

The Messiah and the Direction of History: Walter Benjamin, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Franz Kafka

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“Erst der Messias selbst”, writes Walter Benjamin, “vollendet alles historische Geschehen, und zwar in dem Sinne, daß er dessen Beziehung auf das Messianische selbst erst erlöst, vollendet, schafft.”¹ The meaning of this statement becomes clearer when we turn to his *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen*²; Benjamin speaks of a “messianic standing still” of events, in which the submerged and distorted meaning of the past suddenly reveals itself in the present, and for a moment man has the sensation of realising the past and standing at the beginning of a new, fulfilled era. The French Revolution saw itself, in this way, as the fulfilment of the democratic ideals of ancient Rome, and introduced a new calendar to give expression to its sense of the completion of the past and the start of a new, messianic era. Benjamin relates a fascinating anecdote from the July revolution to illustrate this consciousness of “fulfilled time” - “Als der Abend des ersten Kampftages gekommen war”, he writes, “ergab es sich, daß an mehreren Stellen von Paris unabhängig voneinander und gleichzeitig nach den Turmuhren geschossen wurde.” He quotes an eyewitness who summed up the situation in a little poem:

Qui le croirait! on dit, qu'irrités contre l'heure
De nouveaux Josués au pied de chaque tour
Tiraient sur les cadrans pour arrêter le jour.

In the *Thesen* themselves, Benjamin makes no explicit connection between this standing-still of time and the rôle of the Messiah in Jewish thought, but it is, of course, the real point of the striking image of his first thesis. He compares his own brand of “historical materialism” to a chess playing automaton, which was later discovered to be manipulated by a concealed dwarf; if historical materialism is to win, it will have to enlist the services of the dwarf theology, “die heute bekanntlich klein und häßlich ist und sich ohnehin nicht darf blicken lassen”. The ‘dwarf’ only becomes apparent in the theological-political fragment already quoted and in a fragmentary addition to the *Thesen*. Here Benjamin compares the Jews’ attitude to the past with that of the soothsayer to the future; their constant contemplation of the past, in Torah studies and prayer, combined with the commandment not to speculate on the future, leaves the

zur Ambivalenz seines dramatischen Helden. Er selbst war noch zuversichtlich gewesen, im Falle des Galilei, durch die Verweigerung des Widerrufs die geschichtliche Entwicklung beeinflussen zu können. Wir kennen leider aus unserer Wirklichkeit die Erfolglosigkeit von Physikern, die sich in der Tat verweigerten. Man machte nicht viel Aufhebens in der deutschen Nachkriegspolitik vom Göttinger Protest unserer bedeutendsten Physiker. Der einsam vor dem Capitol in Washington protestierende Nobelpreisträger Linus Pauling entartete beinahe zur komischen Figur. Wahrscheinlich hat Dürrenmatt recht, wenn er als achtzehnte These zu seiner Komödie *Die Physiker* nüchtern feststellt: "Jeder Versuch eines Einzelnen, für sich zu lösen, was alle angeht, muß scheitern". Allein auch Brecht hat recht behalten, wenn er seinen selbstanklägerischen Galilei voraussagen läßt, wie es in Zukunft stehen werde im dialektischen Wechselspiel zwischen der Forschung und der Menschheit. Nämlich so: "Die Kluft zwischen euch und ihr kann eines Tages so groß werden, daß euer Jubelschrei über irgendeine neue Errungenschaft von einem universalen Entsetzensschrei beantwortet werden könnte".

Anmerkungen

- 1 Gerhard Szczesny, *Das Leben des Galilei und der Fall Brecht* (Ullstein Buch 3905), Frankfurt a.M. 1966.
- 2 Ibid., S. 80.
- 3 Ibid., S. 81f.
- 4 *Materialien zu Brechts 'Leben des Galilei'* (edition suhrkamp 44), Frankfurt a.M. 1963, S. 10.
- 5 Ibid., S. 75.
- 6 Szczesny, op. cit., S. 57.
- 7 *Materialien*, op. cit., S. 13.

future as a constant Messianic promise, since "in ihr war jede Sekunde die kleine Pforte, durch die der Messias treten konnte". The Messianic, although it is the true fulfilment of history, can never be the aim of 'historical endeavour', since only on its attainment will the true relevance of history be understood; Benjamin solves the problem, however, by a brilliant piece of dialectical sleight-of-hand, which suggests that, although the 'search for happiness of a free humanity', or as he terms it, 'die Dynamik des Profanen', points in a different, even in an opposite, direction to the Messianic, the two are inextricably related: "aber wie eine Kraft durch ihren Weg eine andere auf entgegengesetzt gerichtetem Weg zu befördern mag, so auch die profane Ordnung des Profanen das Kommen des messianischen Reiches".

This is an ingenious solution to a dilemma which is central not only to Jewish Messianic thinking, but to the Messianically-based revolutionary movements of the last centuries - the gap between the material realisation of political aims for a just society and the millenarian dream of a Messianic kingdom, in which these material aims are linked with a fulfilment of history, a regaining of Paradise joined with the 'infinite consciousness' Kleist, too, had placed in the 'last chapter of the history of the world'. Benjamin is able to separate the two aims, while continuing to postulate their relationship; this is the real secret of his ability to remain faithful to the Messianic beliefs which characterise his work from the beginning, and yet, at the same time, to embrace a personal brand of Marxism. The connection is summed up beautifully in the quotation from Hegel with which he introduces his fourth thesis: "Trachtet am ersten nach Nahrung und Kleidung, dann wird euch das Reich Gottes von selbst zufallen".

Despite the 'limited kind of temporal Messianic fulfilment'³ which the establishment of the State of Israel brought about, this problem still has a vital importance in Jewish thought. As Gershom Scholem has shown convincingly in his recent book, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*,⁴ the whole history of Jewry in the Diaspora can be seen in the light of a conflict between the Talmudic prohibition against 'forcing' or 'hastening the end', that is, attempting to anticipate the coming of the Messiah, and the burning desire of an oppressed and scattered people to achieve the temporal fulfilment of these Messianic promises - on the one hand, the strict observance of the Torah in an apparently endless exile, where each apparent advance in acceptance and status was paid for by a chain of catastrophes, each worse than the last, stretching from the expulsion of the Jews from Spain to Auschwitz and Treblinka; on the other hand, the desire to 'fulfil' the Torah, to transform it into the Law of the New Jerusalem, where the prohibitions and hedgings of the Diaspora could be replaced by the 'positive' law of a realised Kingdom of God.

As long as the 'Torah of Exile' remained in force, however, the only possible expression of this desire was the figure of the Pseudo-Messiah, who seemed able, in his person, to reconcile commandment and desire, before the inevitable disappointment overtook his followers. The most remarkable of these Pseudo-

Messiahs, Sabbatai Zevi, who generated a mass Messianic movement in Europe and the Mediterranean scarcely without parallel in Jewish or world history, brought the conflict to a head. With the coming of the Messiah, his followers argued, the old law no longer applied; the Faithful greeted one another with a saying of the Master's which summed up this new era of history: "Blessed is he who permits the forbidden". The attraction of the Sabbatian promise of an imminent return to Israel and the institution of the earthly Paradise was all too strong for a Jewish Community still reeling from the pogroms of Chmielnicki and his Cossacks; it seemed to promise at once the release from the oppression and discrimination of their life under the Gentiles and from the strict yoke of the Torah. So strong was this attraction that, in many cases, it survived the apostasy of the Messiah, who, confronted by the Sultan at Istanbul with a choice between death and conversion to Islam, outwardly renounced his faith. It is indicative of the Messianic fervour of the period that this step, too, was justified by the Sabbatians, by recourse to the Kabbalah of Isaak Luria; in order to redeem the last of the divine sparks which had been scattered among the 'husks' of the imperfect world, the Messiah must renounce his Jewishness temporarily and descend into the world of the Gentiles, to re-emerge triumphant and announce the End of Days; it was only on Sabbatai Zevi's death that this rationalisation lost its power, and even then, it was rapidly supplanted by another: that he was only one of a number of incarnations of the Messiah which must take place before the promise was finally fulfilled.

Of all Sabbatai Zevi's teachings, however, it was the doctrine of the 'fulfilment of the Torah' which had most impact on the later development of European Jewry. Both Gershom Scholem and Jacob Sloan, in his introduction to Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Satan in Goray*, see the Sabbatian movement as "a focus for important radical forces, driving for liberation from the confines of Jewish inner law, as well as the bonds of the feudal society that is their Ghetto",⁵ and as leading, through the Jewish enlightenment of the nineteenth century, to the Zionism of Herzl and others, which found its final embodiment in the state of Israel. Scholem even establishes a link between the 'overturning of the Torah' by Sabbatai Zevi and his followers and the 'destruction' of a different kind of old law in the French Revolution, which was welcomed by several late Sabbatian sects as the political realisation of their religious aims.

The problem, however, remained unsolved - the debate between Messianists and 'secularists', only briefly checked by the assimilatory tendencies of the nineteenth century, continues to rage. The existence of Israel, if anything, complicates the issue; if, at first, coming as it did after the lowest point in Jewish history, it seemed to fulfil the Messianic promise at last, it is by now clear that any such fulfilment is only of a radically secularised nature. It is, of course, only a Benjamin-like separation of the Messianic and the 'profane' that has made this 'limited fulfilment' at all possible, but it has assumed a national form which creates problems of a kind which Scholem and Benjamin

can never have envisaged in the thirties; whether this development of the 'dynamic of the profane' has helped the coming of the Messiah is a question which a *goy* may be forgiven for avoiding.

I should like, however, to turn to the work of two Jewish writers in whose work Messianism plays a central role: Isaac Bashevis Singer and Franz Kafka. Isaac Singer's best known novel, *The Family Moskat*, which creates a vast panorama of Jewish life in Poland between the wars, ends with the bleak statement that 'the Messiah is dead'; in *Satan in Goray*, he describes the effects of the Sabbatian heresy on a remote Polish village in a manner which, for all its obliqueness, makes its relevance to the present clear.

The most striking feature of the novel is the apparent neutrality of the narrator, a neutrality which, if anything, is heightened by his complete resignation at the end of the novel in favour of a 'serious parody' of the Hasidic legend, which suggests a clarity of relationships not borne out by the rest of the novel. The old Rabbi Benish Ashkenazi rejects both Kabbalah and Sabbatianism as signs of a dangerous decline in Jewish life, but he himself is no match for the dark powers, and the descriptions of life in the old Goray show a strict and pedantic observance of the letter of the law which contrasts unfavourably with the liberal regime of the Sabbatian Gedaliya, at least in its first stages. Rechele, the 'heroine', seems in many ways a victim of this old system; the horrors of her childhood are directly related to the narrow, inhumane world in which she grows up, and her attainment of fulfilment and the gift of prophecy under the influence of Gedaliya is not questioned, even by the narrator of the folk-legend. Gedaliya himself does not appear in the body of the novel as the incarnation of Samael the folk-legend makes him; his friendliness, common sense, *joie de vivre* and genuine affection for Rechele are presented by the narrator without criticism. The heroes of the folk-legend, the cabbalist Reb Mordecai Joseph and Rechele's first husband, Reb Itche Mates, are presented in a very negative light indeed in the body of the novel; Reb Mordecai as a quarrelsome, gullible old man of doubtful motives and Reb Itche Mates as a dangerous and somewhat fraudulent ascetic whose 'deep love of his wife' is certainly questionable. Yet the narrator's neutrality encompasses both the description of the initial flowering of Goray under the Sabbatians and its catastrophic decline after the breaking of the Messianic promise; he relates Rechele's prophetic fulfilment from the same uncritical stance he assumes in telling of her violation by Satan and her conquest by the dark powers. As in *The Family Moskat*, we are left wondering which of the possibilities Singer demonstrates has his secret sympathy, or whether the Messiah, whom the narrator of the folk-legend finally appeals to so fervently while bowing to the commandment not to 'force the Lord', is, again, none other than Death himself.

This, however, is scarcely an adequate answer to the questions the novel raises. If Singer had been concerned only to reveal the Sabbatian heresy, and related movements, as a destructive and evil force in society, he would hardly

have adopted the narrative posture we have already commented on, nor allowed the novel to end in the atmosphere of primitive superstition and chaos which the folk-legend generates. The novel progresses from the bleakness of the opening pages, describing the aftermath of Chmielnicki's pogrom, to the even bleaker and more hopeless conclusion of the last pages, where Rabbi Benish's greatest enemies have become stylised folk-heroes. Between these two extremes, the first days of Reb Gedaliya's regime shine out with all the Messianic promise that the citizens of Goray saw in them; the prosperity and happiness of the village, and the transformation of Rechele, are too 'real' to be dismissed merely as an empty façade. It is only when the 'End of Days' fails to make its appearance and the Messiah is revealed as an apostate that the building collapses; its foundation, the combination of faith in the fulfilment of the Torah and in the coming of the real Messiah, has been removed.

It would seem, then, that Singer is attempting, at one and the same time, to communicate the real and lasting Messianic message which lies even in the heresy of Sabbatianism, and to show the tragedy of its inevitable failure and the re-emergence of the endless sorrow of the Exile. The brief Golden Age of Goray is at once a promise and a warning, and contains the seeds of its own destruction; only the 'coming of the Messiah' will give substance and continuity to the Utopian aims which we, like the citizens of Goray, can see only in brief anticipations which are followed by the inexorable return of darkness. In Benjamin's terms: as long as the pursuit of happiness in the political world requires a Messiah to justify it, its temporary achievement will fall with the apostasy of the Messiah, who, like Sabbatai Zevi, will be forced to make a choice between a variety of martyrdom and survival; either choice will destroy him. The implications of this choice, of course, go far beyond Judaism; any political leader who activates the mythical yearning of the people for the millennium, the new Golden Age, must face the same problem. The persistence of this yearning can be perhaps most clearly seen in its secularised perversion by the Nazis and their ideologist, Alfred Rosenberg.

For Singer, there seems no real answer to the dilemma. His sympathy for the forces of Jewish Enlightenment and for their anticipation in the Sabbatian movement is balanced by a strong moral conviction that the old Orthodoxy, as represented by Rabbi Benish, is in many ways on surer ground. The debate between strict Hasidism and liberal Zionism, which has found such vivid expression in Chaim Potok's recent novel *The Chosen*, remains unsolved in *The Family Moskat*, and Singer's collection of short stories, *A Friend of Kafka*, seems to show him in a state of rootless ambivalence not dissimilar to that of the central figure of *The Family Moskat*, the student Asa Heschel. The process of assimilation has gone too far to be reversed; the attraction which he clearly feels for the old Orthodoxy or even for the demons and *dibbuks* of early Hasidism is, at the same time, a product of their distance from him. Yet the secularised Messianism of the Zionists seems, too, to hold little attraction for him -

above all, because it has renounced the mythological claim to fulfil time and the Law and has substituted political reality for the mysticism and tragedy of the Diaspora. Like Alex Portnoy, he seems to prefer his personal exile, which has become a metaphor for the alienation of the intellectual and the collapse of Messianic hope in a radically secularised society, to an expedient 'political' solution which cannot hope to rectify this situation. In Mordecai Richler's satirical novels, the symbolic rôle of Jewry has been extended even further; the Eskimo poet and the English publisher are 'honorary Jews' whose allegiance to the dying values of their tribe, however shaky, makes them no match for the *dibbuks* of Western capitalism.

Franz Kafka's formulation of the problem is, as one might expect, the most intellectually rigorous of all. In the two stories *Ein Landarzt* and *Schakale und Araber*, a traveller from the 'North', the realm of reason, is confronted with the Messianic hopes and dreams of an oppressed and primitive race, whose whole existence is based on an endless waiting for redemption. Kafka's 'false Messiahs' are unable to satisfy these hopes and dreams; the country doctor, whose journey to the village borrows its miraculous horses from the ecstatic prophecies of Zechariah on the return of Israel to Jerusalem, is simply out of his depth. Modern science, that is, the 'dynamic of the profane', can do nothing to cure the wound of original sin and exile; the secularised 'healing' of the doctor from the country, an *am ha-arez* like the man from the country of Kafka's best-known parable or the land-surveyor K. of *Das Schloß*, is inadequate, and the recognition of its inadequacy leads him to the eternal wanderings of Kafka's travellers, who can neither find their way back to their own society nor restore their connection to the 'old order' which offers, still, the hope of redemption, if only in the 'last chapter of the history of the world'. Similarly, the traveller of *Schakale und Araber*, like his predecessor in *In der Strafkolonie*, cannot fulfil or even understand the demands that are made on him by the jackals, who wait in their oppression and uncleanness for the Messiah who will deliver them, a waiting that goes back to 'the mother of all jackals' herself, Sarah, the wife of the patriarch Abraham.⁶ His Northern 'Verstand', his reason, stands in their way and his.

That this bitter satire on Zionist Messianism should have been published in Martin Buber's periodical *Der Jude* is in many ways the high point of Kafka's irony. Kafka, like Benjamin, often contemplated migration to Palestine, but his plans were never fulfilled. In Kafka's case, apart from the obvious practical difficulties, the same forces seem to have been operating which had stood in the way of his marriage plans; settlement in Palestine was a radical cure for the 'traveller' Kafka, but it was one which might well, like marriage, have removed the tension which, from the beginning, had given rise to his literary work. This secularised 'return to the father' could not have solved any of the real issues of his work, but it might well have imperilled their formulation. For Kafka, death was the Messiah in a different sense than for Singer; the light

which the man from the country sees before his death on the outer circumference of the Law, the phone call which tells K. on his death-bed that he may stay in the village, both show Kafka's conviction that a true 'return' was not possible in this life but only through death. It is difficult not to assume that he felt the same about any kind of 'Messianic fulfilment' in his time; the 'End of Days', however metaphorically understood, remained an 'end', not a product of Jewish migration.

It is curious, however, that Benjamin too, for all his separation of 'Messianic' and 'profane', steadfastly resisted the constant promptings of his friend Scholem to migrate to Palestine, at the cost of great material hardship and ultimately of his life. Perhaps, after all, he too was wary of a weakening of the Messianic idea which is so dominant in his work through temporal fulfilment, however limited. The brilliant dialectic of the *Thesen* could only be maintained in an environment where the Messianic element in history continued to receive its proper nourishment, the tragedy of exile, however symbolically understood, and was thus able to balance the 'dynamic of the profane'. Perhaps, though, the ultimate reason, as with Kafka and Singer, is to be sought in another sphere - the sphere of the artist.

Benjamin's concept of a 'standing still' of the historical dialectic reveals itself, in his own critical writings and in the music criticism of Theodor Adorno, as, in many ways, an essentially aesthetic concept. Thus Benjamin sees Brecht's epic theatre as presenting, in each of its 'gestic' scenes, a 'standing-still' of the dialectic. The epic theatre, he writes, "läßt das Dasein aus dem Bett der Zeit hoch aufsprühen und schillernd einen Nu im Leeren stehen, um es neu zu betten".⁷ In this moment the dialectic is 'frozen', so that its Messianic hope shines out before it plunges back into the river of time. So, too, Adorno sees in Zerlina's arias in *Don Giovanni* a momentary 'standing-still of history', where city and country, rococo and revolution come together to produce a 'Niemandsländ zwischen den kämpfenden Epochen'. She is "keine Schäferin mehr und noch keine Citoyenne. Sie gehört dem geschichtlichen Augenblick dazwischen, und an ihr geht flüchtig eine Humanität auf, die unverstümmelt wäre vom feudalen Zwang und geschützt vor bürgerlicher Barbarei".⁸

The grounds for the ambivalence we have seen in Singer, Kafka and Benjamin are, I feel, to be found in their concept of art. I know of no better definition of art than Adorno and Benjamin's 'standing-still of history'; it is this sensation of standing-still, of joining the antitheses in a crystalline moment of paradoxical unity, where myth and reality, life and literature meet. Benjamin's insistence on the independence of the 'dynamic of the profane', of the search for a secularised happiness, may be a liberating political force, but as an artist he has not really escaped the dilemma of the Sabbatians. The dialectic of profane and Messianic he proposes is at one and the same time an escape from and a return to the commandment of 'waiting for the end'; the end itself can only be sensed in those paradoxical visions of a world at once fulfilled and

unfulfilled which the Pseudo-Messiahs of art have striven towards from beginning of time. It is, one suspects, only the 'Messianic' tension between the real and the ideal that makes life worth living and literature worth reading. And what better motto can the apprentice in either take than that infinitely disturbing greeting of the Master himself: "Blessed is He that permitteth the forbidden"?

The apostasy of history contains its own promise, which no secularised 'dynamic of the profane' can adequately fulfil. However sceptical we may have become about the 'goal' of history, however indescribable, like the coming of the Messiah, it may seem, we are forced, if we wish to remain productive, to 'think' a direction into history which is, in the last analysis, Messianic. To parody Brecht's 'Keunergeschichte' *Die Frage, ob es einen Gott gibt*⁹ in Kafkian terms: the 'Messiah' will come only when he is no longer necessary, but 'he' remains necessary as a projection of the possibility of progress towards a fulfilled society; this fulfilment would destroy the need for the hypothesis, but they seem inextricably linked:

Der Messias wird erst kommen, wenn er nicht mehr nötig
sein wird, er wird erst einen Tag nach seiner Ankunft
kommen, er wird nicht am letzten Tag kommen, sondern
am allerletzten.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 W. Benjamin, "Theologisch-politisches Fragment", in *Illuminationen*, Frankfurt a.M. 1962, p. 280.
- 2 Op. cit., p. 268 ff.
- 3 Cf. Jacob Sloan, Introduction to Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Satan in Goray*, Avon Books, N.Y., p. 10.
- 4 London 1971.
- 5 Sloan, loc. cit.
- 6 Cf. William C. Rubenstein, "Kafka's *Jackals and Arabs*", *Monatshefte* LIX (1967), pp. 13-17.
- 7 W. Benjamin, *Versuche über Brecht*, Frankfurt a.M. 1966, p. 21.
- 8 T.W. Adorno, "Huldigung an Zerlina", in *Moments Musicaux*, Frankfurt a.M. 1964, p. 37 ff.
- 9 *Werkausgabe* vol. 12, Frankfurt a.M. 1967, p. 380.
- 10 Franz Kafka, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, Frankfurt a.M. 1966, p. 90.