

Ground Zero of Meaning

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Dieser Aufsatz zielt darauf ab, die Hermeneutik der Offenbarung zu dialektisieren und sie so mit der kritischen Theorie in Verbindung zu bringen, indem er den Riss der Negativität herausarbeitet, den die Offenbarung in eine Ökonomie der Bedeutung einführt und der das Subjekt der Geschichte jenseits der (mytho-)logischen Einschließung hervorbringt. Unter Rückgriff auf die psychoanalytische Linguistik und die jüdische Religionsphilosophie wird ein materialistischer Begriff des Sprachereignisses der Offenbarung entwickelt, der es erlaubt, ihren anti-hermeneutischen Kern ohne Rückgriff auf das Vorsprachliche zu denken. Die Psychoanalyse und eine Kritik der hermeneutischen Arbeit aus der Perspektive einer Kierkegaardschen Theologie von Sünde und Gnade helfen bei der Entwicklung einer gedenkenden Gegenhermeneutik der Gerechtigkeit. Diese wird schließlich durch die Einbeziehung von René Girards christologischer Opferkritik und Marika Roses Ekklesiologie des Scheiterns direkter mit der christlichen Offenbarung verbunden.

The conjunction of “hermeneutics” and “revelation” points to an impossibility that has long haunted theology and via theology, also philosophy. If revelation indicates transcendence breaking into immanence, it cannot but mark a limit to what can be meaningfully understood. Drawing systematically on Eric Santner’s cross-reading of psychoanalytic linguistics and Jewish philosophy of religion as well as on the apocalyptic thought of Jacob Taubes, the following essay aims to show how a proper dialectical elaboration of this negativity at the centre of hermeneutical understanding is the seam that cuts across the fabrics of theology and critical theory.

By the same token, it should become clear that what otherwise sets them out against each other is intimately tied to theology’s investment in the economy of meaning-production against all odds and to how this also amounts to the production of socio-political legitimacy¹. Against this temptation of a hermeneutical theology of revelation, the following seeks to establish that the integration of revelation into a mythological economy of meaning or into a subjective economy of identity is a symptomatic defense against the hermeneutical rift which is paradigmatically articulated in the theology of revelation and which generates the possibility of historical subjectivity, falling out of any totalizing order.

1. Revelation of Nothing – Negativity and Ontology

In his *Philosophy of Revolution* Gunnar Hindrichs ties the question of the possibility of free human agency to the very concept of revolution:

¹ This is Adam Kotsko’s formula for the subject matter of political theology; cf. *Adam Kotsko, What Is Theology?*, in: id., *What Is Theology? Christian Thought and Contemporary Life*, New York 2021, 1–23, here 4.

“Revolution marks the difference between nature and agency. According to an old idea, the conditions under which we act are posited by human beings (θέσει) rather than being natural givens (φύσει). Following this, agency is determined in terms of the distance/*Abstand* towards the natural. The book at hand develops further this idea and provides the index of this distance: revolution.”²

It is not by accident or by virtue of an appropriative hermeneutics that Hindrichs concludes his considerations of this problem with a politico-philosophical interpretation of exodus, prophecy and apocalypse. These theological *loci* respectively testify to the disruption of a natural or mythical continuum and to the formation of an opening onto what may end up becoming history, i.e., to pass over into the order of time that is deployed by freedom. With regard to the theory of the subject and to the hermeneutics of history, the following considerations shall establish that the epitome of this opening, this discontinuity in which exodus, prophecy and apocalypse are folded, is the concept of revelation. To give an elementary formula of this constellation, Jacob Taubes determines revelation as the “subject of history” and history as the “predicate of revelation”³. Revelation is subject qua hermeneutical breach, as a rift tearing through a closed (mytho)logical context⁴ and falling out of the logic of objects – since, what is a subject, if not something real which nonetheless cannot be described as an object and thus, in a positivist sense, cannot be described *at all*? It is in this *apophatic*, but nonetheless *experiential* sense that the subject as well as revelation will be spoken of here.

So already some aspects of a “distinctly modern notion of revelation”, as envisioned by Eric Santner in his *Psychotheology of Everyday Life*⁵, begin to align. It is fair to speak of modernity in this respect, because the negativity that is revealed within the self-enclosed symbolic economy of mythical nature mirrors Hegel’s modernist principle of the radical unsurpassability of the subject, according to which the (natural) substance needs to be thought of also as subject, i.e., as ‘*pure simple negativity*’⁶ designating a distance or gap: revelation cannot be reduced to any propositional content without formally becoming a part again of that very objective world it conceptually transcends, *completing* that world instead of introducing a break into it. So revelation “in some sense reveals *nothing*”⁷, a nothingness of substance which according to Taubes “is contained within any something as its foundation”, in fact as “ontological subject”: Nothingness can never be an object, but always and anywhere it precedes anything as subject. If language is limited to the

² Gunnar Hindrichs, *Philosophie der Revolution*, Berlin 2017, 7. Translations from German editions of the quoted texts are my own. Where considered important, German original are added with dash and in italics.

³ Jacob Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie*, Berlin 1991/2007, 16.

⁴ The allusion to Marx’ ecological thinking in the title of this essay would require a closer elaboration, taking off from the conceptualization of an insistent remainder of nature. Here, however, it serves to emphasize the rift in the human relationship to nature as it is not only to be taken in an ecological, but also in an ontological sense that asserts itself in revelation: revelation is a rift not only in the natural metabolic circuit, but also in the ‘metabolic circuit’ of being and meaning.

⁵ Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life. Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*, Chicago – London 2001, 37.

⁶ Georg F. Wilhelm Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Hamburg 1988, 18.

⁷ Santner, *Psychotheology* (see fn. 5), 90.

boundaries set by the logic of objects, nothingness cannot be expressed.⁸ Insofar as it seeks expression, the nothingness of substance as ontological subject takes the form of a determinate negation, i. e., a dialectical negation of negation, pinned down by Franz Rosenzweig to the “not-nothing” that at the same time is not *something*.⁹ Such a break with the logic of objects on which also Santner and Hindrichs respectively insist¹⁰, according to the latter is prototypically expressed in the revelation of the name of God in Exodus 3:13. “I will be, who I will be” as the name of God is understood by Hindrichs as “something that could not be adding up to any factual relation. Because factual relations are structured as predications, hence as exactly that which the explanation ‘I will be, who I will be’ avoids”¹¹. This is closely related to the name of God being identical “with the freedom of Israel”¹². For the rift within the logic of objects, which is torn open by revelation, is *subjectivating* for those to whom revelation is addressed, precisely because there is nothing objective with which *identification* would be possible.¹³

2. Economization as Defense

Identification and the logic of objects are connected with one another: identification as appropriation of identity in this context is an imaginary closure of that gap in the world of appearances which instantiates the subject¹⁴. In identification, the subject works on its justification as a legitimate part of a whole and on the acquisition of the dignity that is due to a socio-symbolic thing¹⁵. The self-investment of a subject into such an identity is a repetition compulsion in the “undeading drama of legitimation”¹⁶, where a subject attempts to become part of a whole and thus is no longer itself, producing symptoms in the process¹⁷.

⁸ Jacob Taubes, Zu einer ontologischen Interpretation der Theologie, in: id., Vom Kult zur Kultur. Bausteine zu einer Kritik der historischen Vernunft, München 1996, 255.

⁹ See Franz Rosenzweig, Der Stern der Erlösung, Frankfurt a. M. 1988, 26.

¹⁰ For Santner this means – drawing on the work of Rosenzweig – to break with the demand that the subject be part of a whole in the face of which it will necessarily insist as the gap in the chain of its predicates, in its sullen self-referentiality (see Santner, Psychotheology [see fn. 5], 84, 90, 92; see also the following).

¹¹ Hindrichs, Revolution (see fn. 2), 319.

¹² Ibid., 316.

¹³ On this zero-point of subjectivity see also Slavoj Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology, London 1989, 60, where he develops this thought – similar to Santner – with Kafka.

¹⁴ In the terms of Jacques Lacans psychoanalytic logic, the object called “small a” would as *liminal or lost object* be the constitutive representative of the subject within the world of objects; see Jacques Lacan, Das Seminar, Buch X. Die Angst (1963), Wien – Berlin 2010, 415/(380).

¹⁵ It is – drawing on Søren Kierkegaards sarcasm – about, “*being something*, for instance Councillor of Justice; or walking the streets earnestly – and *being something*, for instance Reverend” (Søren Kierkegaard, Die Wiederholung, in: id., Die Krankheit zum Tode. Furcht und Zittern. Die Wiederholung. Der Begriff Angst, München 1976/2005, 331. Against this, Santner argues with Rosenzweig: “Indeed, Rosenzweig’s whole point is that the self is *not* a thing – not even a noumenal Thing –, but rather a tautological point of self-reference opening a breach in the chain of being.” (Santner, Psychotheology [see fn. 5], 80.)

¹⁶ Santner, Psychotheology (see fn. 5), 43.

¹⁷ This of course calls on Kierkegaard’s analysis of despair in: Die Krankheit zum Tode, in: id., Die Wiederholung (see fn. 15), 23–177.

Here we set foot on the ground of a materialist critique, since this is the fundamental constellation of economy, as Marika Rose understands it in accord with Jacques Derrida: economy is the “figure of the circle” as “the circular figure of exchange, causation, return, identity, and completion”¹⁸. All the while, this designation is completed only in paying heed to the fact that any such circular movement is bound to remain incomplete and would collapse upon itself, were it not for a remainder that cannot be integrated and therefore at the same time makes the finalization of the circle unattainable. The economic formalization of a problem in the critical sense – so, not in the sense of a discourse of feasibility or equilibrium – thus testifies to an identity of goal and obstacle, *eros* and *anteros*, to an identity of the condition of possibility with the condition of impossibility¹⁹ of unity and self-containment. – Economy is, in other words, the continuous labor of the integration of surplus *and* lack: this surplus remainder, this too-muchness identical with a lack of objectivity, a nothingness, not-enough-being and fundamental loss, is at the same time the *transcendence* which is revealed when identity fails: “[Economy] becomes a problem for thought when the question arises whether what appears to be a self-contained, closed system, is in fact in relation to something that exceeds or escapes it, whether immanence is broken up by transcendence.”²⁰

This excess, this something not adding up, according to Santner can now be permanently “translated into a demand for work, a task to be discharged, *something we can do* (or, for that matter, refuse to do, feel guilty for not doing, and so on)”²¹. He holds that this path is that of the super-ego, to which the subject always owes the pursuit of fulfilling impossible demands. This makes the subject feel to be “a determinate failure or limitation of some sort – the failure to be part of a whole – that could be and ought to be remedied”²².

3. Recognition as Limit of Meaning

By contrast, subjectivation through revelation becomes possible by virtue of an *aneco-nomic*, free act which means an *interruption* of work; an “intervention against our defense-strategies with regards to the excesses of meaning confusing us” in our identity as part of a whole²³. Søren Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Anti-Climacus precisely relates this problem of an impossible requirement to work to an understanding of this work of defense essentially as *despair*, or theologically, as sin, i.e., defense against revelation:

“He who is desperate cannot die; no more than ‘the dagger can kill thought’, despair can consume the eternal – the self that lies at the ground of despair, whose worm dieth not and whose fire is not quenched. Yet despair is precisely a *self*-consumption, but an impotent self-

¹⁸ Marika Rose, *A Theology of Failure. Žižek against Christian Innocence*, New York 2019, 5.

¹⁹ This is one Derridean formulation for what initiates his deconstructive, “ultra-transcendental” way of proceeding (see Christoph Menke, *Spiegelungen der Gleichheit. Politische Philosophie nach Adorno und Derrida*, Berlin 2000, 121.)

²⁰ Rose, *Failure* (see fn. 18), 5.

²¹ Santner, *Psychotheology* (see fn. 5), 32.

²² Ibid., 83 f.

²³ Dominik Finkelde, *Politische Eschatologie nach Paulus. Badiou – Agamben – Žižek – Santner*, Wien 2007, 111.

consumption that cannot do what it wills to do. And what it itself wants – to consume itself – it cannot do and this impotence is a new form of self-consumption in which despair nonetheless still cannot do, what it wills, namely to consume itself, which is a potentiation or the law of potentiation. This is the heating up, or the cold burning in despair, this nagging whose movement is always directed inside, deeper and deeper in impotent self-consumption.”²⁴

With Kierkegaard, Santner's concept of the “undeadening” becomes more concrete: the attempt totally to include the self, that subjective remainder of all identity which cannot be positivized, into the world of – potentially controllable – facticity amounts to an “impotent self-consumption”: an attempt to make oneself into a dead object and finally to silence the drive-like, insistent mark of eternity within the subject²⁵. The state of permanent, impossible self-consumption is one of the undead. This fallenness unto death for Anti-Climacus philosophically means despair, but theologically – as neutralizing, defensive working against a revelation that has been deployed – it means sin. Psychoanalytically speaking, revelation opens up the rift of the real – of something uncontrollable, something that “cannot be assimilated” and is therefore traumatic²⁶ – within the doubly subjective constitution – through God and human – of objective reality. Yet thereby it engenders freedom: a step out of the line of the compulsory principles of that which constitutes one's own identity as part of a symbolic economy, being simultaneously an economy of meaning. In this register, Santner's “demand for work” also means a demand for *hermeneutical* work, i.e., work of interpretation, which is being interrupted by revelation. This interruption is put into effect paradigmatically in the recognition of a “meaningless centre of meaning” as which Hindrichs designates the name of God²⁷ and to which the subject is structurally correlated.²⁸

Jacques Lacan, too, points to this logical opposition of hermeneutical work that produces meaning and a subjectivating kind of intervention when he separates psychoanalytic from hermeneutical interpretation in a small polemic. Lacan holds that it is possible to distinguish between discourses of “searching” and those of “finding”. With respect to searching, Augustine's dictum applies: “you would not be searching for me, if you had not already found me”²⁹. Here the hermeneutical anticipation of meaning always settles the direction and thus opens the “comfortable path of an indefinite research”³⁰. Only what is not endangered to be put fundamentally into question by some finding can be indefinitely researched.

²⁴ Søren Kierkegaard/*Anti-Climacus*, *Die Krankheit zum Tode*, Stuttgart 1997, 19 f.

²⁵ The concept of drive in psychoanalysis is not to be understood naturalistically or biologically, but as a “liminal concept” between the psychic and the somatic (see Sigmund Freud, *Triebe und Triebchicksale*, in: id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 10, London 1946, 214). Following Santner, drive can be understood “biopolitically” in terms of the excessive liveliness and the fundamental, symptom-producing being-beside-oneself that is caused by a symbolic overdetermination of the body and that in an important sense constitutes bodyliness itself (see Santner, *Psychotheology* [see fn. 5], 30).

²⁶ See Jacques Lacan, *Die vier Grundbegriffe der Psychoanalyse*. Das Seminar, Buch XI, Wien – Berlin 2015, 61 [54 f.].

²⁷ Hindrichs, *Revolution* (see fn. 2), 321.

²⁸ This is given plasticity also in those scenes of ‘revelation’ in *Stanley Kubrick*, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, Los Angeles 1968, where the characters are mesmerised under the spell of the appearance of an enigmatic black monolith devoid of meaning.

²⁹ Lacan, *Grundbegriffe* (see fn. 26), 14 [12].

³⁰ Ibid., 14 [12].

Against this idea of an interpretation that cannot but search what it has already found, Lacan posits the psychoanalytic concept of interpretation which “communicates with the religious register” in this very respect³¹. What counts as revelatory finding in the analytic interpretation is *not* that which gives meaning and coherence to the analysand’s discourse. Rather, according to Lacan, “discontinuity is the essential form in which the unconscious initially evinces itself to us”³². It evinces itself as rift in the economy of meaning of the discourse, as a gap of nothingness within the causal chain of being, and as such indicates the subject which can at this point come to the recognition of a desire³³. It could be said then: hermeneutically one searches where one has already found while, psychoanalytically, something is found where nothing is really to be searched for – because it focuses on the drive-like insistence of a zero-point of meaningful discourse. The readiness *not* to continue searching and try to integrate the surfacing of such a gap into a more *complete* interpretation, but rather *recognise* it as finding and, through this, to break out of a compulsory logic, is indicative of the psychoanalytic intervention. Because the structural logic of revelation is recurrent in this, Marcus Pound can speak of God as “arch-analyst”³⁴.

4. The Materialist Universality of the Language Event

This structural logic should be determined further. In his discussion of revelation, Santner departs from Gershom Scholem’s letter to Walter Benjamin wherein he elucidates why he is speaking of the “nothingness of revelation”. In Santner’s interpretation, Scholem performs a formal reduction of revelation which allows for offering a precise conceptualization for it: that of a “surplus of validity over meaning”³⁵. Neither a form of knowledge nor even a positive content is being revealed, hence it does not participate in the logic of objectivity; all the while it intervenes *into* this logic and appears within it³⁶. Rather, it is *valid for a subject* and has an effect on the latter as an interpellation without content, but with author and addressee. So, revelation is less of a message or a process of communication, but a language *event*. Nothing about it is cognizable in any representational sense; rather it makes possible the recognition of a subject. The “nonsemantic” dimension³⁷, which is constituted in the language event, is expressed in the name. The name of God as the meaningless centre of meaning has already been introduced; Santner adds the concept of a signifier that does not signify anything, but signifies for a subject – in analogy, the language event of revelation reveals nothing, but it does so for a subject. This event is subjectivating

³¹ Ibid., 14 [13].

³² Ibid., 31 [28].

³³ Hence, when Adorno writes that “true are only those thoughts which do not understand themselves”, he recognises the subject of the unconscious as the structural place where truth comes to reveal itself (see *Theodor W. Adorno*, *Minima Moralia*. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben, Frankfurt a. M. 1951, 254).

³⁴ See *Marcus Pound*, *Theology, Psychoanalysis and Trauma*, London 2007, 141.

³⁵ *Santner*, *Psychotheology* (see fn. 5), 39.

³⁶ For according to Scholem, revelation nonetheless is something which appears (*Gershom Scholem*, *Walter Benjamin*, 20. September 1934, in: *Gershom Scholem* (Hg.), *Walter Benjamin – Gershom Scholem, Briefwechsel 1933–1940*, Frankfurt a. M. 1985, 175, as cited in: *Santner*, *Psychotheology* [see fn. 5], 38).

³⁷ See *Santner*, *Psychotheology* [see fn. 5], 28.

because only here the subject itself *comes into language*, insofar as it realizes itself to be *meant* without reservation in its insisting tautological self-referentiality and can partake in language without having to submit to a logical integration persistently negating its singularity. Rosenzweig argues that the subject can only realize its own possibility in the world in another way than through defiant withdrawal onto itself – which in the mythological order amounts to a tragic challenging of fate – and hence other than in defense against the demand of this objective world, if this world does not face it in the form of simple objectivity and (mytho-)logical closure, but as itself *linguistically* structured. Yet this is the case in revelation, where God is not the final *being* that completes the world and unshakably resides on his throne above it, but where he reveals himself as its creator to the subject in and as the *word*. Terry Eagleton for instance insists against metaphysical theism that God as creator does not function in any way as guarantor or primary cause of a world that in itself is complete and completely structured by necessity – and hence, in principle, cognisable. In other words: God does not function as an *explanation* of the world and as filler of its being. Rather, God as creator is “the supreme guarantor of the contingency of things”³⁸, the guarantor of the non-sense of the world:

“Yet it is not exactly that contingency leads us in Platonic style to posit something necessary and eternal lying beyond it. It is rather that any particular non-necessary fact points to the non-necessity of the world as a whole. It suggests that there might just as well have been nothing as something; and for the theologian [sic] the reason why this is not so is God, who loved the universe into being in a purely gratuitous act. Nothingness in the sense of the non-being with which the world is shot through [...] points to the nothingness in the sense of the unfathomable abyss of which is the Deity.”³⁹

In exactly this way, creation can be understood as a counter-concept to *labor* as the attempt to bind that excess preventing everything from falling into place within the whole through its tenacious insistence⁴⁰. The hermeneutical labor of understanding here also finds its limit in the *materiality* of the word as ground zero of all meaning; as held by a tradition which can in this sense be called materialist and which ranges from Johann Georg Hamann to Rosenzweig and Lacan, countering the rationalist ideal of a world that can be understood with the irreducible contingency of language. For implicitly, the notion of creation as revelation in the word is expressed also here: *the world itself* – not as causal or symbolic unity, but as testimony to “a purely gratuitous”, even superfluous act of love – thus becomes a message at the zero-point of meaning, an “enigmatic signifier”⁴¹, a hieroglyph or an inscrutable revelation which reveals nothing, but does so for a subject. As testimony to the revelation of God it can no more be assimilated to meaning than can the subject itself. Nevertheless, the name of God is paradigmatic for the word in an important sense: It raises what is unassimilable in the subject and what in the logic of a closed economy of meaning can

³⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Materialism*, New Haven – London 2016, 31.

³⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁰ This work in the form of defense would in psychoanalysis be opposed to the concept of “working through”.

⁴¹ See Sanmer, *Psychotheology* (see fn. 5), 33.

only appear as a mere “fluttering” (Hans-Georg Gadamer)⁴², to the status of *generality*⁴³. However, since generality is led *ad absurdum* through this equation with what it cannot contain, what emerges is, rather, the *universal*: universality for Rosenzweig, as he elaborates in his letter to Rudolf Ehrenberg regarding the ethics of the love of neighbor, is exactly not the humanist connectedness among human beings who are, after all and despite their differences exemplars, of the same general species. This again would amount merely to a reduction of the neighbor to an object, to a legitimate identity, and it would mean a domestication of his otherness. It is much more the other’s falling out of her own identity, her non-coincidence with her place within the symbolic whole establishing our relationship as both exemplars of the general that makes an encounter with the neighbour – and with that uncanny surplus that the neighbor reminds the subject of within herself – possible⁴⁴ – as a possibility of living together which is not already prescribed by the requirements and laws of the general, but rather unforeseen⁴⁵.

5. Falling Out – From Sin to Grace and Back

Revelation, then, is not a source of meaning never running dry that can be exploited to work on bridging the gap between subject and object. The commemoration of revelation rather is the ever new and subjectivating repetition breaking open the hiatus within the closed economy of meaning and objectivity. Sin, which has to appear as failing the order of the whole – falling out, falling away⁴⁶ – from the perspective of mythical thinking, from

⁴² In his critique of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics, Ingo Elbe elaborates that exactly this tautological self-referentiality of the subject is abrogated in favour of the primacy of the meaning transported by the tradition that historically precedes the subject (see *Ingo Elbe*, Die falsche Versöhnung von Subjekt und Objekt. Eine Kritik an Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutischem Antirealismus. Mit einem Epilog: Dipesh Chakrabartys konservative Hermeneutik im postmodernen Historyland, in: *Sans Phrase. Zeitschrift für Ideologiekritik* 16 (2020), 91–121, here 96 f.). When Gadamer calls the “self-reflection of the individual” but “a fluttering within the closed electric circuit of historical life” and infers the “prejudice” stemming from this historical life would “far more than its own judgements” be “the historical reality of its being”, he downright inverts the position held here: the very “fluttering” of the subject, the disturbance within the “closed electric circuit”, is the *locus* of revelation and maybe not the reality of historical *being*, but indeed of history (see *Hans-Georg Gadamer*, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen 1986, 281, as cited in *Elbe*, *Versöhnung* [see fn. 42], 97).

⁴³ Rosenzweig’s “formulae” for the singularity of God and the human self respectively are A=A and B=B, wherein “A” stands for the general and “B” for the particular.

⁴⁴ See Franz *Rosenzweig*, „Urzelle“ des Stern der Erlösung. Brief an Rudolf Ehrenberg vom 18.1.1917, in: id., *Mein Ich entsteht im Du im Du. Ausgewählte Texte zu Sprache, Dialog und Übersetzung*, Freiburg i. Br. – München 2013, 88 f.

⁴⁵ *En passant* it should again be emphasised that this makes clear how the general does precisely not fully coincide with the universal, but that universality consists really in the possibility of trespassing this generality onto an excentric position.

⁴⁶ See *Taubes*, *Eschatologie* (see fn. 3), 14: “Only freedom raises a humanity out of the circle of nature into the kingdom of history. [...] Yet freedom can only reveal itself as falling out/*Ab-Fall*. Since as long as freedom still moves within the orbit of the divine-natural circle, it is under the spell of the necessity of God and nature. Non posse peccare is no different than the coercion to the good. Only man’s answer to the word of God, which essentially is a No, testifies to human freedom. This is why the freedom of negation is the ground of history.”

the perspective of revelation, appears as grace and thus as the cause for the possibility of a superfluous and excessive acting out of love. Marika Rose here spots a central point of contradiction within the history of Christian theology, which is the homology of sin and creation: “Sin, in short, is structured in a manner that exactly parallels creation itself as an excessive, unjustifiable, inexplicable act that ruptures economy.”⁴⁷

But a philosophy of revelation in the sense sketched here would not be geared towards a mythological revocation of the fall and towards its renormalization, but would have to start from the maxim “that we first have to eat from the tree of knowledge *again*”, i.e., to follow the path of history opened by sin *as* the path of grace out of myth and nature, to “fall back into the state of innocence”⁴⁸. To think about this liminal being-out-of-order between sin and innocence, Santner draws on the self-reports of the famous psychotic Daniel Paul Schreber. During his episodes of madness, Schreber finds himself insulted as ‘hussy’/*Luder*⁴⁹ by God. When Santner then speaks of the subject’s falling out of legal generality as “a sort of chronic *Ludertum*”⁵⁰, it could be added that love of the neighbor in the emphatic sense is directed at the neighbor *as fall, product of waste ejected from the symbolic economy*. This neighbor is an accursed share who can never be all that it is supposed to be, who cannot be understood or integrated into a harmonious relationship – and who might even enjoy it⁵¹.

For this reason the Jewish people, the people of revelation, represents the scandalous “hussy” among peoples to the world whose “existence in history but also beyond history”⁵² designates it as “non-people”⁵³, whose not-wanting-to-add-up is either – as in Hindrichs’ *Philosophy of Revolution* – heard as a call out into universality wherein it is ultimately about the possibility of human agency itself and about the possibility of history in the strong sense of the word, or it is to be antisemitically feared and fought against as ‘counter race’, danger of deracination and abstract loss of belonging which reminisces the insistence of the indivisible remainder and is finally itself fetishised as the obstacle to a harmonious and meaningful order⁵⁴. If this “remainder” within the order of revelation is raised to the status

⁴⁷ Rose, Failure (see fn. 18), 19.

⁴⁸ Jacob Taubes, Vom Kult zur Kultur, in: id., Vom Kult zur Kultur. Bausteine zu einer Kritik der historischen Vernunft, München 1996, 282. How precisely “innocence” would have to be understood here would require its own consideration, but it could well be more about breaking with the economical logic of guilt rather than erecting an ideal of moral completion.

⁴⁹ See Santner, Psychotheology (see fn. 5), 52: “The appellation favored by the deity – Luder – has especially rich connotations in the context of Schreber’s torments. It can mean wretch, in the sense of a lost and pathetic figure, but can also signify a cunning swindler or scoundrel; a whore, tart, or slut; and finally, the dead, rotting flesh of an animal, especially in the sense of carrion used as bait in hunting.”

⁵⁰ Ibid., 57.

⁵¹ Santner relates Lacan’s concept of enjoyment – *jouissance* – to “[t]he persistence of a mindlessness imminent to mindedness” (ibid., 29).

⁵² Jacob Taubes, Die Entstehung des jüdischen Pariavolkes. Ideologiekritische Noten zu Max Webers Gesamelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie, in: id., Apokalypse und Politik. Aufsätze, Kritiken und kleinere Schriften, München 2017, 200.

⁵³ Taubes, Eschatologie (see fn. 3), 29.

⁵⁴ See on this idea e. g. Philipp Lenhard, „Weiße Juden“. Zum Unterschied von Rassismus und Antisemitismus, in: Christoph Jan Gerber et al. (Hg.) Hallische Jahrbücher #1 Schwerpunkt: Die Untiefen des Postkolonialismus, Berlin 2021, 58: “The ‘Jewish parasites’ in this view do indeed belong to the natural order thought of as cosmos, but simultaneously are opposed to it. Artificially engrafted onto the natural communities, they would ‘decompose’

of a universal or if by it universality is constituted, then history is to be understood as history of the remainder, as “the narration of the stranger and his sojourn in the world”⁵⁵.

6. Commemoration as Messianic Counter-Hermeneutics of Justice

Hermeneutically, this also means a reversal of the signs in the way in which the “text” of history is to be read. History, then, is not to be anticipated as a (potential) whole of meaning only to be *justified* via being attributed with meaning, or, drawing on Santner, to be drawn into the drama of legitimation⁵⁶. History rather is to be approached from the perspective of its *littered remainders and decrements* as a continuum *to be disrupted*⁵⁷. That which to the measure of this continuum is futile and null, those vacant and uncomprehended meanings and breakdowns, can *sub specie revelationis* become a meaningless centre of meaning for a subject. In other words: they can become something which nonetheless is *valid*. It can be recognized and thus become a call of the neighbor – possibly a neighbor from the past who in his singularity might be closer to me than the one with whom I just share in a common historical, social, etc. continuum. The hermeneutical ‘key’ to this relationship to history is the singular, not economizable demand for justice which Jan Assmann has emphasised about biblical monotheism⁵⁸. Because it cuts across all that remains instinctive, natural and evolutionary and that seems to run automatically in history, revelation takes the form of *scripture*:

“It claims to have been revealed to humankind once and for all, since no path of merely human fashioning could have led from the experiences accumulated over countless generations to this goal; and it has been deposited in a canon of sacred texts, since no cult or rite would have been capable of preserving this revealed truth down the ages. From the world-disclosing force of this truth, the new [monotheistic] religions draw the antagonistic energy that allows them to recognize and condemn falsehood, and to expound the truth in a normative edifice of guidelines, dogmas, behavioral precepts, and salvational doctrines.”⁵⁹

Scripture is the Archimedean point that makes an “irreducibly polemical” hermeneutical position possible,⁶⁰ one that Judaism has taken towards history – in the prophetic discourse, for instance, also towards its own history. Scripture is the materialized demand to the

and destroy that natural order from within. In antisemitism, jews embody the artificial, superficial, anti-natural, yes even the revolutionary that is thought to intervene into the harmonic order and wants to change it.”

⁵⁵ Taubes, *Gemeinschaft nach der Apokalypse*, in: id., *Apokalypse* (see fn. 52), 127–138, here 136.

⁵⁶ This, of course, points back to the problem of theological production of meaning, i. e. of integration of contingency, being a problem of legitimacy and thus political theology (see fn. 1).

⁵⁷ Little wonder that the same holds for ‘understanding’ the ‘text’ of social structure. The communication of revelation and revolution (as well as the psychoanalytic conception of interpretation) comes to bear on a method that does not know to read what is intelligible and productive of meaning, but what is unintelligible, nonsensical and *symptomatic* within the socio-symbolic system of reproduction to be indicative of its truth.

⁵⁸ See Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, Stanford 2010, 65, as cited in Kotsko, *Theology* (see fn. 1), 15.

⁵⁹ Assmann, *Monotheism* (see fn. 58), 14, as cited in Kotsko, *Theology* (see fn. 1), 13.

⁶⁰ Kotsko, *Theology* (see fn. 1), 13.

commemoration of revelation which is itself neither historical nor pre-historical, but constitutive of history and coming to pass *within* history⁶¹.

Taubes claims that the concept of history can only be maintained when the difference as well as the possibility of momentary coincidence between time and eternity is maintained⁶². History cannot be thought without the relation to something universal, something that is not merely historical and that can assume validity beyond ‘its time’ for other times and can pass from “a past that *was*” to “a past that *is*”⁶³. The totalization of history in historicism leaves it sinking back into a mythical logic where nothing particular can be decisive. By contrast, *κρίσις* as the time of deciding in which what is historically dated is divorced from what is historically valid is constitutive of the dialectics of history: “Infinite endlessness marks the neutrally in-different/*gleich-gültige* proceedings which call for no decision. History differentiates itself from this indifferent proceedings as it places one within the decision about truth.”⁶⁴

The decision about truth – a motif that is carried forward even into Marx’ theory of crisis – is opened up in a critical moment in which the contingency of a socio-symbolic and historical continuum is breaking through and haunting it from within. If anything, a hermeneutics of revelation would have to be formulated in a paradoxical fashion, as a dialecticised counter-hermeneutics: it would have to start from crisis, from the critical, decisive and truth-revealing moments of rupture in the historical continuum of meaning and would hence become *critique*. Yet the critical revealing of truth by turning history inside out⁶⁵ is apocalyptical and it entertains a subterranean relationship to the modern idea of revolution. Taubes illustrates this connection which for him reaches from exodus to Gnosticism, turning to the word “left”:

“For of course it is not for external, accidental reasons like the seating arrangement in a parliament that massive currents of the present give themselves the insignia of the ‘left’. But in an affirmative reference to all that is decried as ‘left’ by the world – with all the ominous sentiments attached to that word – and in an advocacy for all those questions and woes that are ‘left’ aside by the world, those currents stand on the side of the ostracised and the despised.”⁶⁶

René Girard’s interpretation of revelation through the passion and resurrection of Christ can be understood in continuity with this reversal and as its consequent continuation in the sense of a non-identical repetition. The labor of the production of meaning and of the dismantling or metabolization and normalization of singularity appears as the logic of sacrifice, following Girard. The defense against revelation corresponds to Girard’s concept of sin insofar as it again and again demands to split singularity off from itself – to objectify the split by splitting up the divided subject again into the subject as identity on the one

⁶¹ In Rosenzweig’s language, it could be called “metahistorical”.

⁶² See Taubes, *Eschatologie* (see fn. 3), 23 f.

⁶³ Levi Bryant, *Material Time* (blog-entry), in: <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2018/08/25/material-time/#more-9149> [accessed at: 29.07.2022].

⁶⁴ Taubes, *Eschatologie* (see fn. 3), 13.

⁶⁵ The usual German expression for this literally reads “to turn it left”.

⁶⁶ Taubes, *Eschatologie* (see fn. 3), 57.

hand and the very split itself on the other hand which can then be killed in substitution. The sacrifice then takes the place of the “empty signifier”⁶⁷ – of the meaningless centre of meaning for the symbolic continuum it grounds. For this reason, sacrifice is the place where revelation through passion intervenes, sustaining the tradition of prophetic critique of cult-worship and opening up history for a critical reading against the grain from the point of the *nonsense* of sacrifice:

“Outside of the reports on the passion and in the lamentations of the suffering servant of God, the powers and forces are visible for their outward glory, but invisible for their violent, nefarious origin. The flipside of history is never present and exactly this flipside is brought among the people by the cross of Christ for the first time. For everything that pertains to their false glory, the powers are concerned with their own publicity, but the cross reveals the infamy of their violent origin that must remain hidden for them not to crumble. [...] When they nailed Christ to the cross, the powers believed they were doing what they normally do; when they spun the mechanism of sacrifice, they believed to avert the impending revelation; they did not forebode that they were doing the exact opposite, working on their own annihilation, in a sense nailing themselves to the cross whose power of revelation they did not divine.”⁶⁸

An interpretation of history under the sign of the cross – not determining sin as the *falling away* from a mythical totality, but in the regressive attempt of its *retrieval* – in that regard is part of the same tradition of thinking from the point of view of revelation like Walter Benjamin’s Judeo-Marxist philosophy of history with its critique of historicism and the concept of progress as it is thought in liberal and social democratic political thinking. Benjamin’s critique breaks out of the continuum of history as that of an “advancement traversing a homogenous and empty time”⁶⁹ and it turns against the identity-generating illusion to be able to “swim with the current” of history – with the ‘world’, in the apocalyptic sense of the term⁷⁰. Such an ideation is invested in abrogating the irreconcilable remainder by way of “quantitative accumulation”⁷¹ and the labor of increasing productive forces. This labor feeds on an anticipation of meaning. Against this anticipatory fantasy of completion which will amount to a theodicy, Benjamin champions the revelatory power of the commemoration of the victims that are being produced by this labor – hence a commemoration in the “tradition of the oppressed”⁷² which is a tradition of failure, aborted meaning and messages which remained unreadable and incomplete. Their demand for justice can only be dealt with through the recognition of a subject. Hence, commemoration is a practice of an eschatological ethos that seeks as a part of the sequence opened up by revelation to

⁶⁷ Dominik Finkelde, Slavoj Žižek – Zwischen Lacan und Hegel, Wien – Berlin 2009, 27.

⁶⁸ René Girard, Ich sah den Satan vom Himmel fallen wie einen Blitz. Eine kritische Apologie des Christentums, München 2002, 179.

⁶⁹ Walter Benjamin, Über den Begriff der Geschichte, in: id., Gesammelte Schriften I.2: Abhandlungen, Frankfurt a. M. 1974, 701.

⁷⁰ Benjamin, Geschichte (see fn. 69), 698.

⁷¹ So Michael Löwy quotes Benjamin (see Michael Löwy, Fire Alarm. Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’, London – New York 2005, 70). It thereby becomes clear that in this social democratic view, labour becomes the index of historical progress.

⁷² Benjamin, Geschichte (see fn. 69), 696.

“wrest from the current of time”⁷³ what would be devoured by it, if meaning were conferred on it. The traces of the victims of history after the fall as they appear *sub specie revelationis* can be received as a message by the currently living through the historico-ethical sensory organ which Benjamin called a “weak messianic force”⁷⁴, and so they can be called upon and find themselves “meant” by it as subjects, repeating the subjectivising type of revelation.

What could that mean for a hermeneutics of the Christian revelation itself? Drawing on Rose’s theology of failure, it could mean *not* to restore Christianity hermeneutically as a coherent whole of meaning, falling back into the labor of identification, economizing lack and excess. It could mean becoming a Christian subject by identifying with the symptoms of Christianity, by recognizing “the truth that is revealed from the position of the whore, the witch, the heretic, or the slave”⁷⁵ and – it must not be forgotten – the Jew.

This essay aims to dialecticise the hermeneutics of revelation and thus engage it with critical theory by elaborating on the rift of negativity that revelation introduces into an economy of meaning, engendering the subject of history beyond (mytho-)logical enclosure. Drawing on psychoanalytic linguistics and Jewish philosophy of religion, a materialist notion of the language event of revelation is developed that allows for thinking its anti-hermeneutic kernel without recourse to the pre-linguistic. Psychoanalysis and a critique of hermeneutical labor from the perspective of a Kierkegaardian theology of sin and grace help in developing a commemorative counter-hermeneutics of justice. This is finally more directly linked with Christian revelation by including René Girard’s Christological critique of sacrifice and Marika Rose’s ecclesiology of failure.

⁷³ *Taubes*, *Eschatologie* (see fn. 3), 24.

⁷⁴ *Benjamin*, *Geschichte* (see fn. 69), 695.

⁷⁵ *Rose*, *Failure* (see fn. 18), 149.