

READING GOD'S BOOK TO THE END: ANTINOMIANISM AND THE AVANT-GARDE

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Let me begin with a remark on the concept of messianism itself and its popularity today. It is clear that messianism is a contagious subject. Originally a term from theology, it was also deployed in the fields of political philosophy and philosophy of history during the first decades of the twentieth century, by Jewish philosophers such as Franz Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin. Today, messianic thinking is not only an appropriate topic in Jewish studies and in philosophy, but also in aesthetics and literary theory.

Why is messianism a legitimate frame for reflecting about art and literature today? I will try to shed light on the general connection between messianism and art by means of one specific question. It concerns the historical avant-garde from the beginning of the twentieth century and its legacy for today. How can the structures of messianic thought help to understand the strivings of the historical avant-garde?

The Avant-Garde at the Turn of the Century

The following quote is from an interview with the East German dramatist Heiner Müller that took place in 1991, just two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The interviewer asks for his opinion about the servile role of art in former East Germany. For Müller, however, the conflation of art and politics in the postwar communist states was just a single manifestation of a much larger project, i.e., the utopian venture of the avant-garde which started at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Die eigentliche Frage/Kritik gilt der Illusion/dem Traum der linken Intelligenz nicht nur in der DDR, nicht nur in Europa, von einer möglichen Hochzeit von Kunst und Politik im Namen der Utopie von einer sozial gerechten Gesellschaft. Die Illusion ist verfliegen, der Traum ist nicht ausgeträumt. Aber für Jahrzehnte wird nach dem vorläufigen Sieg des Kapitalismus, der ein System der Selektion ist (das Prinzip Auschwitz), die Kunst der einzige Ort der Utopie sein, das Museum, in dem die Utopie aufgehoben wird für bessere Zeiten. (Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer* 3: 125)

The actual question concerns the illusion or the dream of the left-wing intelligentsia—not just in the German Democratic Republic, not just in Europe—the dream of a possible marriage of art and politics in the name of the utopia of a just society. The illusion has vanished, the dream has not been dreamed to an end. But for decades to come after the provisional victory of capitalism, which is a system of selection (the Auschwitz principle), art will be the only place left for utopia, the museum in which the utopia is preserved for better times. (Trans. TC)

The word “preservation” has a double meaning, just as the German “aufgehoben.” At the end of the twentieth century, utopian views are so to say buried alive in art. The very medium that sustains them, the museum, is also deactivating them. Elsewhere Müller writes: “Now it is a time to bury the doctrine, as Brecht would say, as deep as possible, so the dogs can't reach it. Until it may be dug up again and exposed to a new and altered reality” (*Zur Lage der Nation* 24, trans. TC). It seems that he is again talking about the avant-garde doctrine, the dream of a possible marriage of art and politics.

The legacy of the avant-garde at the turn of the millennium is ambiguous. On the one hand, its utopian ideals of using art to revolutionize society are still alive. During the last twenty years, new designations such as abject art, transgressive art, or “the return of the real” have testified to the fact that a certain critical potential is still believed to be present in contemporary artwork. On the other hand, the divide between artistic practice and society at large has not been breached as the avant-garde had hoped for. Moreover, utopian views may only survive in the protective environment of the museum, the theatre, or literature.

This ambiguity has long been recognized by thinkers from Critical Theory such as Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Peter Bürger. The problematic has become known as “the death of the avant-garde” (see Mann). I believe that two conflicting strands from Jewish messianic thought may help to conceptualize the indeterminate nature of the avant-garde's dreams.

Redemption Materialized in Liturgical Time

The first model of messianic thought that I want to discuss is based on the work of Franz Rosenzweig. From his studies of Hegel before and during the First World War, Rosenzweig deduced that the traditional Jewish conception of history and utopia was radically different from the views of both Christian eschatology and its modernized version, the Enlightenment idea of progress.

The Christian and the Enlightened conceptions of history may be said to be typically quantitative and accumulative. Time is a homogeneous substance that is composed of uniform and empty units of time. According to Rosenzweig, waiting for the end of history is quite a trivial thing for both Christian and

Enlightened thinkers.

History is self-perfecting. Every stage is an improvement on the previous stage, whatever disasters may occur. The simple progress of time, its mere duration guarantees that the world is continually being ameliorated, through the design of God or the Spirit and the activity of humankind.

These views seem to derive from a system of absolute knowledge. If you know what happened at the beginning of time and what will happen at the end, you also know that there is only one possible line between these two points. No conceivable event can be more than a historical accident. Christians know that Christ has already come and redeemed mankind; they also know that he will return on the Last Day. Rosenzweig reveals that this idea of history, which was secularized by the Enlightenment and became most prominent during the nineteenth century, particularly in the writings of Hegel, is fundamentally evolutionist. It is a conception of time that is inspired on the growth and decline of living beings. The utopia at the end of history is therefore theoretically possible, but in fact continually postponed. At every point of time, life can grow but it can also decline. There is always the hope for a good ending but never the certainty that it will materialize here and now. Christianity developed a conception of time that is essentially unfinished. We can wait forever, sustained by the hope that we are always going in the right direction.

According to Rosenzweig, Jewish messianism does not conceive the end of history as a terminus that will necessarily follow once time has mechanically completed its course. He even argues that Christianity and the Enlightenment have nullified the utopian potential of human history. These systems of belief abolish “all shades of our psychic relationship to the future—waiting, anticipation, patience and impatience” (Mosès 11, transl. TC). Today is no more than “a passage to tomorrow” (Rosenzweig qtd. in Mosès 91). Nothing truly new is able to emerge during this empty kind of time.

Traditional Judaism, on the contrary, does account for history’s essential dimension, i.e., the fact that time can produce absolutely new things. “Newness” makes it possible that humans have a complex relationship to time, not a trivial one. Our being-in-history may take the form of hope, waiting, expectancy or impetuosity. In particular, Judaic redemption is conceived as an event that does not conclude history in a horizontal way, but cuts it off vertically. Time may generate moments so different and heterogeneous as to be strictly incomparable. Every moment that is filled with anticipation of the Messiah, such as Sabbath, occupies this kind of heterogeneous time, just as the moment of the Messiah’s coming itself will break off the normal course of time. Today is no longer merely a “passage” but “the other today, a springboard to infinity” (Rosenzweig qtd. in Mosès 90). Stéphane Mosès even suggests that “messianic moments” are not unique to Judaism, but designate a kind of experience that is profoundly

human.

Certain moments of life, personal as well as historical, seem to be made from a different fabric: favorable constellations or sudden portents of new promises, they resemble true *messianic moments*. (Mosès 90-91, trans. TC)

The First Fantasy Castle

The various movements and individual artists that make up the historical avant-garde developed shortly before, during and after the First World War, i.e., exactly in the same time frame as Rosenzweig's philosophy of history. I suggest that the avant-garde's strong blend of utopianism is to be conceived along the lines of Rosenzweig's version of Jewish messianism, rather than along the lines of the Enlightened view of history, which, for example, usually pervades Marxist visions of the ideal future. Although many avant-gardists came under the influence of Marxism, the remote ideal of the classless society never could become an integral part of their beliefs, nor of their artistic practice. The utopia of the avant-gardists was not a regulative ideal as the word itself implies (*u-topia*, "non-place"). Rather, it was a very concrete kind of place, the utopia next-door.

One such avant-garde utopia is to be found in the first *Manifeste du surréalisme* by André Breton (1924). He envisions how a place shaped by Surrealist principles could look like, and he comes up with a *castle*. It's a peculiar location: very nearby, quite practical, but at the same time clearly an object of fantasy.

Pour aujourd'hui je pense à un château dont la moitié n'est pas forcément en ruine; ce château m'appartient, je le vois dans un site agreste, non loin de Paris. Ses dépendances n'en finissent plus, et quant à l'intérieur, il a été terriblement restauré, de manière à ne rien laisser à désirer sous le rapport du confort. Des autos stationnent à la porte, dérobée par l'ombre des arbres. Quelques-uns de mes amis y sont installés à demeure [...]. (Breton 1: 322)

I think of a castle, half of which is not necessarily in ruins; this castle belongs to me, I picture it in a rustic setting, not far from Paris. The outbuildings are too numerous to mention, and, as for the interior, it has been frightfully restored, in such manner as to leave nothing to be desired from the viewpoint of comfort. Automobiles are parked before the door, concealed by the shade of trees. A few of my friends are living here as permanent guests [...]. (Trans. TC)

There follows a list of writers and artists associated at this time with the Surrealist movement, such as Louis Aragon, Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, Antonin Artaud, Roger Vitrac, etc. They practice all kinds of fantastic activities

such as ballooning, studying ancient edicts on duelling and so forth. A number of “gorgeous women” are present as well. The keyword of the utopian estate is total and unrestrained freedom. Breton concludes his vision: “[I]sn’t what matters that we be the masters of ourselves, the masters of women, and of love too?”

To recapitulate: the first messianic model that can be used to comprehend the avant-garde is the abrupt materialization of redemption as Rosenzweig understood it. Traditional Jews may experience this messianic moment in a symbolic way when they honour the religious feasts and rituals, such as Sabbath. The same temporal structure is manifested by avant-garde utopias such as the Surrealist fantasy castle. The vision seems so real that it may almost be implemented tomorrow. The crucial difference is that the avant-garde utopia is not sensed or realised through observing a set of religious laws and rituals, but through new and unconventional artistic techniques.

Total Transgression

The second messianic model I propose should be able to account for this second characteristic of the avant-garde, namely, the innovating and often shocking artworks produced in order to bring the utopia closer. It will not come as a surprise that this messianic model is very dissimilar to Rosenzweig’s rendering of messianism.

Here I will follow the doctrine of Sabbatai Sevi, the seventeenth-century false messiah, and of his “prophet” Nathan of Gaza. According to Gershom Scholem’s 1957 book on the Sabbatian movement, their doctrine may be called *antinomian*. Sabbatai Sevi was believed to be the messiah because he performed certain “strange actions” from time to time. Some of these were merely eccentric: at one occasion he invited the town’s prominent rabbis to a banquet, and then had a Torah scroll brought in. In order to demonstrate his extraordinary piety, he “performed the marriage ceremony between himself and the Torah” (Scholem 159).

However, at other times he would consciously transgress the religious laws, for example, by ordering his followers to eat *heleb*, a sort of forbidden animal fat. He would even bless it using a formula that stresses his doctrine of revolutionary messianism: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who permittest that which is forbidden.” Such transgressions were read as proof that Sabbatai Sevi was the true Messiah. He put an end to the traditional law in accordance with certain sayings from the Prophets and the Talmud. For example: “Before the advent of the Messiah, insolence will increase” (qtd. in Scholem 49).

Sabbatai Sevi radicalized transgression in order to prove that the end of times had come. The ancient law now was abolished, and in anticipation of “the

new heavens and the new earth," everything was permitted (Isaiah 66.22). This vision of the end of history corresponds to another aspect of the historical avant-garde, namely its transgressions. I will illustrate this by means of a second fantasy castle.

The Second Fantasy Castle

The first fantasy castle was a Surrealist pleasure mansion, a "château de plaisance" in true eighteenth-century fashion. The second, however, is rather a "pain mansion" or "château de souffrance," equally in the eighteenth-century tradition—albeit not an architectural but merely a literary tradition. Namely, the novels by the Marquis de Sade, which are usually set in a remote location, preferably a castle, far away from prying eyes and hermetically sealed off. An illustrative example is Castle Silling from *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome* (1785), situated in the heart of the Black Forest.

Only in such an isolated place as Castle Silling the four rich and powerful libertines may give full rein to their desires by humiliating, violating, mutilating, and eventually murdering their sixteen young captives. The castle of Sade is not a setting that makes possible the realization of all kinds of *positive* freedoms, such as the desires qua art, love and friendship which the Surrealists wished to favour in their fantasy castle. The Surrealist utopia stressed the positive gratification resulting from the distance to bourgeois society; the Sadean dystopia is obsessed not with the result of revolution, but with revolution as such. Of central concern is the libertine act of distancing oneself from society by breaking its laws, and then maintaining this distance, which again only seems possible by sustaining the transgressive efforts. In order to summon another kind of reality, the laws of the first reality have to be breached totally and exhaustively.

The manuscript of *Les Cent Vingt Journées* is unfinished. The story breaks off on the thirtieth day. What follows is Sade's plan of the events that would fill the remaining ninety days. It reads as a catalogue of every imaginable crime or transgression. Sade was tireless. It was rightly observed by Roland Barthes that the bodies inhabiting his novels are combined again and again according to a strictly formal, almost mathematical language (see "L'arbre du crime"). Every law or taboo has to be infringed in all possible ways. For example, not content with imagining all elementary forms of incest, Sade mentions the history of

un homme qui a foutu trois enfants qu'il avait de sa mère, desquelles il y avait une fille qu'il avait fait épouser à son fils, de façon qu'en foutant celle-là, il foutait sa soeur, sa fille et sa belle-fille [. . .]. (*Les Cent Vingt Journées*, 2nd part, § 25)

a man who had sex with three children he had by his mother, amongst whom there was a daughter whom he had marry his son, so that in having sex with her he was having sex with his sister, his daughter and his daughter-in-law [...].
(trans. TC)

It is clear that there is only type of beings that would *not* become terminally bored realizing Sade's program, i.e., computers. Given a certain lawbook one might imagine a Transgressive Computer that writes out all possible transgressions, and so completes the project that Sade himself, a finite creature with a finite amount of writing time, never could accomplish. But even programming this computer seems terminally boring! One would have to specify every single way in which every single law can be broken. In short, the computer would have to be provided with an exhaustive description of human reality, and a list of all actions that are possible in it.

The extreme vision of Sade makes it possible to point out the fundamental problem of any revolutionary strand of utopianism or messianism. In order to imagine a radically different type of reality, one has to undo the existing laws one by one, reading God's book of Creation to the end. Only then the second and equally gargantuan task may be begun: reinventing a new world from scratch.

Conclusion

Let us return to the avant-garde. How do the two messianic models, and the two figures that I have used to apply them to the avant-garde, the two fantasy castles, fit together?

According to the first model, the avant-garde does not want to wait for the messianic moment but imagines that a second reality may burst out at any time from its confinement inside the narrow and antiquated reality of the present. The avant-garde is anxiously anticipating that *Augenblick*. However, the sheer kinetic energy of its anticipation cannot be channelled through any kind of religious rituals or laws, as in Rosenzweig's description of how Jewish messianism functioned. There are no feasts such as Sabbath that allow redemption to be experienced in a symbolic way, no such hallowed days that function as "a springboard to infinity."

On the contrary: following the second model it is clear that the avant-garde attacks all that is traditional and hallowed. Its uncountable small revolutions and transgressions may also be termed a symbolic way to experience redemption by anticipation, but *this experience has no bounds*. There is no evening to end the artificial Sabbath that the avant-garde has instituted. Its version of Judaic liturgical time is at most pseudo-liturgical.

In his biography of Martin Heidegger, Rüdiger Safranski has pointed out

how numerous German intellectuals of the Weimar Republic professed a doctrine of the *Augenblick*, that mysterious moment where everything could change. He mentions that the avant-garde movements, too, such as Dadaism, were impatient for the great revolution. In anticipation of it, the artists “performed thousands of small revolutions in culture” (Safranski 220-222). Safranski’s analysis brings together the two models of messianic time. It enables me to gauge the specific utopian dimension of avant-garde art and, by extension, contemporary art. By now it should be evident that the specificity of the avant-garde’s utopianism lies in the messianic concreteness of its utopias, which was not achieved through some kind of liturgical time such as in Jewish messianism, but rather through vivid depictions and even small-scale realizations of “the utopia next-door.” Avant-garde propagated the art of the now. It wanted to focus all artistic energy in order to conjure the single moment that would remake the world. Not only Breton’s fantasy castle illustrates this wish, but also the Dadaist soirées, the Futurist *serata*, and the art parties organized by the Bauhaus movement.

Simultaneously, Safranski’s assessment implies that this pseudo-religious project must end in despair precisely because it attempts to imagine something like messianic redemption outside of the bounds of traditional redemptive religion. Sensing that the *Augenblick* may be near, but unable to hasten it in another way than by tearing down the established patterns, including the ones that deal with the *Augenblick*, the avant-garde got stuck on a rollercoaster to the end of history that was continuously accelerating but never got there. The utopia, then, is indeed buried alive in art: fully aware of its own impossibility, but frantically struggling to get out.

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