

Miracles and Redemptive Aspirations:
Theology in the Thought of Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin

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Every genuine rebirth seeking to return to some original principle, every genuine *ritornar al principio*, every return to pure, uncorrupted nature appears as cultural or social nothingness to the comfort and ease of the status quo. It grows silently and in darkness, and a historian or sociologist would recognize only nothingness in its initial phases. The moment of brilliant representation is also and at one the moment in which every link to the secret and inconspicuous beginning is endangered.-Carl Schmitt¹

Origin is not, therefore, discovered by the examination of actual findings, but it is related to their history and their subsequent development -Walter Benjamin²

¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, translated by George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1976), p. 94.

² Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, translated by George Steiner (London: Verso: 1998), p.46.

Introduction

The Book of Exodus tells the story of the Israelites' flight from Egypt and their escape from slavery. Their fate was not yet their own; until God, maker of miracles, parted the Red Sea, the truth of their identity remained unclear. The miracle of Exodus established in public belief that the Israelites were not slaves, they were, quite the contrary; they were His chosen people, his most beloved. With his single gesture, God interrupted the laws of nature, indicating that a time had ended for the Israelites and something entirely new had begun. Thinking against the theological grain, Baruch Spinoza challenged the truth of Biblical miracles. Spinoza argued that people believed in miracles, not because the event was true, but because of an author's skillful use of poetic devices that appealed to the imagination of those who considered the fantastic to be more valid than the normal. Humankind concocted stories such as these, continued Spinoza, to convince people that they were special, more beloved than others by God. Spinoza was not alone in his attack on the miracle's validity; David Hume too argued that a miracle could not be considered valid unless its falsehood was established as more miraculous than its truth. The doubt cast, by rationalists and empiricists, upon the credibility of religious symbols and myths initiated their descent from the public sphere.

The work of Enlightenment philosophers, like Spinoza and Hume, was one catalyst of the disincorporation of church and state. The church's disempowerment and lost influence in political affairs initiated a new era. The responsibility of defining rules and making laws in the modern world was assumed by, among others, the political scientists, and the sociologists who did so with the use of empirical knowledge and reason. They began to analyze the laws of the seen world and the make-up of the human

being, judging mankind to be of either devious or benevolent nature and mind. Scientific concepts, however, only scraped the surface in their effort to describe phenomenon of the modern world. Political philosophers were left grasping for conceptualizations that allowed them to talk and write about the human condition without denying something vital to human identity, something that neither science nor reason sufficiently explained. The inadequacy of sociological and theoretical terms was apparent in thinkers' more creative conceptualizations, which tried to explain phenomenon of the modern world that were antagonistic to its rational and factual order. In an attempt to fill the void in modern thought, contemporary thinkers like Hent de Vries, have suggested that we reexamine the significance of religion in a world, which is "much less post-metaphysical or post-traditional than it is post-secular."³

The reexamination of religion's place in modern society elicited memory of those who argued that it never really went away. Hegel claimed that it would be a mistake to assume that religion could disappear from the world that humans share. More recently, Claude Lefort and Hent de Vries have claimed that religion has been around, even if hidden, since its initial conception. Lefort argues that religion reemerges when a weakness in the democratic order allows it to break through the "edifice of the state" and reintroduce itself in the public sphere. De Vries argues that religious symbols and myths can show themselves in other ways too. Religious representations, he claims, are part of our collective consciousness, even if they are now only part of private life. De Vries suggests that there are new possibilities for old myths, that a crisis should not be necessitated to impulsively call them forth. We can, he argues, intentionally crack open

³ Hent de Vries, "'The Miracle of Love' and the Turn to Democracy," *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2009, pp.237-290. 279.

the archive of Christian symbols and myths and use them to take us forward. If we accept the claims of those like Hegel and Lefort, that religion is still present in our world, a world that modern theoretical concepts fall short in assessing, we have license to follow the suggestion of de Vries and examine old ideas, to discuss what they once meant and to identify their survival in and potential for interpreting a secular world.

A good place to begin an examination of theological traces in modern thought is with the work of Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin. Both believed that religion survived in the secular state. Schmitt argued in his 1922 book, *Political Theology*, that all modern concepts and systems were secularized theological ones. Benjamin claimed, in his 1928 *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, that, besides religious concepts and systems, religious aspirations also remained, although the twentieth “century denied them a religious fulfillment, demanding of them, or imposing upon them, a secular solution instead.”⁴ Benjamin and Schmitt each had their own redemptive aspirations, and each wrote to save an aspect of human identity in the modern state. While Schmitt fought to preserve the European state form from its domestic and international threats, Benjamin tried to save the human’s capacity to think in an age of fragmentation. Both conceptualized the miracle as an interruption in the edifice of the status quo and an attempt to redeem an aspect of modern man’s identity.

The Biblical miracles and its twentieth century version both redeemed mankind by initiating a new thought or belief. For example, the Israelites found redemption in a phenomenon that aligned their collective belief with the revealed truth of their common identity. Even in Spinoza’s account of the miracle as the poetic concoction of an

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, p. 79.

individual with a flourishing pen, man found redemption by thinking differently than before. Although Benjamin and Schmitt conceptualize the miracle differently and intend it to have different effects, both considered it to initiate new thought within the rational world.

Biographical Background

The connection between Benjamin and Schmitt is not incidental. Benjamin wrote the following letter to Schmitt in 1930, indicating that his book was indebted to the professor's work:

Distinguished Herr Professor,

You will be receiving in a few days from the publisher my book, *Origin of the German Mourning Play*. With these lines I would like not simply to announce its arrival, but also express my joy at being able to send it to you, at the suggestion of Mr. Albert Salomon. You will quickly see how much the book owes you in its presentation of the seventeenth-century doctrine of sovereignty. Perhaps I may go even further and say that in your later works as well, above all in "Dictatorship," your mode of research in the realm of political philosophy has confirmed my own mode of research in matters concerning the philosophy of art. If in reading my book this feeling seems comprehensible to you, the purpose of my sending it will have been fulfilled.

With the expression of particular esteem,

Your very devoted

Walter Benjamin⁵

Benjamin was born in Berlin in 1892 to a family of liberal yet not fully assimilated Jews and, later in life, dedicated himself to Marxist thought. That he saw a similar mind in Carl Schmitt, often remembered as the Nazi party's crown jurist, a man "willing to accept and justify the relentless civic degradation and expulsion of the Jews,"

⁵ Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's-abilities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2008), p. 176.

suggests that their thought somehow transcended the external forms of their lives.⁶ The uniqueness of each man's thought is apparent to anyone who reads a book of Schmitt's political philosophy or Benjamin's theses on history or art. Because their theories are so distinct, historians often pay less attention to the events in their lives than to the content of their work. Many historians do not mention their connection, and the ones that do tend to express disbelief that Benjamin professed admiration for Schmitt, or to emphasize the scandal that it implied.

Carl Schmitt, born in 1888 in Plettenberg, was raised in a petty-bourgeoisie Catholic family. Schmitt studied academic law as a university student, worked as a professor at various universities, and maintained a self-alienated existence. Biographies and intellectual histories of Schmitt bear such titles as *A Dangerous Mind* and *The Enemy*. The evolution of his work and career indicate why his name is synonymous with "the reckless mind."⁷ During the Third Reich, Schmitt's task was to create the Nazi party's ideological foundation, and he wrote many anti-Semitic articles that seemed less analytical or philosophical, than absurd. He also created one of the twentieth century's most sophisticated and creative bodies of thought. The distinctiveness of Schmitt's theoretical work, both in content and style, make his inspirations and influences unclear. His theories do not ride the wake of any particular dogma. For instance, although the theological traces in his work are evident, he did not intend a return to traditional Catholic thought. But when he looked for "armament" to defend the traditional European state against its rise of revolution, he found political power in a religious "system" that gave primacy to transcendent identity over rational thought. To call him a nationalist is

⁶ Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy* (London: Verso: 2000), p. 205.

⁷ Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind* (New York: New York Review Books: 2001).

also misleading. His “almost abnormal indifference to the national cause for an academic, and for someone who was neither on the Left nor a pacifist,” indicate that nationalism was not a driving tenet in his intellectual work.⁸ He wrote to defend the European order of states in general, but he drew his insights from the specific situation of Germany. To save the German state, Schmitt argued that it had to mobilize and unify against a common enemy or threat. He defined the sovereign as the state’s redemptive agent, and he integrated a modern miracle, similar to the Biblical miracle, into his modern systems of theologically structured law.

Benjamin was influenced early in life by Gustav Wyneken’s Youth movement; later, the Zionist movement had a determining role. Benjamin was mentored in his spiritual pursuits by his longest lasting friend, Gershom Scholem, who bonded with Benjamin after watching him debate on Zionism in 1915. Benjamin consistently sought the spiritual over the systematic in his philosophic writing and developed a passion for dissecting difficult theological text. Many of Benjamin’s biographers, historians, admirers, and friends intentionally omit his self-proclaimed connection with Schmitt. For instance, when Theodor Adorno, Benjamin’s friend and colleague, collaborated with Scholem in 1966 on compiling a collection of his correspondence in honor of his distinctive way of working out thoughts and ideas in letters to his friends, they left out his letter to Schmitt. It is not surprising that they did this. Scholem would not have wanted Benjamin remembered or represented in conjunction with Schmitt. Adorno was opposed to disclosing Benjamin’s admiration for Schmitt for different reasons. Adorno was affiliated with the Institute of Social Research, a group of critical theorists, with whom

⁸ Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy* (London: Verso: 2009), 45.

Benjamin's name was associated as well. The institute was an independently funded group dedicated to reviving western Marxism in its pursuit of a new line of social research. Adorno's concern for the Institute's reputation cautioned him against marring the legacy of Benjamin and, by association, that of the Institute by acknowledging a connection with Schmitt. However, Adorno did not fully or consistently consider Benjamin's work to represent the Institute's methods either. Benjamin's use of theological elements, his search for redemptive possibilities in the modern state, and his interest in the obscure aspects of religious text like the Cabala, gave his societal critique more religious influence than the Institute's members preferred. Throughout the period that he worked for them, they tried to persuade him to adopt a more secular approach.

Adorno found other elements to criticize in Benjamin's philosophical method; he was particularly critical of the elements that aligned Benjamin further with Schmitt. For example, Adorno wrote in a 1940 essay that Benjamin's focus on total processes, mythical and historical, prevented him from emphasizing the boundaries of subjectivity: "Between myth and reconciliation, the poles of his philosophy, the subject evaporates."⁹ Schmitt more decisively broke down subjective boundaries, arguing that subjectivity divided the state and detracted from its larger purpose. If Benjamin de-emphasized the subject, it was not because he considered subjectivity to be antithetical or oppositional to the historical process. It was because he, instead, focused on history's antithetical and oppositional relationship with myth. From the perspective of subjectivity, however, Benjamin and Schmitt's philosophies appeared less incongruent. The initial question concerning what made their thought similar became one about what kept them apart.

⁹ Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (London: University of California Press: 1973), p. 71.

But before exploring their subtler differences, their similarities must be more fully understood. Some historians claim that Benjamin and Schmitt's connection is obvious. Mark Lilla finds it unsurprising that Benjamin found likeness with Schmitt, whose work was laden in religious content and rich in its style. Benjamin's fascination with the "moment when Europeans became conscious of the breakdown of the religiously ordered medieval world but before the birth of the modern," made his engagement with Schmitt inevitable.¹⁰ Furthermore, their shared interest in theology was not their only commonality. For example, both were fascinated with the expressive power of language, especially the different expressive capabilities of each particular language. Schmitt originally intended to study philology at the Friedrich-Wilhelm University of Berlin before deciding to study jurisprudence. He believed that language could be given an aesthetic that would make it battle-ready, useful in the political project of mobilization.¹¹ Benjamin also thought that language had hidden potentials, not ones that could be reached by adding more onto its external form, but ones that were hidden within. Benjamin claimed that language's meaning could be unlocked by translating different languages into one another, allowing man to get closer to the language of God.

Whatever conjunctions existed in their work, however, Schmitt and Benjamin did not intend it to have the same effect. Schmitt gave his language an aesthetic to make it political, not to make it poetic. He indicated this in his critical examination of those who tried to escape the political by indulging in the aesthetic. In his 1919 essay, *Politische Romantik*, Schmitt defined his intellectual approach by criticizing two other philosophical currents that countered rational Enlightenment thought. The first was that of the anti-

¹⁰ Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind*, p. 93.

¹¹ Jan-Werner Müller, *A Dangerous Mind* (London: Yale University Press: 2003), p. 9.

revolutionary German Romantics. Schmitt indicated his own political intentions by condemning their purely aesthetic ones. He argued that the Romantics had neither found an indigenous pulse of political power nor defined their own unique political inclination. He more favorably esteemed the Romantics' precedents: a lineage of thinkers from Fichte to Hegel that "contrasted the rationalism of Enlightenment by adopting 'the mentality of the miraculous,' which celebrated passion and irrational desire."¹² As opposed to the Romantics, who escaped into their autonomous world, the latter group engaged with the authentic power that rose from the new ideas brewing in "Berlin of the reform era, epicenter of an intellectual revolution."¹³ Although they tapped into an authentic source of political power, he believed their unsystematic antithesis to reason to be a "kind of play of ideas" that had no pertinent intent. Schmitt departed from earlier efforts by creating an approach that was neither exclusively aesthetic nor celebrated solely in the margins of the political world.

Benjamin made the Romantics the topic of his first academic dissertation as well, finding relevance in the aspects of their work that Schmitt opposed. Schmitt objected to the formal qualities of the Romantics' work, arguing that alienated spaces of human activity, including the artistic realm, were divisive of the state's larger identity and truer purpose. He attempted to combine all energies within the state, using the aesthetic to unify, totalize, and mobilize its people. In contrast, Benjamin claimed that the Romantics' formal qualities were the most important element of their work. In a letter to Scholem in 1917 Benjamin compared the formal qualities of the Romantics to the formal qualities of theology: "romanticism seeks to accomplish for religion what Kant

¹² Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy*, p. 98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

accomplished for theoretical subjects: to reveal its form.”¹⁴ Benjamin argued that the work of art had to be autonomous in order to form effective social critique. The critical theorists would have agreed; they also used the autonomous work of art to inspire man to look critically at his world. In their analysis of society, they used art forms “as a kind of code language for processes taking place within society, which must be deciphered by means of critical analysis.”¹⁵

The neo-Kantian inspired schools, prominent in the early interwar years, also conceptualized an ideal with which to change aspects of the real world. Benjamin and Schmitt may have had different opinions about the Romantics, but they both opposed the efforts of neo-Kantians. If the Romantics constructed the ideal by using poetic devices, the neo-Kantians constructed their version by using normative and scientific systems. Schmitt formed his theories as antitheses to the neo-Kantian inspired legal positivists, a group of legal scholars that worked on the Weimar constitution. The legal positivists created a “pure” body of law that they intended to be purely conceptual and unmarred by determinants in the chaotic world of humans and their affairs. Benjamin belonged to a generation of Jewish thinkers who worked in opposition to the efforts of Hermann Cohen, one of the leading figures of the neo-Kantian school. In *Ethics of Pure Willing*, Cohen developed a system of ethics with the intention of tying the individual to the idea of God.

¹⁴ *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1994), p. 89.

¹⁵ Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. 177.

Benjamin resisted Cohen's systematic approach, preferring, instead, to seek redemptive possibilities within religious text.¹⁶

The intersections and divergences of Benjamin and Schmitt's thought and lives are at once obvious and shocking. The puzzling connection of two of the twentieth century's greatest thinkers, whose work is still being interpreted today, makes it important to examine them within the same frame. This thesis is not the first to attempt such a comparison.

Samuel Weber and Giorgio Agamben have written about Benjamin and Schmitt together, focusing on the connection of their ideas more than on the connection of their lives. Agamben argues in his essay, *Gigantomachy Concerning a Void*, that, although Benjamin voiced his indebtedness to Schmitt, Schmitt was the one who initiated their exchange. He argues that Schmitt developed his theory of sovereignty as a response to Benjamin's 1921 essay, *Critique of Violence*. Agamben bases his claim exclusively on the fact that *Critique of Violence* was published in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik*, a journal that Schmitt read and to which he often contributed. Agamben argues that Schmitt created his concept of the decision as a response to Benjamin, who argued that violence in its pure form must remain external to the law. By doing so, Schmitt preserved the sovereign's ability to bring pure and ideal elements into the law by making the decision not a suspension of law, instead of a destruction of law. This thesis agrees that Schmitt maintained the sovereign's ability to introduce pure elements into the legal order. This thesis diverges from the idea that the decision should be defined exclusively as an act of violence; it was not determined by the sovereign's ability to make

¹⁶ *Neo-Kantianism in Contemporary Philosophy*, edited by Rudolph A. Makkreell and Sebastian Luft (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press: 2010), p.18.

an exception to the law; it was determined by his knowledge of when to do so. It was primarily determined by the sovereign's knowledge about the truth of the state's identity and what posed a threat to that identity.

Samuel Weber has also interpreted Benjamin and Schmitt's exchange of ideas. In his book, *Benjamin's-abilities*, Weber included a section dedicated to their interaction titled *Taking Exception to Decision*. Weber argues that both used a "methodological extremism;" both determined the concept by its antithesis, not its general trait. Although they used the same methodology, however, their concepts of sovereignty were different. While Schmitt defined the sovereign by his ability to make an exception to the law, Benjamin defined the sovereign by his decision against making an exception and by his "loss of a redemptive perspective."¹⁷ According to Weber, Benjamin's sovereign is left in resignation and can only "appeal for a miracle."¹⁸ To make his argument, Weber uses Benjamin's philosophy of history in comparison to Schmitt's political philosophy. However, Benjamin specified in his letter to Schmitt that he intended his philosophy of art to be the primary source used in their comparison. Benjamin abandoned the idea that the sovereign could redeem the state; he did not abandon the idea that there were redemptive possibilities in the modern world. He made this argument in his philosophy of art.

This paper aims to place Benjamin's philosophy of art, developed in *Origin*, within the same frame as Schmitt's political philosophy. In doing so, it will highlight aspects of both that are insufficiently developed, and sometimes overlooked, when scholars compare Schmitt's philosophy of the modern state to either Benjamin's *Critique*

¹⁷ Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's-abilities*, p. 189.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

or his philosophy of history. Most importantly, in his philosophy of art, Benjamin argued that knowledge had potential to redeem identity in a modern state in two different ways: the way that Schmitt envisioned, by presenting man with truth, and his own version, by giving man the ability to determine meaning. This paper follows Schmitt's thought first and begins with the line of argumentation he developed to claim that the miracle was a legitimate part of modern law. It will then examine how his miracle redeemed the state's true identity by reconciling the collective identity with that of the sovereign, achieving totality and indivisible unity with the political form. This thesis will then examine Benjamin's idea of redemption, beginning with his critical interpretation of Schmitt's version, his innovation of Schmitt's concepts, and the redemptive potentials he found in subjectivity and thought. Finally it will examine the new forms that Benjamin's miracle assumed in both the seventeenth and twentieth century.

Historical Background

The ideas of Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin came from a political environment without a clear source of stability. The rifts that ran through the state's façade allowed artists and thinkers to tell its secrets, artists and thinkers who could interpret, not just the German situation, but the human condition and the constitution of a major European state when its political form threatened to fall apart. Indeed, the artistic and intellectual interpretations that came from Weimar Germany provide a much richer assertion of German identity than did its political form at the time. The chance for a successful revolution was lost when the councils, which formed from the initial revolt in

1918, lost their voice in the formation of the Republic's political foundation. The political form that the Republic eventually took was largely influenced by the vision of Friedrich Ebert, the monarchy's instated leader, who envisioned a seamless transition from monarchy to parliamentary democracy for the new Republic. Instead, parliament was adopted arbitrarily and subsequently corroded into a negotiating ground for various interests and political parties. The two camps that opposed the Republic were a radical faction of revolutionaries, who never gave up their revolutionary aspirations, and the conservative opposition.

Germany faced powers no less hostile from the international community. The signing of the Versailles treaty marked the end of the First World War, but it was not the victory for Germany or for Ebert, who only gained further hostility from across the political spectrum, that it was for Europe, in general, and for the interest of the United States, which was a new emerging superpower. The treaty locked Germany into an indefinite number of years of economic reparations, occupation, and territorial annexation. It was dearly felt by Germans, who had already suffered a long war, a lost generation, and the disillusionment that accompanied the deceptions about the purpose and outcome of the war. Whether or not the Versailles treaty was morally justified, its reparations struck hardest at the Germans of the lower class, who experienced economic pain and expected to do so indefinitely.

It is little wonder that ideas of miracles and redemption come from thinkers in this context. As the German state moved into the modern age, religious themes reappeared in secular form, sometimes in an attempt to save an aspect of the past and sometimes in an attempt to begin something new.

Carl Schmitt

To redeem his state, Schmitt defined the miracle of the twentieth century similar to the Biblical miracle, as the sovereign's intervention in the law. He identified the sovereign by his ability to know when an intervention was necessary. In the opening line of his 1922 book, *Political Theology*, he explained the sovereign: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."¹⁹ Just as he did with all of his concepts, Schmitt also defined the sovereign by what he was not; the "essence" of his authority was not his ability to coerce, nor was it his capacity to dominate. Schmitt defined the sovereign by his ability to introduce a decision, knowledge derived from a realm external to the law, into a body of already determined law:

Therein resides the essence of the state's sovereignty, which must be juristically defined correctly, not as the monopoly to coerce or to rule, but as the monopoly to decide. The exception reveals most clearly the essence of the state's authority. The decision parts here from the legal norm, and (to formulate it paradoxically) authority proves that to produce law it need not be based on law.²⁰

The miracle was not a novelty in Schmitt's thought. In fact, it was thematically consistent with his overarching argument that all of the modern state's concepts and systems were secularized theological ones. The sovereign's intervention in the law was introduced, in the third chapter of *Political Theology*, as the "exception in jurisprudence," the modern equivalent of the Biblical miracle:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development-in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state...but also because

¹⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, translated by George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1922), p.5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology. Only by being aware of this can we appreciate the manner in which the philosophical ideas of the state developed in the last centuries.²¹

Because Schmitt argued that the “systematic structure” of modern law was similar to religious law, the miracle assumed an integral role in an already religiously patterned system. Schmitt identified two types of theological law, theism and deism, with counterparts in the modern state. Theism was constructed as a hierarchy of identities and observed the sovereign as the highest position of authority. The deistic system observed only the laws of the rational world. There was no invisible counterpart to its visible order and there was no exception to its rules. Schmitt compared deism to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the modern legal order; he compared theism to the counter-revolutionary and the personal sovereign:

The idea of the modern constitutional state triumphed together with deism, a theology and metaphysics rejected not only the transgression of the laws of nature through an exception brought about by direct intervention, as is found in the idea of a miracle, but also the sovereign’s direct intervention in a valid legal order. The rationalism of the Enlightenment rejected the exception in every form. Conservative authors of the counter-revolution who were theists could thus attempt to support the personal sovereignty of the monarch ideologically, with the aid of analogies from a theistic law.²²

Schmitt developed his concept of sovereignty and his legal theories during the legal debates over the German constitution after the First World War. The monarchy’s collapse, in 1918, initiated the efforts of a group of aspiring legal scholars, who focused their attention on creating a system of law to replace constitutional monarchism. In *The Theory of Monarchy*, a section of his 1928 book, *Constitutional Theory*, Schmitt

²¹ Ibid., p. 36.

²² Ibid., p. 37.

explained the monarch's relationship to law. The monarch was superior to the rules of both nature and men; he was the creator of both miracles and law. "During a time in which the king performs miracles," Schmitt wrote, "with his entire person he can be considered holy and inviolable, priest and the anointed of the ruling lord. The king's law is godly, that is of religious origin; the king himself is a governor of God."²³ His law was considered godly and was legitimate because it was of religious origin. His person was considered godly because of his "inviolable" identity and his "entire person." He was the image of God and similar to a theistic sovereign, whose person also had supremacy over his system. To replace the monarch and to redefine his role in the formation of constitutional law, the legal positivists proposed a legal order that functioned as a closed, deistic, system that did not have a ruling identity or a religious origin. The positivist order was legitimate because it was factual and empirical, not because it was godly. Schmitt's conceptualization of theistic and deistic law gave him a foundation with which to examine and explain the interaction between a transcendent sovereign and a closed system of law in a modern age.

Schmitt claimed that, even after the monarchy's collapse, the sovereign continued to exist-even if repressed- under the closed legal order. Not only did the sovereign persist, Schmitt wrote, but he would, inevitably, emerge and transcend the rational legal order. Schmitt argued, in two ways, that the sovereign had the legitimacy to interrupt the law. First, he called attention to the limitations of the positivists' system. He analyzed the way that it worked, acquainting himself with its loopholes and all of its flaws. Schmitt formed his argument, specifically, as a polemic against the legal theories of Hans

²³ Ibid., p. 308.

Kelsen, the most radical of the legal positivists, who proposed a legal order most congruent with deistic law. Kelsen proposed to replace the monarch's identity by eradicating identity from the constitution altogether. To erase all traces of identity, Kelsen argued that the constitution should be sterilized of human elements, natural elements, and equally uncertain and impure "sociological," "psychological," and causal elements. The state's new scientific and "methodological identity," had no existential or divine characteristics; it further achieved neutrality by eradicating internal hierarchies that revealed sovereignty, personality, or identity in any recognizable form. It was composed as a closed system of uniform norms that emanated from a similarly uniform basic norm.²⁴

The largest flaw in the normative ideal, one that Schmitt quickly identified, was the trait intended to be its biggest strength. By erasing all human elements, Kelsen created a flawlessly normative ideal that was incompatible with the world of human events and affairs. The law's inapplicability to the real situation created a very large loophole in its gap-less order. Because the normative order was applied to the situation with difficulty, it more efficiently affected the visible order by inspiring humans to replicate its façade and mimic its method with their thought and behavior. The system occupied the equivalent of a transcendent realm; it stood above and reflected onto the real, creating: "a regularity, an evenness, derived from repeated practice and professional reasoning."²⁵ Schmitt admitted that a methodological system could create regularity in the status quo, but he argued that it could not defend the state from an extreme threat. He

²⁴ Peter C. Caldwell, *Popular Sovereignty and the Crisis of German Constitutional Law: The Theory and Practice of Weimar Constitutionalism* (London: Duke University Press: 1997), p. 49.

²⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* p. 38.

argued that the system's limitations would be exposed in a situation that eluded its legal norms. The extreme situation would also initiate the sovereign's emergence, when the system fell through and "real life [broke] through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition."²⁶ When a hole was worn through the modern state's façade, the sovereign identity would emerge, and the tale of its creation would be told.

Schmitt legitimized the miracle also by establishing the sovereign's ability to transcend the law. The sovereign could not claim legitimacy by virtue of his godly essence and so had to claim his superiority over the rational system in another way. Schmitt thus developed his idea of the decision, arguing that it was derived from the sovereign's access to a "pure" place of origin, similar to the "religious origin" of the king. The secular sovereign was not the maker of law, but his decision enabled him to be, like the monarch, the maker of miracles. His decision gave him legitimacy to enact the modern miracle, "the exception in jurisprudence" when he determined that the state's true identity was under threat and with the intention of redeeming the state.²⁷

Schmitt argued that the sovereign's decision was superior to the normative order because it originated in realm that transcended and preceded the law: "Looked at normatively, the decision emanates from nothingness."²⁸ The decision was also qualitatively different than the legal norm; it was purer and alien within its system: "Every legal thought brings a legal idea, which in its purity can never become reality, into another aggregate condition and adds an element that cannot be derived either from the content of the legal idea or from the content of a general positive legal norm that is to

²⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

be applied.”²⁹ Not only was the decision different than the norm, it was different than other forms of thought as well. For example, the certainty demanded of the sovereign in his decision-making role was different than the certainty demanded of men in their commercial and economic pursuits. Schmitt argued that the sovereign’s decision and the calculated decision should be neither compared nor confused:

The certainty of the decision is, from the perspective of sociology, of particular interest in an age of intense commercial activity because in numerous cases commerce is less concerned with particular content than with a calculable certainty...the legal interest in the decision as such should not be mixed up with this kind of calculability³⁰

Schmitt also determined that the decision was not subjective; it could not be defined psychologically: “This has nothing to do with the causal and psychological origins of such a decision.”³¹ The importance of Schmitt’s distinguishing the decision from calculable, factual, and subjective thought was that he made it theological, an alien element within a rational or empirical order. In his 1934 book, *On the Three Types of Juristic Thought*, Schmitt argued that the decision transcended normative, calculable, psychological, and measurable thought because it was divine:

It returns this concept of grace, which statute thinking continually attempts to normativize and relativize, back to its rightful place of deserved incalculability and immeasurability; it takes it out of a humanized normativistic order and places it back where it belongs in an exalted Divine order above human normativization.³²

²⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

³² Carl Schmitt, *On the Three Types of Juristic Thought*, translated by Joseph W. Bendersky (Connecticut: Praeger: 2004), p. 61.

The superiority of the sovereign's decision was not attributed to its predictability or certainty. It was superior because of its content and because it revealed and represented the truth of the state's identity.

Schmitt introduced the "pure" decision within the law, as a redemptive measure of the state after the war, when revolutionary threats posed a greater threat than before. The sovereign used the decision to break the law by suspending it, revealing a representation of truth. Schmitt argued that the decision was a representation of truth by claiming an opportunistic perspective. To legitimize a miracle, he needed only to predict that the law would meet a situation that it could not explain. The miracle was enacted in "the moment of the true exception, a moment that norms could not predict." It was the moment that the professionals were incompetent to handle: "Who is responsible for that for which competence has not been anticipated?" The sovereign suspended the law when the normative order failed to provide rules to meet real threats.

The sovereign's exception to the law did not redeem the state in its isolated act; it redeemed the state only by what followed, beginning with the sovereign's reunification of the state under a solitary ruler. In the fourth chapter of *Political Theology, On the Counterrevolutionary Philosophy of the State*, Schmitt gave concrete examples of leaders that could assume sovereignty in the modern state. The dictator and the "conservative authors of the counter-revolutionaries who were theists" were introduced as such sovereigns.³³ Schmitt specifically named French and Spanish counter-revolutionaries, Donoso Cortés and Louis Gabriel Ambroise de Bonald, as exemplary sovereigns; they were distinguished from other men the same way that the decision was distinguished

³³ Ibid., 37.

from other forms of thought. For example, Bonald was able to recognize the evil inherent in other men; he was “clear about the fundamentally evil instinct of man and recognized the indestructible ‘will to power,’ as do modern psychologists.”³⁴ Schmitt considered the dictator to be purer than the other, power hungry men. In fact, he considered the dictator to be more like the godly monarch than the ordinary individual. Cortés would have agreed. He too compared dictatorship to monarchy, and he concluded that the only way to redeem the state from the depravity of man was to demand the enactment of dictatorship:

As soon as Donoso Cortés realized that the period of monarchy had come to an end because there no longer were kings and no one would have the courage to be king in any way other than by the will of the people, he brought his decisionism to its logical conclusion. He demanded a political dictatorship.³⁵

Dictatorship was, indeed, the first political form that was instated after the sovereign’s exception to the law. In his 1921 *Die Diktatur*, and in his 1923 *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, Schmitt explained that dictatorship redeemed the modern state, specifically the modern German state, by unifying the people within the existing democratic form. In both books he argued that dictatorship was not only compatible with democracy but was also an intermediate step between the existing democracy and a true form of democracy. If the sovereign preserved the law by suspending it, the dictator did the same for democracy: he “suspends democracy in the name of a true democracy that is still to be created. Theoretically, this does not destroy democracy, but it is important to

³⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 85.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

pay attention to it because it shows that dictatorship is not antithetical to democracy.”³⁶

Dictatorship suspended a democratic form with separated powers and initiated a democratic form that would return to its “originary condition,” by reunifying power within the body of the commander:

‘Within the space [of positive law], a return to the originary condition takes place, so to speak, the military commander acts [within it] like the administrating state prior to the separation of powers: he decides on concrete measures as means to a concrete goal, without being hindered by statutory limits.’³⁷

Dictatorship was not the final expression of Schmitt’s version of true democracy. He returned to and evolved his work on dictatorship in 1931 when the increasingly dire situation within Germany drove him to seek leadership with which to unify the state along more substantial terms. Accordingly, in *Guardian of the Constitution*, Schmitt argued in favor of the executive’s even greater license to transcend the constitution. Schmitt’s idea of true democracy was a democracy without parliament or other divisive institutions; it was a democracy that, instead, bypassed liberal institutions to unify the pure power from above with the awakening power from below. The sovereign decision, an assertion of identity and truth, redeemed the state by instating a true form of democracy in which the ruler and the ruled united in realization of a common identity:

As democracy, modern mass democracy attempts to realize an identity of governed and governing, and thus it confronts parliament as an inconceivable and outmoded institution. If democratic identity is taken seriously, then in an emergency, no other constitutional institution can withstand the sole criterion of the people’s will, however it is expressed.³⁸

³⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (Cambridge: The MIT Press: 1923), 28.

³⁷ Peter C. Caldwell, *Popular Sovereignty and the Crisis of German Constitutional Law* (London: Duke University Press: 1997), 59.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

In the early 1920s, Schmitt found an even more fulfilling political form with which to redeem German identity in Mussolini's Fascist regime. Unlike the party-oriented version of fascism that Hitler offered, Mussolini's version integrated itself seamlessly with the state. One reason that Schmitt found fascism attractive was that it united people according to their common identity by inspiring their collective belief in a myth. Schmitt first became interested in myth, as a cohesive agent of the state, when he read the work of Georges Sorel. Schmitt, "agreeing with Sorel on the sheer power of myths to generate the enthusiasm and courage necessary for any great moral decision," particularly liked Sorel's irrationalist version of myth, as an alternative to the Marxist, intellectual, version that he did not endorse.³⁹ In his effort to totalize the political form, myth allowed Schmitt to utilize his aesthetic capabilities and give full expression to existential quality of the state's identity.

Walter Benjamin

To the extent that Schmitt delighted in the fantastic power of a society united by myth, Benjamin delighted in the novelties of a world stripped by myth. Although religion influenced his writing and thought, Benjamin did not believe that it would return in an old form. And if Schmitt conceptualized the miracle to revive a state of order, Benjamin wrote about the German tragic drama to describe of a world without heroes or order, a world "suffused with the melancholy of statesmen, tyrants, and martyrs, who

³⁹ Jan-Werner Müller, *A Dangerous Mind*, p. 28.

[were] wracked by guilt.”⁴⁰ He did not deny theology’s presence or power in a modern age. On the contrary, he argued that theological concepts were necessary to understand secular forms of representation, like the tragic drama, or the Mourning Play. For instance, he claimed that the secular version of the tragic drama, the *Trauerspiel*’s “

Content [could not] be elucidated without the aid of theological concepts, which were indispensable even to its exposition...For a critical understanding of the *Trauerspiel*, in its extreme, allegorical form, is possible only from the higher domain of theology; so long as the approach is an aesthetic one, paradox must have the last word. Such a resolution, like the resolution of anything profane into the sacred, can only be accomplished historically in terms of a theology of history.⁴¹

Benjamin did not deny theology’s presence in a secular state, and he did not give up on redemptive possibilities. He denied that a transcendent authority could fulfill redemptive aspirations in a modern state.

Accordingly, Benjamin defined the sovereign by his decision against transcending the law and his decision against using his executive powers. More specifically, he defined him as the “the representative of history,” the one with “dual insight,” who knew that transcendent redemptive aspirations were fallacies and misguided truths in a secular age.⁴² If Schmitt’s decision was legitimate because of its transcendent origin, Benjamin countered Schmitt’s claim by redefining origin. Origin, for Benjamin, was not an external realm; it was, instead, an immanent moment in time. According to Benjamin, origin was the conceptual moment of an idea, the moment that determined what it would become. And if a phenomenon could only find redemption by returning to its origin, then by redefining origin Benjamin redefined redemption as well. According to Benjamin,

⁴⁰ Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind*, p. 93.

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso: 1998), p. 216.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

redemption was neither an act of man nor a return to genesis. Instead, redemption was the fulfillment of an idea, and it could only occur at the end of the idea's historical life.

Origin [Ursprung], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [Entstehung]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearing. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history.⁴³

Benjamin's sovereign played an insignificant, if any, role in the fulfillment of an idea, and he knew his limitations. He decided to forego transcendence and chose, instead, a less brilliant representation. But although Benjamin defined the sovereign by his lost redemptive actions, he did not argue against redemptive possibilities. Benjamin found redemptive possibilities in thought, reflection, and contemplation that awakened man's consciousness.

It is important to look beyond Benjamin's philosophy of history and his redefinition of origin to fully understand his response to Schmitt. Otherwise, the redemptive possibilities that Benjamin suggested are lost. In his philosophy of art, Benjamin claimed that the work of art had redemptive powers that were similar to those of the miracle. The work of art and the miracle could both interrupt the repetitive laws of nature by providing man with the philosophical laws of meaning: "The only philosophical laws which have any place in the work of art are those which refer to the

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin o German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso: 1998), 45.

meaning of existence...There is no need for events to follow a pattern which conforms to the laws of nature; a miracle can just as easily evoke this sense.”⁴⁴

In his philosophy of art, Benjamin introduced two different forms of art, the symbol and the allegory. Each redeemed man differently. While the symbol promised to redeem man by giving him truth, the allegory promised to redeem man by giving him meaning. Benjamin argued that one must understand both formally before understanding how they succeeded or failed at fulfilling their redemptive promises. First, Benjamin explained the form of the symbol, which was a representation of truth; he argued that truth was beautiful, and therefore he also defined the symbol by its beauty. Here Benjamin aligned with Plato, claiming that an “understanding of the Platonic view of the relationship of truth and beauty is not just a primary aim in every investigation into the philosophy of art, but it is indispensable to the definition of truth itself.”⁴⁵ In fact, the symbol, the monarch and the sovereign were all defined by their “indivisible unity,” and the inviolability of their external form. Benjamin argued that man’s attraction to a unified form did not require, and even resisted, his use of intellect. In his explanation of the symbol’s power, Benjamin referenced Plato’s *Symposium* and described Eros’ relationship to truth and his pursuit of its beauty.⁴⁶ He follows it,

but as its lover, not as its pursuer; so that for the sake of its outward appearance beauty will always flee: in dread before the intellect...the content, however, does not appear by being exposed; rather it is revealed in a process which might be described metaphorically as the burning of the husk as it enters the realm of ideas, that is to say a destruction of the work in which its external form achieves its most brilliant degree of illumination.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid., 129.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 30

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

Benjamin argued that flawless unity of any inviolable identity or gap-less order, although perhaps beautiful, was a lie. Furthermore, once man knew this, its beauty would disappear: “Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished.”⁴⁸

Man was drawn to the symbol, according to Benjamin, in the same way that man was drawn to the sovereign, according to Schmitt. However, Schmitt did not consider man’s alignment with the sovereign to be symbolic, he considered it to be political. He expressed this in his 1927 *The Concept of the Political*: “The friend and enemy concepts are to understood in their concrete and existential sense, not as metaphors or symbols.”⁴⁹ Nor did Schmitt intend to achieve totality symbolically; he, instead, abolished the symbolic realm altogether and aspired to reconcile the ruler and the ruled by means of identification within political form. Benjamin would argue that totality, achieved by this type of alignment, was established with a lie.

If the symbol promised redemption by giving man truth, the allegory promised redemption by giving him meaning. Although the allegory was not inviolable, it was no less divine than truth. Allegory even had the potential to save man from his attraction to the symbol: “Where man is drawn towards the symbol, allegory emerges from the depths of being to intercept the intention, and to triumph over it.”⁵⁰ Benjamin considered the allegory, the written language, and the act of textual exegesis all to have divine powers. While the divine power of the written word was the act of writing itself and the holy act of codification: “The sanctity of what is written is inextricably bound up with the idea of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 176.

⁴⁹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 27.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 183.

its strict codification,”⁵¹ the divine power of textual exegesis was the act of unlocking the meaning hidden within codified religious text. Only allegory had redemptive powers, however, and it redeemed man, first, by redeeming his subjective capacity for thought. “Subjectivity, like an angel falling into the depths, is brought back by allegories, and is held fast in heaven, in God, by *ponderación misteriosa*.”⁵² The allegory had redemptive potentials that man could use to reconcile with his past, redeem himself from guilt, and salvage the events of his history, all by interpreting them and imparting them with meaning: “the more nature and antiquity were felt to be guilt-laden, the more necessary was their allegorical interpretation, as their only conceivable salvation.”⁵³ Although the allegory’s origin was immanent, it was no less divine than the sovereign’s transcendent decision. The allegory was divine, not because it emanated from a transcendent realm, but because it referred and “pointed” to something that transcended the visible world:

But it will be unmistakably apparent, especially to anyone who is familiar with allegorical textual exegesis, that all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them. Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued. This religious dialectic of content has its formal correlative in the dialectic of convention and expression.⁵⁴

Benjamin dedicated the second and third section of *Origin* to his interpretation of the Mourning Play, discussing the meaning that it imparted to the events that littered man’s historical evolution. Important for our purpose is his comparison of the Christian mystery-play, in which the sovereign had access to the beyond, with the its secular

⁵¹ Ibid., 175.

⁵² Ibid., 235.

⁵³ Ibid., 225.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 175.

version, the *Trauerspiel*, in which the sovereign's action was restricted to "a context of strict immanence, without any access to the beyond of the mystery plays and so, for all their technical ingenuity, limited to the representation of ghostly apparitions and the apotheoses of rulers."⁵⁵ If the sovereign of the German *Trauerspiel* was defined by his loss of a redemptive perspective, the sovereign of the Spanish *Trauerspiel* was, alternatively, defined by his attempt to redeem the state by enacting his executive powers.

The sovereign of the Spanish *Trauerspiel* could be considered an allegorical interpretation of Schmitt's dictator, and not just because of their similarities. In his letter to Schmitt, Benjamin specified that Schmitt's work on dictatorship confirmed his own. Even if Benjamin did not mention why he found Schmitt's work influential, it is only important to know that Benjamin referenced Schmitt's dictatorial theories before he formed his own thoughts. In his description of the Spanish *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin explained the actions of the sovereign who, like Schmitt's sovereign, attempted to redeem the state. While Schmitt considered the dictator to be analogous to the monarch, however, Benjamin presented the dictator as more of a tyrant than a monarch:

The theory of sovereignty, which takes as its example the special case in which dictatorial powers are unfolded, positively demands the completion of the image of the sovereign, as tyrant. The drama makes a special point of endowing the ruler with the gesture of executive power as his characteristic gesture...⁵⁶

Benjamin interpreted the Spanish *Trauerspiel* of Calderón as a way of imparting meaning to the actions of a ruler who enacted the miracle as Schmitt envisioned. According to Benjamin's interpretation of Calderón, the sovereign who made an exception to the law did not transcend the boundary that demarcated man from monarch.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 69.

Instead, he overestimated his capabilities and, consequently, transcended the demarcations of his sanity; the dictator “ends in madness.”⁵⁷ The tyrant’s moment of glory, which found him basking in his newly found power, was also the moment of his greatest defeat. His actions marked a failed attempt to save his state because, in an attempt to redeem it from the evil of its men, he failed to recognize his own evil, his own will to power, and his own humanity: “And so there is this one thing to be said in favour of the Caesar as he loses himself in the ecstasy of power: he falls victim to the disproportion between the unlimited hierarchical dignity, with which he is divinely invested and the humble estate of his humanity.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, without basing his actions on his knowledge of the past, Benjamin argued that the tyrant would be unable to make the decisions that his role necessitated, that he would be unable to initiate anything new. The tyrant’s impulsive act, then, marked not only his personal defeat, but also the downfall of the state he attempted to save:

This is the indecisiveness of the tyrant. The prince, who is responsible for making the decision to proclaim the state of emergency, reveals, at the first opportunity, that he is almost incapable of making a decision. For their actions are not determined by thought, but by changing physical impulses.⁵⁹

According to Benjamin, the emergence of the dictator could not fulfill mankind’s redemptive aspirations. Benjamin found miracles in the seventeenth century, claiming that “the work of art [was] just such a miracle.”⁶⁰ However, the baroque artists faced a dilemma: they looked for ways to create a unified art form while working only with fragments. According to Benjamin, the exasperated authors of baroque literature

⁵⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 71.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 178.

resigned. Their resignation left them with an appeal for a miracle. Hoping to achieve formal totality “miraculously,” they incessantly piled up fragments. “For it is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle.”⁶¹ The creators of the baroque theatre created a total work of art out of fragments by using aesthetic techniques such as framing, miniaturization, and the subsidiary plot to unify their representation: “these aspects of reflection are equally essential: the playful miniaturization of reality and the introduction of a reflective infinity of thought into the finite space of a profane fate. For the world of drama of fate is-to anticipate our conclusions-a self-enclosed world.”⁶² The creators of the baroque drama did not limit their expressive capabilities by enclosing the representational space. They, instead, added embellishments and achieved greater depth by receding space further back into the form. Their method was oppositional to the method of Schmitt, who broke down enclosed spaces and aestheticized the political form externally.

In the late 1920s, after turning to Marxism, Benjamin looked for twentieth century art forms to act as “just such miracles.” In *Origin*, Benjamin examined baroque art’s potential to interrupt a natural progression of time by imparting historical events with meaning. His discussion of twentieth century art focused on its ability to interrupt the laws of capitalism by inspiring revolution. Adorno was happy with Benjamin’s turn away from theology and toward Marxism. Adorno argued that art had always guided mankind from one stage of development to the next. He claimed that in a capitalist age, however, art had been divested of its potential to inspire social change. For example,

⁶¹ Ibid., 178.

⁶² Ibid., 83.

whereas classical music was once used to discipline man's emotions and turn him into a rational being, in a capitalist society, it was transformed into an object of consumption. The distracted and unreflective modern man fetishized the concert tickets and the singing voices, valuing them as indications of social distinction; he consequentially forewent the experience of art, which alone had the potential to change him. The critical theorists looked for ways to rediscover the hidden potential of art, but they debated which art forms could evolve society forward, through a capitalist age.

Figures in the foreground of the debate were Institute members such as Theodor Adorno, Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, and Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's embrace of Marxism inspired his interest in the writing of Bloch and Lukács; all three had become "disenchanted with the esoteric, quasi-elitist formulations of their early work and...turn[ed] to Marxism as a more generalizable, historically adequate solution to the problem of a regenerated humanity."⁶³ Benjamin, Bloch, and Lukács all considered the work of art as a means of realizing Marxist ideology in reality, but all three slightly disagreed with which art forms were most capable of inspiring revolution.

Their debate over the expressionist art movement, in the 1920s, exemplified their specific points of divergence, as well as their more general ideas about how art could perpetuate or stagnate social change. The biggest question was whether or not an individual's expression of his subjective experience could inspire a mass movement like revolution. Benjamin's answer to this question is present in *Origin*, where he insinuated that subjective thought was a necessary step toward the "fully developed consciousness

⁶³ Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 16.

of the community.”⁶⁴ In contrast, Lukács argued no; he claimed that the expressionists’ art could not inspire social change; expressionist art could not even be understood by anyone other than the individual who created it. In his essay, *Realism in the Balance*, Lukács criticized the expressionists for “leaping into the air and clinging to the clouds;” he argued that they had divorced from reality to the extent that it was not even used as a springboard for the development of their imaginations.⁶⁵ Most importantly, he claimed that by giving individual experience a form, the expressionist hindered revolutionary progress, which depended on forward motion in order to be realized. The expressionists ossified what should have only been a transition phase between ideologies,

Stabiliz[ing] both intellectually and artistically what was essentially a merely transitional ideological phase...But the revolutionary significance of such phases of ideological transition lies precisely in their fluidity, in their forward movement...in this case stabilization meant that the Expressionists...prevented [man] from making further progress of a revolutionary kind.⁶⁶

Others argued that subjectivity was not antithetical to revolutionary progress. Bloch came to the defense of the expressionists in his essay, *Discussing Expressionism*; he claimed that expressionist art was revolutionary, but that it was just, “different; it was composed partly of archaic images, but partly too of revolutionary fantasies which were critical and often quite specific...even if it was undisciplined and uncontrolled.”⁶⁷

Adorno and Lukács’ debate over the formal characteristics of the novel, like the debates over expressionism, centered on ways in which to reconcile subjectivity and

⁶⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 115.

⁶⁵ Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 41.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶⁷ Ernst Bloch, “Discussing Expressionism,” in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 20.

objectivity while also critiquing capitalism. More specifically, their debate concerned the perspective of the narrator and whether he could reference his life in capitalist society without reinforcing and endorsing capitalism. Lukács maintained that the narrator had to make the objective world the starting point of narration and that even subjective “feelings grow out of the life of society.” Instead of drawing the reader into his inner world, the narrator should illustrate “what area of society [the emotions] arise from and where they are going to.”⁶⁸ Adorno agreed, in his essay *The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel*, that reconciliation was important, but that, in a capitalist society, it was only possible by divorcing from a false reality, a fraudulent surface appearance, and creating one free from its laws. “The narrator establishes an interior space, as it were, which spares him the false step into the alien world.”⁶⁹ He noted the narration of Marcel Proust, who opened his novel upon the narrator’s fall into a state of sleep, “the narrator raises a curtain: the reader is to take part in what occurs as though he were physically present.”⁷⁰ The closing of his eyes marks the moment that the reader is invited into his dream world and embarks in his subjective life, free from a false reality.

Benjamin used the montage form to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity. He argued, in his 1930 essay *The Crisis of the Novel*, that the author did not have to choose between divorcing his narration from reality, by using the interior monologue, and using reality exclusively as the milieu of his narration. Instead, he collided fragments of reality with subjective experience.

⁶⁸ Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 36.

⁶⁹ Theodor Adorno, “The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel,” (New York: Columbia, 1991), p. 33.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

Petty-bourgeois printed matter, scandalmongering, stories of accidents, the sensational incidents of 1928, folk songs, and advertisements rain down in this text...The montage explodes the framework of the novel, bursts its limits both stylistically and structurally, and clears the way for new, epic possibilities. Formally, above all.⁷¹

In *Origin*, Benjamin stressed the importance of reconciling subjectivity and objectivity not only within the artistic representation, but also in the philosophical system. Here he specified particular twentieth century philosophical systems that omitted subjectivity from their orders. For example, pragmatism referred to man as its object, an external element, of its unified system, not its origin:

Where art so firmly occupies the centre of existence as to make man one of its manifestations instead of recognizing him above all as its basis, to see man's existence as the eternal subject of its own creations instead of recognizing him as its own creator, then all sane reflection is at an end. And whether, with the removal of man from the centre of art, it is Nirvana, the slumbering will to life, which takes his place, as in Schopenhauer, or whether it is the 'dissonance become man' which, as in Nietzsche, has created both the manifestation of the human world and man himself, it makes no difference; it is the same pragmatism.⁷²

The humanists were also guilty; they created a unity of essence that failed to integrate subjectivity. Benjamin claimed that the humanists' unity of essence was just as false as other inviolable forms: "Such kinds of Humanism or Renaissance are arbitrary, indeed they are false because they give life, with its multiplicity of sources, forms, and spirits, the false appearance of real unity of essence."⁷³

Traces of Benjamin's eventual Marxist thought are apparent in *Origin* in his description of baroque architecture as well. Here he emphasized the reconciliation of its

⁷¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Crisis of the Novel," in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 301.

⁷² Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, p. 301.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

base of support and its rising structure. Whereas Schmitt's dominating sovereign created unity in the political form by reconciling the identity of the ruler and the ruled, Benjamin called attention to the dominating power of wonder inspired by collective works that were creations of the builders as much as they were creations of the master designer: "The Aristotelian idea of [wonder], the artistic expression of the miracle (the Biblical [sign]), is what dominates [art and architecture too]." Benjamin claimed that the base provided a firm foundation so that the aspiring accoutrements could reach even further skyward from their place at the top. He wrote about the width of its columns, the power suggested by its pedestals, and the emphasis of strength carved deeply into its pilasters. He claimed that the real might held the structure's weight so that the embellishments at the apex could soar: "What other function have they than to emphasize the soaring miracle above, by drawing attention to the difficulties of supporting it below. The *ponderación misteriosa*, the intervention of God in the work of art, is assumed to be possible."⁷⁴

Benjamin and Schmitt both valued the total form, but for Schmitt it was the form of the state, and he decided to fight to keep it whole, even at the expense of the integrity of its people. Benjamin loved Germany no less, but he made different choices. He fought to preserve subjectivity and he fought to preserve thought. He let the political form fall apart, and he thought no less of it, even at the moment of its greatest ruin. When Benjamin wrote about the German *Trauerspiel*, it is most likely safe to assume he was writing about his home. In an attempt to redeem his state, Benjamin told the story of its

⁷⁴ Ibid., 235.

powerful design and the majesty of its structure that was made most apparent when a hole was worn in its façade, and it fell apart:

The powerful design of this form should be thought through to its conclusion; only under this condition is it possible to discuss the idea of the German *Trauerspiel*. In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are; and for this reason the German *Trauerspiel* merits interpretation. In the spirit of allegory it is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment. Others may shine resplendently as on the first day; this form preserves the image of beauty to the very last.”⁷⁵

Conclusion

Before concluding, it is important to introduce one more thinker into the conversation between Benjamin and Schmitt and use one more concept of the miracle to elucidate the relationship between theirs. Although Hannah Arendt did not acknowledge indebtedness to Schmitt, her concept of the miracle has a significant relationship to his. In fact, it is almost systematically antithetical to his concept. If his miracle was initiated with a thought that emanated from nothingness and that returned man to his past, Arendt’s was an action that emanated from nothingness and pointed man purposefully into the future. If Schmitt’s miracle promised redemption by abolishing the status quo, it did so at the expense of aspiring to anything new. Arendt defined the miracle exclusively as something new, which seemed like a promising solution. The only example she could find of something entirely new in the world of man, however, something with no history and without extremes yet needing reconciliation, was the birth of a child:

⁷⁵ Ibid., 235.

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence which Greek antiquity ignored altogether, discounting the keeping of faith as a very uncommon and not too important virtue and counting hope among the evils of illusion in Pandora's box. It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their 'glad tidings': 'A child has been born unto us.'⁷⁶

Arendt's miracle could have been a response to Benjamin as well. If Benjamin suggested that man could confront his past with contemplation and thought, Arendt responded by salvaging thoughts from religion, faith and hope, which had no reference to the past and suggested, instead, a brave endeavor into something unknown. By turning decisively away from the past, however, Arendt implied that reconciling with it was futile, that man could only deny it and hope that it would go away. Furthermore, by suggesting that natality was man's sole ability to begin something new, Arendt suggested that the thoughts, events, and memories of man's past would be, at best, dissipated gradually as they disappeared with the rise and fall of each generation. Even worse is her implication that all of the world's hope resided within souls untainted by that world. And does she claim that by turning a blind eye to the past, it will not come back in new forms? Will not new inviolable truths reappear in new forms and lead new generations down the same old paths? Perhaps without reconciling the past, without doing as de Vries suggests and opening the archive of Christian symbols and myths to examine what they once meant, we submit to their reemergence, as Lefort claims, and the possibility that they

⁷⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (London: The University of Chicago Press: 1958), p. 247.

will, at times of weakness, break through the edifice of the state. When Arendt suggested that man turn away from the past, she also suggested that he had no potential to use his thought to reconcile the old before initiating something new. She also denied that man's unique ability to interpret and reflect on history was as much a part of his identity as is his ability to start something new.

Benjamin may have claimed the last word in the debate on miracles. He argued that the miracle was not a decisive turn from the past. He emphasized the importance of thought. He emphasized the importance of confronting the past, of giving it meaning, before ushering in something new. He also emphasized the importance of historical time; he acknowledged the small, yet no less crucial, role of the subjective man who had, throughout history, been forced to resign from redemptive hopes in the visible world and to forego asserting or representing his identity. Perhaps the miracle, then, comes at the perfect moment, when the old has been fulfilled and when humans have learned from past adventures, in action and thought, and know how to make the decisions required of a new beginning. Benjamin described this moment by defining the perfect work of art which, like the single gesture of God in Exodus, reconciled the past with the very same act that embarked mankind on an entirely new adventure: "A major work will either establish the genre or abolish it; and the perfect work will do both."⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 44.

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