borrow the wonderful title of the *Festschrift* for Stéphane Mosès (Festschrift 2000). This thinking is not to be confused with *negative theology*, in which the *Deus absconditus* itself becomes the center of, and point of reference for, a religious compartment. Nor should it be aligned with a variant of negative theology critical of capitalism that makes the bourgeois world in the image of hell into the object of a quasi-religious evocation (Chapter 5).

Blumenberg once remarked that the God of philosophers is unfeeling, while that of the bible is hypersensitive: “therefore the theologians speak in the idiom of philosophy in order to spare *their* God: could he bear the language of the Bible?” (Blumenberg 1998, 19, my trans.) With Benjamin, one must object to this interpretation to the extent that in his view, *theology* as speech *about* God has already been differentiated from biblical language, since it always implies a speaking in history after the “Fall of language-mind,” at a distance from creation, so that this fact can rather clarify the closeness the theological idiom has to the language of philosophy. Contrarily, Benjamin is adamant that there is an afterlife of biblical language, and indeed in poetic works. *Dichtung* does not inherit the tradition in such a way that it can be possessed as a resource at *Dichtung*’s disposal, but rather in the sense that poetic works provide a site for a breach through which “something beyond the poet interrupts the language of poetry” (Chapter 4). In this way, his engagement with the tradition does not conform to the opposition of theology to philosophy. Benjamin’s position beyond theology and philosophy finds expression mainly in his figures of speech, thought-images, and dialectic images. The genuinely Benjaminian use of language systematically disappears in most translations of his writings into other languages. Because the thought-images are translated either as metaphors or as concepts, his theory often loses its specific signature in international reception. Whereas, because of this elision, his reflections appear to be a great deal more easily compatible with current theoretical discourses, it is often the case that the dimension of language that recalls religious quotations is unrecognizable (Chapter 7).

## Forgotten Images:

## The Significance of Art in Benjamin's Epistemology

On the other hand, the dominance of thought-images in Benjamin's writing has to date obscured the central and irreplaceable significance that aesthetic perception and the visual images have for his mode of thinking. Artworks, paintings, and prints (that is, images from the history of art) in fact occupy an elevated place in his writings, and not only the two icons of his work, Dürer's *Melencolia* and Klee's *Angelus Novus*—without reference to which few books and articles about Benjamin manage to be published. Similarly, not only are the photographic and cinematographic images so important for his cultural theory of modernity central in his works (Chapter 10), but so are images from artists of the most diverse provenances, from the Middle Ages through to the Renaissance and from the baroque to modernity and expressionism, cubism, and surrealism. Although many works have dealt with Benjamin's concept, critique, and theory of art, an investigation into the question as to what epistemological significance corresponds to artworks themselves remains until now absent.

In Benjamin, the images are also related (like *Dichtung*) to the afterlife of religion. Yet even though poetic language is significant and meaningful for the survival of biblical language, with images it concerns the survival of the cultic, sacred, and magical meanings. If religion relocates its divine kingdom into the clouds, as Benjamin once formulated (VII.1/25), then a preview of the "divine kingdom" becomes perceptible in the artists' painted clouds. Benjamin is interested less in motifs from the history of religion, mostly Christian topics, than he is in the colors and materials of art. In them, the sacred appears practically instantaneous and unmediated. In often short, extremely dense passages, the most diverse images from the history of art come to play a central role in Benjamin's writings. Not uncommonly, it is similar to that lightninglike insight followed by the text as the long-rolling thunder described by Benjamin in one of the thought-images from the epistemo-theoretical *convolute* of the *Arcades Project* (Chapter 9). The viewing of paintings or artists' images often functions like a mode of knowledge in which revelation continues to have an effect: the lightninglike perception of a simultaneity that is not translatable into concepts or terminology. The charge (that thought learns from the images' own mode of perception) continues in

Benjamin's style of writing and is expressed primarily in his thought-images. Because of this, Benjamin's epistemology is unthinkable without the experience of art.

In addition to the afterlife of religion in modernity, Benjamin's physiognomic gaze was also interested in physical movements, pathos formulas, and expression of emotions in painting and art history. Yet despite repeated efforts, he failed to convert his latent affinity with the cultural science (*Kulturwissenschaft*) of the Warburg circle into a real exchange with its members, as testified to by the odyssey his *Origin of the German Mourning Play*<sup>4</sup> took through the Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg (Chapter 8). The weight of this missed encounter is clear when one considers the fact that he saw the Warburg school as part of a movement that felt at home in boundary zones (*Grenzgebieten*), just as he did in his own work. This type of being at home thus became existential for him the more he was in reality excluded—barred first from the institution of the university (through the rejection of his *Habilitationsschrift*),<sup>5</sup> then from the country (by the start of the Hitler-Reich). He also considered the *neue Kunstwissenschaft's* treatment of art, one that (like Riegl and Linfert) attributes significance to the insignificant, as a part of his imagined virtual movement. He valued it and considered this mode of research a study of images “in the spirit of true philology.”

The missed dialogue between Benjamin and the Warburg school stands in the series of failures that characterize Benjamin's own efforts, while at the same time they continue in the reception of his work. This includes not only the failure to take seriously the epistemic importance art has for his thinking, but also a passage from his “Critique of Violence” that is highly significant for the context for his stance toward biblical tradition, until now largely ignored.

4. *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, often referred to as *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. The latter mistakes an important argument: In two early essays, written in 1916 just before his language theory, Benjamin discussed the contrast between *Tragödie* (tragic drama) and *Trauerspiel* (mourning play) in respect of totally different concepts of time, language, and emotion. There, he already emphasized mourning and the relation of history and nature in *Trauerspiel*, which later on became leitmotifs of his book on the baroque mourning play.

5. Translator's note: The *Habilitationsschrift* is the postdoctoral, professional dissertation required by German universities to obtain the rank of professor and then lecture at a university.

“In Monstrous Cases”:

A Largely Ignored Passage from the “Critique of Violence”

Considering present-day instances of war and terrorism on the international scene, a “Critique of Violence,” such as the one Walter Benjamin undertakes in his essay (published in August 1921 in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*), is of pressing urgency in that it attends to the tense relationship between law (*Recht*) and justice (*Gerechtigkeit*). Firstly, such a critique bears on the violence brought out in the conflict between international law and the unilateral claims of sovereignty made by the U.S. empire as part of the Bush administration’s policy exercised in Iraq, Guantanamo, and elsewhere. Yet it also touches on the varying forms of nonstate violence that are legitimized through concepts such as justice and human rights, reaching up to the register of a terroristic violence that itself appeals to the principles of ‘righteousness’ or ‘holy war’ and thus relies on instances that override national or international law (Chapter 2). It is precisely for the discussion of these nonstate forms of violence that Benjamin’s essay is particularly relevant. It is devoted to the question of “whether violence, in a particular case, is a means to a just or unjust end” (SelWr 1.238, transl. mod.). In addition to phenomena such as the right to general strike and martial law, Benjamin grapples with the legitimacy of revolutionary violence in general and brings his argument to a head at the end when he poses the question of tyrannicide literally exemplified in the “monstrous case [. . .] exemplified in the revolutionary killing of the oppressor” (201, 250ff.).

Yet however much Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” is again moved into the center of political theory through the present-day debates, it is indeed conspicuous that the readings of this certainly dense and difficult text consistently disregard (when it is not simply avoided) a particular passage, namely, the nearly two pages on “divine violence” in which Benjamin speaks of what it means to disregard the commandment “Thou shall not kill” when “monstrous cases” (200ff., 250) present themselves. The fact that this passage plays no essential role in the intense present-day discussion of Benjamin’s contribution to a critique of violence is therefore quite remarkable, as it is the only one in the entire text in which he not only deals with his contemporaries’ arguments about the legitimacy or principled rejection of revolutionary murder but also formulates his own re-



sponse. His response certainly does not take place under the banner of *legitimacy*, but rather of the *responsibility* of acting subjects. Subsequent to the assertion that “[t]hose who base a condemnation of all violent killing of one person by another on the commandment are therefore mistaken,” he writes: “it [the prohibition—S.W.] exists not as a criterion of judgment, but as a guideline for acting of persons or communities who have to engage with it in solitude and, in monstrous cases (*in ungeheuren Fällen*), to take on themselves the responsibility to disregard it (*von ihm abzusehen*)” (250, transl. mod.; Chapter 3).

The question will not be addressed here as to from which motives Benjamin’s discussion of the aloneness in which one must take the responsibility in disregarding the commandment “Thou shall not kill” is virtually ignored or bypassed in a systematic way. With reference to his famous declaration “detour is method,” however, it can be asserted that circumvention also is and has a method. In this case, it seems to be a necessary precondition to be able to position Benjamin’s reflections on violence in close proximity to a theory of the *state of exception* and thereby to integrate the “Critique of Violence” within the paradigms of political theology. At present, the author who gives this positioning the greatest weight is Giorgio Agamben. He claims that though Benjamin “does not name the state of exception in the essay,” he nevertheless proceeds, retrenching his argument slightly: “though he does use the term *Ernstfall*, which appears in Schmitt as a synonym for *Ausnahmestand*.” In interpreting the appearance of *Ernstfall* as evidence, Agamben adds another indication for the claimed affinity to Schmitt: “But another technical term from Schmitt’s vocabulary is present in the text: *Entscheidung*, ‘decision.’ Law, Benjamin writes, ‘acknowledges in the “decision” determined by place and time a metaphysical category” (Agamben, *State of Exception* 53).

The claim that Benjamin uses Schmitt’s terms and concepts is an important cornerstone both for Agamben’s reading of an “exoteric debate between Benjamin and Schmitt” (55) and for his interpretation of the relationship between the two theories, which amounts to a distinction of two sides of the law, both on this side and beyond, in dealing with violence in the state of exception: “While Schmitt attempts every time to re-inscribe violence within a juridical context, Benjamin responds to this gesture by seeking every time to assure—as pure violence—an existence outside the law” (Agamben, *State of Exception* 53). Yet in Agamben’s summary, not only

is Benjamin's argumentation misjudged but the gesture and diction of the entire essay are as well. Benjamin's argument is both far removed from insuring (*sichern*) pure violence beyond law and absolutely distant from establishing any *security* for a decision about violence at all. Benjamin is only *sure* in his efforts to clarify the terminology taken from the history of philosophy that is operative in his analysis of violence in its relationship "to law and justice" (SelWr 1.236): "[t]he critique of violence is the philosophy of its own history" (SelWr 1.251).

In this endeavor, language and terminology gain a central significance. A close reading of his essay will disallow the assertion that Benjamin used Schmitt's vocabulary, especially in the case of technical terms, that is, of nomenclatures or disciplinary jargon. The epistemo-theoretical point of departure for his critique of violence, in which he yet takes the historical and theoretical preconditions of law making (*Rechtsetzung*) and law preserving (*Rechtserhaltung*) into account, consists precisely in the fact that it takes place beyond the disciplinary boundaries of legal or constitutional law (and thus also beyond positive law). Regarding the specific terminology in Benjamin's essay that Agamben interprets as coming from Schmitt, a close reading will show that Benjamin indeed speaks of "crisis" (*Ernstfall*), yet only in the context of his analysis of martial law. For him, its contradictions obtain precisely in the fact legal subjects sanction violence, "whose ends [. . .] can therefore in a crisis come into conflict with their own legal or natural ends" (240). *Ernstfall* here thus means the becoming effective of *law* of war through the entrance of the *event* of war—that is, crisis. And if Benjamin talks about decision, the word "decision" is carefully set within quotation marks, when Benjamin explains that through this acknowledged metaphysical category (namely '*Entscheidung*') law gives rise to the "claim to critical evaluation" (243). He thus considers the utilization of the category of decision in the law to be worthy of critique.

One likewise fails to recognize the significance of "pure violence," an idea central to Benjamin's mode of reflection, when one understands it (as Agamben does) as *terminus technicus* (technical term) in Benjamin's essay (Agamben, *State of Exception* 53). Benjamin rather inscribes the central terms in the contemporary debate on revolutionary violence in terms of their mythic and religious-historical foundations, which remain embedded within them and are thereby used in mediated ways. In particular, the diction of the passage on the commandment quoted above argues outside

of any certainty provided by technical language. Instead of a decision made in the state of exception, the vocabulary is rather one of monstrous cases, solitude, responsibility, and disregard of the commandment.

### On the Problem of Double Translation

The subsumption of Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" into a discourse about the state of exception and political theology is naturally not the result of Agamben's interpretation alone but rather is also the effect of, among other things, problems involved in translation, as it is a debate conducted mainly in the English-speaking context. In English translation "ungeheure Fälle" becomes "exceptional cases" (SelWr 1.250), a rendering in which the difference between the Benjaminian formulation "in monstrous cases" and the "state of exception" disappears. The phrase "von ihm absehen" then becomes "ignoring it" in the translation, which really means taking no note or notice of something. Yet "davon abzusehen," rather than indicating ignorance, refers to a conscious omission, that is to say a kind of negative acting that presupposes acknowledgment. If the struggle with the imperative of the commandment is translated with the phrase "to wrestle with it in solitude," then this situation of acting (judged by Benjamin to be one of uncertain responsibility) maintains a tragic element: it becomes the lonely struggle of a person, which makes the scene suitable for political theology's concept of sovereignty, which holds that the sovereign is the one who decides on the state of exception.

For me, it is not a matter of exposing or criticizing "false" translations, but rather a question of the problem of translatability itself. That even in the best translations Benjamin's argumentation, along with the specific linguistic style of his analyses, is often lost and sometimes reversed is an effect of a double assimilation. First, his writing is assimilated into 'understandable' (that is, accepted or conventional) usage through the translations. The second takes place with the approximation of his very singular (*eigensinnig*) use of language to present-day theoretical language, even though Benjamin's specific mode of writing is incompatible with it because it often relies on unusual, older locutions and so-called outdated words. The difference between the language with which we communicate today and the words favored by Benjamin concerns, if nothing else, the difference between sacred or biblical language and modern, secular discourse.

Benjamin's attitude toward Jewish tradition and biblical language, toward religion and secularization, is apparent not only in his explicit assertions about the relation of messianism to history (such as in the "Theological-Political Fragment" and "On the Concept of History"); in his remarks on literature and religion (such as in "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*" and his essay on Franz Kafka); or in reflections on language and revelation (such as in the essay on Karl Kraus and "The Task of the Translator"). Above all, it is operative in his use of language. His postulate "[to call] on the word by its name" literally means to bend the secular use of language back to the biblical (cultic) origin of language.

The origin and descent (and this also implies the derivation) of secular terms from biblical concepts is a main topic of the essay "The Critique of Violence." For example, when Benjamin amends the contemplation of "every conceivable solution to human problems" with the insertion of the clause "not to speak of salvation from the confines (*Bannkreis*) of all the world-historical conditions of existence obtaining hitherto," (247) then the pair of terms *solution* and *salvation* (*Lösung* und *Erlösung*) opens up a horizon for a critique of violence in which 'solution,' as a notion of human action, reflects its descent from the biblical idea of redemption: as the transport of divine terms into the sphere of human politics. Solution comports itself toward redemption just as law does toward justice. Again this specific wordplay of the pair of terms *Lösung-Erlösung* is largely lost when English translations take "Erlösung" as "deliverance." For Benjamin, the critique of violence is inseparable from his stance in dealing with the dialectic of secularization. Its scene is his work on and engagement with concepts and images.

### Dialectic of Secularization

An engagement with secularized theological language runs through Benjamin's writings as a leitmotif. Above all, his criticism is directed against strategies that counter the dwindling legitimacy of theology after the death of God with an investiture of or participation in its orphaned terms. Benjamin mobilizes those theoretical efforts that can be described as work on constellations of a historical dialectic between Creation and history in order to counter this. Whereas political theology inherits theological concepts, Benjamin's work is committed to phenomena and meanings

in which vanished religious and cultic practices have an ongoing effect in modernity. The challenge of reading Benjamin, however, lies in the fact that a consistent theory of secularization is never formulated in his writings. Instead, a web of connections among thought-images, figures, and terminology spans his texts. A trail of his reflections on the concept of *life* and the *creaturely*, for instance, reaches from the short text “Fate and Character” (1919), through the “Critique of Violence” (1921), “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (1924–25), the *Origin of the German Mourning Play* (1927), and “Karl Kraus” (1931), up to “Franz Kafka” (1935).

In this context, Benjamin again and again rebuffs terms that represent the unreflecting transfer of a *divine mandate* into secular cultural contexts—without however pleading for an absolute purity of religious concepts. Instead, he is concerned (in acknowledgment of the ineluctable difference between revelation and history) with the illumination of threshold constellations. This is apparent when he situates, for example, Karl Kraus’s figures and tone on the threshold between the world of Creation and the last judgment, between lament (*Klage*) and accusation (*Anklage*). From his early draft on the theory of language from 1916, in which the “Fall of language-mind” constitutes the line of demarcation that separates pure paradisiacal language from language within the history of human communication; through “The Task of the Translator” (1921), in which translation is understood as a rehearsal (*Probe*) of the distance between the world’s many languages and the pure language of revelation; and up to the theses “On the Concept of History” (1940), one can observe an ongoing and continuously reconsidered work on constellations of dialectic of secularization. It is grounded in the philosophies of language and history. With reference to the idea of redemption, which coincides with the end of history, images of history are necessarily distorted or displaced—like dream images.

Above all, Benjamin’s critique is concerned with the adoption of religious concepts such as justice (*Gerechtigkeit*) and redemption (*Erlösung*) to political philosophy or historiography. It also touches on a field of rhetoric and metaphors that profits from the perpetuation of sacred and biblical terminology: precisely all the practices in which theology becomes the small, ugly hunchback who, as the first of the thought-images to appear in “On the Concept of History,” “enlists the services” of another sphere and is, through the refined representation in its puppet, invisible. Benjamin’s engagement with secularization in his “Theological-Political Fragment” is

formulated in condensed form as an epistemo-theoretical configuration, a thought-image that describes the relationship of the profane order to the messianic as a “teaching of the philosophy of history.” In it, he rejects the adoption of ‘theocracy’ as a political term. Instead, he stresses the principle asynchrony between historical events and the alignment of the secular order with the idea of happiness on one hand, and the messianic (which coincides with the end of history) on the other. Only from this fundamental division can one discuss the specific manner in which the pursuit of happiness orients itself toward the messianic within the dynamic of the secular, namely, in the “rhythm of messianic nature” in which the pursuit of happiness and transience come together (Chapter 1).

Benjamin’s essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* constitutes thus a type of foil to the “Critique of Violence.” He recognizes a “Nazarene breach” within the novel: that Eduard praises Otilie’s striving nature as an incomparable martyrdom, describes the dead as ‘saints’ and then places them in Christ’s line of succession. His critique in this text, however, applies more to a modern cult of the poet that, under the provenance of Stefan George and Friedrich Gundolf, ascribes sacred attributes to poetry. According to Benjamin, when poetry is built up to be a quasi-religion it results in a remythologization of art that reaches back before the separation of art and philosophy, a split that came with the end of mythology in Greek antiquity. He sets this remythologization of art, in which it appears as a crypto-religion, up against a strict border between the discourse of art and a “speech of God” and then develops this basic distinction in his reading of Goethe’s novel. Benjamin’s text makes this contention in the course of a systematic differentiation between the terms of human and divine orders: between ‘task’ and ‘exaction,’ between ‘formed structure’ and ‘creature,’ and between ‘reconciliation’ (which occurs among humans), transcendent ‘atonement,’ and the notion of ‘expiation’ through a divine element. In the form of the dialectic construed between natural and supernatural life established by these terms, and then the motif of the “the guilt nexus of the living,” the essay on Goethe maintains a direct connection to the “Critique of Violence,” a text in which Benjamin’s efforts concentrate on conceptual and terminological differences between law and justice (Chapter 4).