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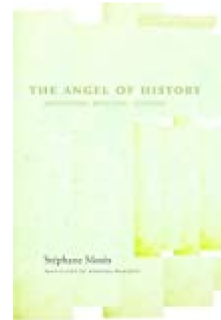

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Three Weimar-era German Jewish Thinkers and Their Visions of History

Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, and Gershom Scholem were three of the most important Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century. They sprang from a similar world, that of the early twentieth-century, assimilated, German-Jewish bourgeoisie (though with differentiations in terms of assimilation and wealth), and they left an indelible mark on modern Jewish studies as well as modern intellectual history. The late SteÌphane MoseÌs brings together these three thinkers, who produced a new vision of history, in an interesting, but ultimately somewhat limited, analysis. They engaged in a "radical critique of historical Reason and its axioms: the idea of continuity, the idea of causality, and the idea of progress" (p. 10). For these three writers, history was not an inexorable march forward to "the final realization of humanity" (p. 10). Rather, history was for them discontinuous, and its crises and caesuras were more important and "more promising" than its homogeneity (p. 10).

MoseÌs situates their emphasis on the breaks in history within the context of the tradition of Jewish messianism and argues that it grew out of their contemporary historical experience. Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Scholem were born and educated in the final decades of the *Kaiserreich* and are generally associated with the interwar years. The First War World, the ultimate caesura in modern European history, was an intellectually formative event for them. Each in his own way experienced the end of an era of belief in historical progress. Additionally, the war forced a reconceptualization of historical time. Rather than as a cumulative process, time was seen as a collection of moments that qualitatively differed from one another. Negative events in the past were not erased or redeemed by positive ones in the present or future. MoseÌs also argues that the present was no longer seen as a transition from the immediate past to the immediate future, thus negating the idea of causality and admitting the possibility of many different futures: "What characterizes the vision of history in Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Scholem is precisely that passage from a time of necessity to a *time of possibles*" (p. 12). Moreover, despite the twentieth-century tragedies experienced by these men, they retained hope. Utopia might

not be something to be achieved at the end of history, but in a passing of time marked by multiple possibilities, at any moment "the imminent realization of the idea becomes conceivable again" (p. 13).

Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Scholem represented three paths of rebellion against the prevailing spirit of assimilation, though each held non-mainstream views in his field–religion, revolution, and Zionism, respectively. Rosenzweig drew heavily on the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and worked to subvert it, arguing that the notion of historic missions for nations had led to the twentieth-century catastrophe. Rosenzweig replaced nationalism, a secular messianism, with a concept of metahistory, "a sacred time, cut off from the vicissitudes of political temporality, where the Jewish people would live its religious vocation" (p. 14). Benjamin reversed orthodox Marxism by rethinking historical materialism in light of Jewish messianism. For him, sudden interruptions of history definitively disproved the notion of historical progress, but these breaks were themselves messianic instants. Scholem reintegrated the study of Kabbalah into Jewish historical studies and rehabilitated religious thought as a symbolic system. He stressed the "destructive and apocalyptic element of Jewish eschatology" rather than the vision of continual progress that had been championed by Jewish historians in the nineteenth century (p. 14). A sense of "now-time," an opposition to the belief in mankind's continual progress, and the location of utopia in the present tie these three writers together beyond the mere similarities of their biographies.

For Rosenzweig, the idea of the nation and the mission of the nation were critical themes, and his examination of these two in Christianity and Judaism underpinned his notion of history. For Rosenzweig, the mission of Christianity, which was identified with modern civilization itself, was "to enter history to accompany nations in their march toward Redemption," and Christianity's nurturing of national mystiques had led to events such as the First World War (p. 34). In contrast, Judaism escaped "the vagaries of history," and "self-identification" was at the core of the "spiritual destiny of the Jewish people" (p. 34). Rosenzweig was an academic expert on Hegel, and he confronted Hegel's vision of history as he formulated his own. He rejected the German school of historiography and judged Hegel's view of history against the background of the nationalist wars of his own generation. Moreover, Hegel may have predicted the death of nations, but Rosenzweig claimed that such a prediction only applied to those nations living within history, and for him, the Jews were on the margins of history. Rosenzweig felt that Hegel's Christian vision of history omitted matters that it could not explain, such as the continuing existence of the Jewish nation. The Jewish people occupied a metahistorical space outside the system. Moreover, for Christianity, holy history has an origin (the birth of Jesus), but has not reached its end. It is a process. For Judaism, the world is not finished, and, thus redemption, which has not yet begun, can have no history. While other religions concern themselves with a return to the mythical time of origins, Judaism concerns itself with completion, to be achieved by fulfillment of the commandments and rituals. Paradoxically, because the Jewish people have lived on the margins of history for two thousand years, they remained "in the immediate proximity not only of [their] founding myths but also of the messianic end of history" (pp. 58-59). And, if the most distant past seems more immediate than the actual present, then hopes for the future can seem present, too. The simultaneity of past, present, and future contributes to a sense of the possibility of contemporary fulfillment of messianic hopes.

For Benjamin, the nature of history was a constant theme. He wanted to know how order could be made out of chaotic events. How could history be understood? Historians reconstitute history through accounts growing out of the reality of their own present, and they draw lessons about the future based on the past. In his era, this attitude often included a belief in the ongoing progress of humanity. Benjamin rejected this idea as well as German historiography's "vision of historical time" conceived in terms of "physical time" and "Newtonian mechanics," where time was continuous and linear (p. 67). MoseÌs divides Benjamin's intellectual development into three phases dealing with three paradigms: theological, aesthetic, and political. In the theological phase, Benjamin emphasized language's role in shaping history, beginning with the loss of Adamic language and the adoption of communicative idioms. In the second phase, the theological paradigm was relegated to a secondary role as history came to be embodied in profane literature. Here, emphasis fell on non-causal relationships in history, all part of his rejection of historicism. Benjamin ultimately moved towards a political model of history that displaced the previous two models. His " 'Marxist' turn" was characterized "by a new distrust of the abstract, speculative, and irresponsible character of a purely aesthetic vision of history" (p. 102). Benjamin was certainly no orthodox Marxist, and MoseÌs cites Benjamin's theory of history as evidence. Benjamin did not regard the historical dialectic as a "*necessary* process inevitably leading to the victory

of the oppressed" (p. 107). History is not an irreversible movement of progress; it is a collection of individual moments in time that are the sites of struggle between the return of the same and a redemption located among the infinite possibilities of the moment. Here lies the Jewish element in Benjamin's thinking: rather than opting for the Marxist vision of time leading to an end of history, he posited the possibility of a utopia appearing in the present, a notion borrowed from Jewish messianism.

Scholem sought to reconstitute the metaphysics of Judaism as expressed in the mystical tradition, and philology was to be his tool. As a historian of Jewish messianism, Scholem necessarily wrestled with questions of the nature of history, and he lived in the era of Zionism, a secular heir of Jewish messianism. Scholem as a historian of a potent religious phenomenon also struggled with the tension between history and metahistory. Germane to MoseÌs's account, Scholem felt that "the Jewish conception of history has nothing in common with the idea of progress" (p. 137). Redemption was a new state, not connected to what had preceded it. It was not linked to causality. Moreover, it was not the end of a process, but rather something that can break the fabric of time at any moment. As a philologist or philological historian, Scholem linked the philosophy of history and the theory of language, the former coming from his study of messianism and the latter from his study of the Kabbalah. However, in his own lifetime, Scholem grew dismayed with Zionist secularization of the Jews' holy tongue, and secularization led to the entry of religious values into history. But their destiny within history was not clear. Would they survive or even reemerge? Scholem did not know, though he cannot be regarded as having been optimistic.

Readers will appreciate many aspects of the *The Angel of History*'s clarity. For example, the author does not assume that the reader has intimate knowledge of *The Star of Redemption* (1921), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), and *From Berlin to Jerusalem* (1982), among the other works he quotes liberally to support his argument. However, the book is notably weakened by the lack of a conclusion or summary at the end. After the introduction, the reader is largely left on his own to piece together the common front presented by MoseÌs's three Weimar-era German Jewish thinkers, despite periodic reiterations. No index abets him in dipping into the book, either. Another weak spot is the chapter on Scholem's fascination with Franz Kafka read against the background of Freudian critique of religion. This material is interesting and relates to Scholem's work on the Kabbalah as well as his dialogue with Benjamin, but it is not strongly anchored to the author's overall examination of the idea of history.

How should one ultimately evaluate *The Angel of History*? The blurb on the back of the book reads, in part, "It is a highly reliable and highly readable guide to Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Scholem that gives insight into the structure of early twentieth-century German Jewish thought, especially as it concerns the problem of history. It deserves a large readership not only in academia but beyond." I agree that *The Angel of History* is an interesting exploration of one specific aspect of modern German Jewish thought, but in my opinion, the blurb's first sentence effectively contradicts the second sentence. MoseÌs's book is certainly interesting and his argument convincing, but the focus of the book is very narrowly circumscribed. He provides little historical context or examination of other contemporaneous writers and thinkers. The emphasis truly falls on these three scholars and a very close reading of their texts as a means to prove a certain point. As a result, *The Angel of History*'s audience will be limited to scholars of pre-Holocaust German Jewry and scholars of German intellectual history (if not to scholars who work at the intersection of these two fields). Understood within these boundaries, this is a fine book, and readers who find this genre of scholarship appealing will thoroughly enjoy it.

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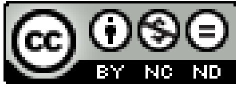

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