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CRITIQUE IN A POSTSECULAR AGE: MAKING ROOM FOR
TRADITION AS A MEDIUM¹

Introduction

The postsecular age, or event, is a unique opportunity to reflect on critique as it re-directs attention to the relations between critique and tradition. The term “postsecular” commonly refers to the presence and influence of *religious* traditions and communities in what were imagined to be secularized societies.² This presence also directs attention more generally to *tradition* as an originally religious order, or medium of reception and transmission, which is active in various domains of culture beyond religion, including art, science and philosophy. In the case of Kantian-inspired critical thought, the challenge of accounting anew the relations between critique and tradition is obvious. It requires reckoning with a common version of the Kantian fantasy of Enlightenment, according to which critique is inimical to tradition. The former liberates mankind from the latter’s yoke, for it sees tradition as a main source of heteronomy.

Jürgen Habermas, one of the champions of postsecular diagnostics, provides one of the familiar attempts to cope with this challenge by transcending the hostile relation between critique and tradition. He does so mainly in relation to religious traditions, but also, at least in earlier writings, in relation to the more general concept of cultural tradition. This kind of work is apparent in direct relation to Kant in Habermas’ writings on the latter’s philosophy of religion,³ but more generally, it is apparent in the normative demand he finds latent in the current presence of religious communities and traditions in the public sphere of secular societies. This presence calls upon the secular citizens of these societies “not to exclude a fortiori that they may discover, even in religious utterances, semantic

¹ I would like to thank the Minerva Humanities Center in Tel Aviv University for a postdoctoral fellowship that supported the work on this paper, and to thank Gilad Sharvit, Naveh Frumer and the members of the research seminar of the Center for their comments on former versions of this paper.

² For significant reflections on the postsecular as an “event” with a focus on the philosophy of religion, see the collected volume edited by Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010); For a recent mapping of the postsecular as a threefold intellectual turn – in critical theory, in radical orthodoxy, and in Marxist-Paulinian thinkers – see Agatha Bielik-Robson, “The Postsecular Turn: Enlightenment, Tradition, Revolution,” *Eidos* 3 (September 2019): 57-82. As my focus is on the relation between critique and tradition, I focus here on the first group. However, in it we might offer a further distinction between Habermas’ reformist postsecularism and Benjamin’s transformational one. On this latter term, developed in a very different context, see Benjamin Schewel, “Transformational Post-secularism: An Overlooked Strand of Thought,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87, no. 4 (December 2019): 1085-1112.

³ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 209-248.

contents and covert personal intuitions that can be translated and introduced into a secular discourse.⁴ This demand applies to critical thinkers in a postsecular age who seek to awaken "in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations in solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven."⁵ Thus, critique must be attentive to the contents of religious traditions, for "among the modern societies, only those that are able to introduce into the secular domain the essential *contents* of their religious traditions which point beyond the merely human realm will also be able to rescue the substance of the human."⁶ Note that Habermas' turn towards tradition is content-oriented. It does not legitimize tradition as a form, or medium of gathering a community. Additionally, it implies a somewhat instrumental relation between critique and tradition: critique filters the contents of tradition required for a thriving modern, secular society.

Walter Benjamin is one of the thinkers Habermas recently noted as providing us with such contents.⁷ Indeed, this continues Habermas' understanding of Benjamin's model of critique, which he described long ago as redeeming "semantic potentials" from "cultural traditions."⁸ I mention this influential yet somewhat outdated interpretation of Benjamin since it still captures not only what Habermas misses in Benjamin, but also what he misses, due to his content-oriented approach, in the opportunity to rethink the relations between critique and tradition in the postsecular age. Benjamin, I argue, points in a different direction than Habermas' interpretation of his texts.

Benjamin's writings imply that critique prepares the ground or makes room for tradition in the experience of modernity not merely as a source of content but rather as a transformative medium. Tradition is a medium of reception and transmission, but what is significant to Benjamin is that he views it as a medium enabling discontinuity and freedom. Rather than a medium that imposes continuity and determinacy through external authority, as implied by the Enlightenment, it is understood as a medium that enables recurring breaks. Rather than imposing heteronomy, and gathering a community under the principle of heteronomy, in his early writings it is seen as a medium of freedom, albeit not based on subjective autonomy. I argue that in his inheritance of Kantian thought, Benjamin offers critical work that develops concepts of knowledge and experience in which tradition will have a place as such a medium. In his later writings,

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "Notes on Postsecular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (October 2008): 29. My italics.

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, "An Awareness of What is Missing" in Jürgen Habermas et al. *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Postsecular Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 19.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Politik, Kunst, Religion: Essays über zeitgenössische Philosophen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1978), 142, cited in Michael Reder and Josef Schmidt, "Habermas and Religion," in Jürgen Habermas et al. *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Postsecular Age*, 5. My italics. Agatha Bielik-Robson in "The Postsecular Turn" nicely describes Habermas' approach, along with prior Frankfurt School critical theorists, as a turn to revelation "as an aid in fighting the reductionist, naturalist specter," which threatens the core values of Enlightenment.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "A Reply" in Jürgen Habermas et al. *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Postsecular Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 80.

⁸ Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin," *New German Critique* 17 (Spring, 1979): 55.

critique – this time, the critique of art and culture – exhibits the collective transformative potency that tradition holds as a medium in modernity. It is by adopting tradition as a medium, by being immersed in the modern past as a tradition, that collective awakening is possible according to Benjamin.

In the face of the crisis of tradition in modernity, which Benjamin famously diagnosed, one finds in his critical work recurring insistence on transposing tradition as a medium from its original place in the sphere of religion to that of the broader sphere of modern culture, art and philosophy.⁹ Thus, I find in his writings a potential contribution for the postsecular discourse as it provides a novel understanding of the critique-tradition relations. In the common picture of Kant we find inimical relations; in Habermas (and other critical theorists) we see a greater openness as critique filters the contents of tradition. Yet in Benjamin's work, the common Kantian view is practically inverted. Rather than liberating from tradition, critique ascertains a place for tradition as a medium in modernity, one that puts transformation and discontinuity at the center of the act of gathering.

While this, as far as I know, is a novel contribution to postsecular discourse, in Benjamin scholarship, there are several works that prepare the ground for this line of inquiry. As noted above, Habermas inserts Benjamin in postsecular discourse, but it is Brian Britt in *Postsecular Benjamin* who actually researched the potential of this insertion into the wider context of this discourse, bringing Benjamin into dialogue with such thinkers as Talal Asad, Ananda Abeysekara and Saba Mahmoud.¹⁰ With its emphasis on the kind of agency made possible by tradition, Britt's work contributes to the contemporary research that emphasizes the practical and political potential of Benjamin's concept of tradition rather than solely focusing on his diagnostics of the crisis of transmissibility.¹¹ However, in this line of research, Benjamin's relation to Kant and thus his relation to the origins of modern critique, is somewhat absent. In this respect, Richard Eldridge's *Images of History* is significant in examining the nexus of freedom, critique and history in Kant and Benjamin – thus indirectly tackling the relation between critique and tradition as well.¹² Eli Friedlander's *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* provides a more direct starting point for examining this relation, by illuminating Benjamin's inheritance of the category of

⁹ On this move in the Jewish context see Brian Britt, "Benjamin's Displaced Jewish Tradition" in *The Future of Benjamin*, edited by Nitzan Lebovic. importance-of-benjamin.cas2.lehigh.edu/content/benjamin%F2%80%99s-displaced-jewish-tradition (accessed October 18, 2017).

¹⁰ Brian Britt, *Postsecular Benjamin: Agency and Tradition* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

¹¹ Arendt's claim that Benjamin "lost faith in tradition" is thus outdated. Hannah Arendt, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin, 1892–1940" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, by Walter Benjamin, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 38. There are various works that exemplify the fruitfulness of Benjamin's concept of tradition, e.g. Vivian Liska, *German-Jewish Thought and Its Afterlife* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Galili Shahar, *Bodies and Names: Readings in New Jewish Literature* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2016); Philippe Simay, "Reconstruire la tradition: L'anthropologie philosophique de Walter Benjamin" in *Walter Benjamin: La tradition des vaincus* (Paris: L'Herne, 2008), 87–98.

¹² Richard Eldridge, *Images of History: Kant, Benjamin, Freedom, and the Human Subject* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

doctrine or teachings from Kant, and stressing the significance of transmissibility in Benjamin, from his early engagement with Kant all the way to the *Arcades Project*.¹³ My starting point is thus a synthesis of these three books, through which I hope to place Benjamin's engagement with Kant and with critique more generally on a new path in the postsecular discourse.

I begin my discussion with the Kantian distinction between critical and doctrinal philosophy or philosophy as teachings. In Kant this distinction means that critique prepares the ground for scientific progression in metaphysics, but also that philosophy can be continuously transmitted as teachings. In other words, philosophy can form a tradition. In Benjamin, I argue, this preparatory task of critique is historicized, along with the concepts of knowledge and experience. The crisis and hopes of 1918 require a concept of experience that will include linguistic and religious experience, which in turn includes the experience of tradition as the unfolding of the teachings. The second section elaborates this experience of tradition according to Benjamin's correspondence with Scholem at that time, referring both to the unfolding of teachings or *Torah* in the Talmud as well as to Benjamin's engagement with Kant. Tradition is accounted for as a medium in which breaking or decomposing the teachings is the very act of their transmission – a medium of twofold transformation, namely of the transmitting agent and of tradition itself; a site of freedom that is based on the dissolution of the subject rather than its autonomy; and finally, as a medium for congregating a community that is not based on relations of dependence. Thus, a critique that prepares the ground for teachings makes room for tradition as an epistemic, ethical, and political experience. The final section develops the polemic with Habermas in the context of Benjamin's late writings, in which he abandons the concept of teachings, or at least claims they are no longer present in modernity. While Habermas emphasizes that in this stage of Benjamin's thought critique redeems contents from tradition for a messianic future, I argue that a clear tie between critique and tradition as a medium can still be observed. Habermas disregards this, since he promotes reformist politics of consensus in the public sphere, while Benjamin's interest in tradition is in the service of transformative politics of interruption.

From Critique as Propaedeutic to Teachings to Critique as Propaedeutic to Tradition

Critique, in the Kantian sense, might seem to be inimical to tradition, and not only to religious ones. Hans Georg Gadamer, for instance, sees the Enlightenment, the age of critique, as an attempt to free humanity from the authority of tradition.¹⁴ The act of critique – drawing the bounds of experience and knowledge so as to judge and legitimize the use of reason – is conceived as one of the major conditions for liberating the human subject from the yoke of external authorities, of doctrines, and of any body of knowledge transmitted by religious clerks, by books, by doctors, or, for that

¹³ Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York: Continuum, 2004), 282.

matter, from father to son.¹⁵ It provides an exit (*Ausgang*) from tradition, so to speak, at least to the extent that it has yet been criticized by reason. However, this inimical approach towards tradition disregards one of Kant's fundamental distinctions regarding philosophy, to which Benjamin was attentive and which many of the latter's interpreters point out, namely his division of philosophy into critical and doctrinal philosophy.¹⁶

Critical philosophy, according to Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, "lays the foundation" or ground for doctrinal (*doktrinale*) philosophy, consisting of a doctrine of nature (*Naturlehre*) and a doctrine of morals (*Sittenlehre*). It has a preparatory role, a propaedeutic function.¹⁷ One way of understanding this distinction is that critique prepares the ground for metaphysics as a science. In a state in which the field of metaphysics is a battleground between different philosophies without any real possibility for agreed scientific progress, critique draws the bounds in which a universally agreed-upon metaphysical plan can be outlined.¹⁸ It responds to the "groping" of philosophy with an epistemological project that opens a horizon of progress, it prepares the way for *Lehre* – the doctrine or teachings of philosophy.¹⁹ Regarding Kant's corpus, the *Critique of Pure Reason* prepares the ground for the doctrinal philosophy of the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, and the later critiques prepare the ground for *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Another complementary aspect of this distinction is observed with stress on the teachability or transmissibility of the teachings, or as Kant has it in the latter book, its "communicability."²⁰ Eli Friedlander, attending to this aspect as well as the former, states: "For Kant, doctrine is that part of philosophy that can be transmitted and forms the basis of a tradition that can be passed from one generation to the next."²¹ Thus, critique prepares the ground not only for philosophy as teachings, but also for the possibility for a continuous transmission of philosophy: it is propaedeutic for a tradition in which scientific metaphysical progress is possible. To what extent does critique have this dual preparatory role in Benjamin as well? Let us begin with the preparatory relation to teachings.

In *Walter Benjamin: A Story of Friendship* Gershom Scholem famously stresses Benjamin's understanding of *Lehre* as *Torah*, underlining its

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?", in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11-22.

¹⁶ E.g. Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 43; Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin*, 31-36; Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's Abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 312.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 58, 5:170; and Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 43-47, 4:387-391.

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 627; A707/B735.

¹⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 109-110, 117; B xv, B xxx.

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 366.

²¹ Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin*, 32.

religious Jewish connotations.²² However, in a 1917 letter to Scholem, Benjamin stresses the philosophical context and hails Kant's struggle to conceive teachings as a philosophical category.²³ Yet in a text like "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," his inheritance of the Kantian distinction between critique and teachings—or, another term he uses, between the critical and the dogmatic—is somewhat more ambivalent:

As a principle of classification [the distinction between the critical and the dogmatic is] not of principle importance. With it, one is trying to say only that upon the basis of all the critical ensuring of cognitive concepts and the concept of knowledge, a theory can now be built up of that on which in the very first place the concept of knowledge is epistemologically fixed...Where the critical ends and the dogmatic begins is perhaps not clearly demonstrable, because the concept of the dogmatic is supposed to designate only the transition from critique to teachings...²⁴

There is a circular movement of thought here, by which an epistemic move prepares the ground for the metaphysical teachings of experience, which in turn provide a fixed place for the epistemological concept. Ambivalent though Benjamin may be, he follows this distinction in this 1918 "Program," where a revised concept of knowledge is required in order to account for a revised concept of experience, and for philosophy as the teachings of this experience. Consider also his *Origin of German Trauerspiel*, which famously begins with a "Critico-epistemic" foreword. It designates *Lehre* as the ultimate "closed and finished form" of philosophical writings, articulates significant epistemological distinctions, and suggests that a certain kind of "schooling" in philosophical disposition is required in order to present the experience of the baroque, which he regards as the origin of the modern experience.²⁵ Thus, despite the developments in Benjamin's thought, including his own problematization of how philosophical writings can achieve their ultimate status as teachings, one line appears constant: critique as preparing the ground for teachings.

The significance of Kant's distinction for Benjamin is thus not in founding the possibility of scientific progress in metaphysics, but rather in turning the teachability or transmissibility of experience into the ultimate task of philosophy. This is the most acute task for a period that is in the midst of a severe crisis of experience, its meaning and its transmission. World War I famously designates such a crisis for Benjamin. In his later writings, this crisis is elaborated to include economic, physical, and moral experience, as well as a crisis in representation, namely in the meaningful transmission of any experience from one generation to the next.²⁶ In relation to such a crisis, the Kantian task of articulating experience in a transmissible form such as

²² Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: New York Review Books, 2003), 69.

²³ Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 97. See also Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin*, 32.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, trans. by Mark Ritter. 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), 1:108.

²⁵ For elaboration on this process of schooling see my "Presentation as Indirection, Indirection as Schooling: The Two Aspects of Benjamin's Scholastic Method," *Continental Philosophy Review* 50, (December 2017): 493–516.

²⁶ Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 2:732.

teachings is of utmost importance. In a letter from October 1917 to Scholem, in which Benjamin refers to Kant's writings as a "tradendum" – as what ought to be handed down - he explicitly admires Kant's struggle to conceive doctrine. This struggle opens the path for redeeming the meaning of the brittle modern experience by presenting it as teachable, as what can be transmitted from one period to another (from the baroque to Benjamin's present, to take *Origin* as an example).

Note, however, that Benjamin's historization of experience, his reference to the experience of his times and to the task of articulating an adequate concept for them, implies the historization of the task of critique. He notes that Kant thought of the experience championed by his era, that of the natural sciences, as the *only* experience possible,²⁷ the latent implication for critique being that it is a one-time project. Once and for all it opens the horizon for teachings, providing the ground for turning experience in its totality into what is teachable and transmissible. Benjamin, however, suggests that Kant's concept of experience is specifically that of the Enlightenment with its scientific bias, so to speak.²⁸ It does not include, for example, the experiences of religion, language, and the absolute. The crisis and redemptive expectations of 1918 call for a richer concept of experience that would include the latter aspects. However, this transformation of the concept of experience requires, according to Benjamin, the transformation of the Kantian concept of knowledge.

What is the bias or limitation of the Kantian/Enlightenment concept of knowledge? This concept, tailored primarily to fit empirical, scientific-like experience, was based on metaphysical structures such as the subject-object relation. Its basic model is that of an individual subject encountering empirical objects. In contrast to this, writes Benjamin:

The task of future epistemology is to find for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object; in other words, it is to discover the autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which this concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities.²⁹

Only if the concept of knowledge could be purified of "the subject nature of the cognizing consciousness" could the possibility of a proper philosophical account of linguistic and religious experience be opened.³⁰ This brings Benjamin to end his "Program" text with the demand "to create on the basis of the Kantian system a concept of knowledge to which a concept of experience corresponds, of which the knowledge is the teachings (*Lehre*)."³¹

Thus, Benjamin does not return to the ultimate Kantian task of articulating the teachings of experience as a continuation of the philosophical progress Kant foresaw. It is rather a renewed struggle, from within current conditions, from the purview of the transient and brittle experience of his own times. He does so with new concepts, using Kant's system as a model. This implies that critique, as a propaedeutic for teachings, is a recurrent task. If a major part of the Kantian critical project was to purify the concepts

²⁷ Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 1:101.

²⁸ See ibid. and Benjamin's "On Perception," *Selected Writings* 1:95.

²⁹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 1:104.

³⁰ Ibid. 1:103.

³¹ Ibid. 1:100, 108.

of knowledge and experience from the objectification of the transcendent with which philosophy was obsessed, Benjamin offers new conceptual work of purification, such that would purify the concept of knowledge from its “subject nature” and would prepare for the teachings of modern experience, including the experience of religion. Here we can finally move from the preparatory relation between critique and teachings to that between critique and tradition.

Several characteristics of tradition need to be outlined at this point. First, tradition for Benjamin is part of religious experience. As part of its preparatory role, critique is supposed to allow including within an account of experience various categories of religious experience. If we inspect Benjamin’s early corpus, we might include categories such as messianic time and redemption as well as the experience of tradition—an experience which he designates in a September 1917 letter to Scholem, written a year before the “Program,” as a “religious order.”³² Second, tradition has a direct tie to teachings, the ultimate end of the critical. In this same letter to Scholem – written immediately before the one in which he addresses Kant’s writings as a *tradendum* and hails his struggle to conceive “teachings” – Benjamin conceives tradition as the unfolding of teachings. He implies that the latter’s actuality depends on tradition and the process of their transmission. The point is that tradition as an unfolding has no place in a subject-object epistemology. It requires an alternative one, and its development, as we recall, is the task of critical philosophy. Benjamin’s brief reference to the Talmud in the September letter, which we will soon attend more carefully, evokes how the meaning of Scripture unfolds through ongoing hermeneutical acts in Judaism. When an interpreter recognizes himself as taking part in such a tradition, grasping “his knowledge as something transmitted”³³ and taking part in the process of reception and transmission, his reflection on that knowledge is not that of a subject cognizing an object; rather, he himself is part of the unfolding of the teachings. Benjamin’s somewhat enigmatic figure here is the following: “The teachings are like a surging sea, but for the wave (if we take it as an image of man) all that matters is to surrender itself to its motion in such a way that it crests and breaks with foam.”³⁴ The knowledge of such an interpreter of tradition is not possession, accumulation, or synthesis of a subject. This mystical account of knowledge should be considered as an example of knowledge purified of “the subject nature of the cognizing consciousness” to which Benjamin’s critical work is supposed to prepare.³⁵

Third, taking critique as preparing the ground for tradition as part of the teachings of modern experience has yet another meaning. Tradition in Benjamin is an instance of freedom that transcends the possibilities of freedom in a common Kantian framework. In the “Program,” Benjamin states that Kant’s concept of freedom “stands in a peculiar correlation to the mechanical concept of experience.”³⁶ He hardly elaborates an alternative concept, yet by tying it to the new concept of knowledge that is situated in a “sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object” he implies it will provide an alternative to the concept of freedom

³² Benjamin, *The Correspondence*, 94.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 1: 103.

³⁶ Ibid. 1: 105.

based on the model of an autonomous subject. In the letter to Scholem mentioned above, freedom in tradition is an instance of freedom that is manifestly not the freedom of an autonomous subject. "Whoever has grasped his knowledge as something transmitted, in which alone it is transmittable, will be free in an unprecedented way."³⁷ Thus, if critique prepares the ground for tradition as part of the experience to which the teachings will account, it also has an ethical role, as it prepares the ground for an alternative kind of freedom, which will be part of these teachings. This concept of freedom *in* tradition is tied, as we shall see, to the freedom *of* tradition, and most importantly, to the understanding of tradition as a medium of transformation.

Tradition as a Medium: Breaks, Transformations and Freedom

We are accustomed to grasp tradition as something that determines us rather than as a site of freedom. Moreover, in the Kantian framework of Enlightenment, it is a source of heteronomy that maintains us in the state of a minor, who does not guide his understanding by himself. It takes great effort, according to Kant's "Enlightenment" essay, particularly collective effort, to liberate ourselves from this state and become free, namely adult autonomous subjects. How, then, might recognizing one's knowledge to be part of a tradition be an instance of unprecedented freedom, according to Benjamin? What does he have in mind when he ties freedom to the figure of a breaking wave in the sea of *Lehre*, in his letter to Scholem? For example: "This enormous freedom of the breaking wave is education in its actual sense: the lesson – tradition becoming visible and free, its rushing from lively abundance."³⁸

Freedom in Benjamin's letter to Scholem has a twofold reference: freedom *in* tradition and freedom *of* tradition. Freedom of an individual who takes part in tradition, and tradition becoming free and visible through its transmission by individuals. How should one understand this dual concept of freedom? In order to answer this question, let us first expand further on Benjamin's conception of tradition in this letter, for which we also need to look at the context of its writing.³⁹

Benjamin writes the letter in response to an essay by Scholem concerning Zionist education, specifically regarding the challenge of guiding assimilated Jews in taking part in the yet-unrealized idea of Zion.⁴⁰ The pedagogical model Scholem advances in the article is one of exemplarity. Education for liberation from diasporic identity should rely not on the transmission of content, but on setting an example of personal transformation. Benjamin responds to this idea of pedagogy without referring to the Zionist issue. He proposes an alternative pedagogy concentrating on the instruction of *Lehre*, while hinting to the Jewish tradition of learning:

³⁷ Benjamin, *The Correspondence*, 94.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ For further elaboration on this letter see my "The 'Enormous Freedom of the Breaking Wave': The Experience of Tradition in Benjamin between the Talmud and Kant," *New German Critique* 140 (August 2020): 193-218.

⁴⁰ Gershom Scholem, "Jugendbewegung, Jugendarbeit und Blau-Weiß," *Blau-Weiß-Blätter Führerzeitung* 1, no. 2 (1917): 26-30.

He who has not learned cannot educate, for he does not recognize the point at which he is alone, where he thus encompasses in his own way the tradition and makes it communicable by teaching. The metaphysical origin of the Talmudic witticism [*des talmudischen Witze*] comes to mind here. The teachings are like a surging sea, but for the wave (if we take it as an image of man) all that matters is to surrender itself to its motion in such a way that it crests and breaks with foam.⁴¹

This condensed figure of the sea of *Lehre*, or of *Torah*, and of the individual who communicates them as a breaking wave, surprisingly presents a break at the heart of the act of handing down. We tend to associate tradition with continuity. Yet, as Daniel Weidner notes, Benjamin's breaking wave figure challenges this common association.⁴² The use of the term Talmudic *Witz* – referring both to the term wit and to a joke – offers a concrete manner of understanding this enigmatic figure.

The concept of wit will preoccupy Benjamin in the context of his 1919 dissertation on the early romantics.⁴³ The letter is the sole time he uses the phrase "Talmudic wit." Scholem, however, did reflect on Talmudic style and its relation to wit in his diaries. It is thus reasonable that Benjamin's use of the term continues discussions they had on the matter and on the Talmud more broadly.⁴⁴ Benjamin surely had no systematic grasp of the ancient corpus – nor, for that matter, did Scholem at that time. Yet the two young scholars apparently shared some assumptions regarding it. I suggest we try to reconstruct some of these by turning to Scholem's diaries. In an entry from 23 December 1918, he offers the following reflection:

What does "Talmudic" mean? In the "perverted" everyday usage it means the splitting of words in a judgement in order to bring out the contradictory elements. Practiced as a deliberate method, the Talmudic is a mechanical way to produce an infinite number of witticisms by means of an arithmetical progression of decomposition ... Systematic disputation is the rule governing the series.⁴⁵

Recall that the Talmud is a corpus that includes the Mishnah and the oral Torah, surrounded on every page by the Gemara – its interpretation and discussion. The Talmud is known and was also at times scorned for its form of disputation. The use of verbal acrobatics to justify opposing positions regarding the meaning and implications of halakhic law was part of this form. Whether this is a caricature of the Talmud or not, it provides for Scholem a significant tie of the Talmud to *Witz*, in the sense of not only sharpness of mind but joke as well. As he puts it: "in the form of the joke

⁴¹ Benjamin, *The Correspondence*, 94.

⁴² Daniel Weidner, "Das Überstürzen der Tradition. Das Problem der Lehre in den Debatten zwischen Benjamin und Scholem," *Trajekte* 13 (2006): 36-38.

⁴³ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 1:138.

⁴⁴ According to Scholem, Benjamin discovered some interest in the Talmud from their first encounter, when Scholem was studying it. See Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 20.

⁴⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913-1919*, edited and translated by Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 286.

the transmissible is handed down.”⁴⁶ Joke in the sense that everything is both justified and questioned on the very same page. In addition, the very transmission of the canon that is the Torah through its discussion, undermines this canon’s authority. Everything is questioned.⁴⁷ “The very fact of doubting doctrine hands it down,”⁴⁸ writes Scholem.

Scholem’s discussion thus provides us with an example of a break internal to tradition. The “decomposition” of the teachings to their opposing elements is an act of breaking what is whole into parts and of breaking the authority of the whole. And this very act of breaking the whole (*Torah, Lehre*) and its authority is what hands down that tradition. It is not a perverse or anarchic relation to tradition but the fundamental form of transmission according to Scholem. Each minor interpretative act that dissects a word to its various meanings presents a particular tension in the teachings and at the same time hands down the obliged yet doubtful relation to those teachings.⁴⁹ What is handed down is thus not merely a corpus, but also an attitude to this corpus, an ethos.⁵⁰

While Benjamin shares this idea with Scholem, the transformative aspect of tradition seems to be lacking in Scholem’s understanding of the Talmud. According to Benjamin’s letter, the transmission of the teachings is also tied with the transformation of a student into a teacher. Tradition, surely in the Jewish context of a tradition of learning, is a medium of such self-transformation. In order to become a teacher, claims Benjamin, one needs not merely to learn, but rather to encompass tradition in a unique and individual manner. This activity is possible through an intensive immersion in the tradition, to the extent of the dissolution of the subjectivity of the individual. Once one encompasses tradition uniquely, one becomes part of the medium of transmission itself. This suggests that tradition is a medium of yet another kind of transformation: that of tradition itself. In the Jewish context, this would suggest that every Rabbi in the Talmud provides a distinct expression of the Torah. According to Benjamin’s image, tradition is composed of the manifold of individual expressions of the Torah, which were produced by those who dedicated themselves to the movement of its reception and transmission.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher, 1917–1923* (Frankfurt am Main: Gründer, 2004), 368.

⁴⁷ In a manuscript found outside the diaries titled by the editors “Note on Talmudic Style,” Scholem states that the Talmud “is based on the only legitimate question: the medial,” a permanent question, one that “knows no answer” other than a further question. Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 310.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 368.

⁴⁹ I thank Galili Shahar for an illuminating conversation on these passages in Scholem.

⁵⁰ This implicitly opens the question – which will be the focus of the famous dispute between Scholem and Benjamin regarding Kafka twenty years later – is tradition, or transmissibility possible without any teachings, or with the teachings lost. If it is possible to hand down the attitude, the ethos, without the doctrine, the answer seems to be affirmative, as Benjamin claimed in that dispute. Thus, Scholem and Benjamin’s shared understanding of the break as internal to tradition, might help understand Benjamin’s later attempts to defend the possibility of a modern tradition in Kafka against Scholem.

⁵¹ Similarly to Benjamin’s depiction in this respect, is the well-known depiction of the transmission of the Torah in tractate Avot. *Torah for Our Sages: Pirkei Avot*, Jacob Neusner trans. (Springfield, NJ: Rossel, 1984). It emphasizes each Rabbi was a

Therefore, Benjamin's picture of tradition is a medium of twofold transformation: of the agent of tradition and of tradition itself. It is an image of a community of learning, in which participation is conditioned by the break of tradition to its elements. Through this process of an all-encompassing decomposition, individuals immerse themselves in tradition to the extent of dissolving their subjectivity, and turn from students to teachers in an act that transforms tradition itself.

Against this background, we can return to the riddle of freedom in tradition. As a medium of dual transformation, tradition is also a medium of twofold freedom: freedom (of individuals) *in* tradition and the freedom *of* tradition. First, there is the freedom of the individual who is aware of their being in tradition. They are, in Benjamin's words, "free in an unprecedented way," partaking in the "enormous freedom of the breaking wave" that is the process of transmission. Second, Benjamin regards tradition itself as "becoming visible and *free*" in such moments. It should be noted that freedom *in* tradition is not the freedom of an autonomous (Kantian) subject. We recall that the act of transmission involves a surrender of the individual to the movement of a medium, an immersion in the medium of tradition that culminates in its embodiment by the transmitting individual. Rather than subjective autonomy, this is a moment of dissolution of subjectivity.⁵²

The freedom *of* tradition is related to its visibility and to a burst of life. The breaking process makes explicit what was formerly implicit and latent in tradition. It thus exhibits the vitality of the tradition—its recurring significance. Tradition here is not a chain of continuous transmission of the same from a supposedly original, divine source. It is rather a recurring process of making the teachings communicable through their decomposition and transformation, one that consists of a multitude of moments of renewal. Each agent of transmission allows this kind of renewal, this kind of actualization of meaning.

It is this kind of freedom that Benjamin offers Scholem as a key for intergenerational relations in the last passage of his letter:

Every error in education goes back to the fact that we think our descendants are dependent on *us*. Their dependence on *us* is no different from their dependence on God and on the language in which, for the sake of some kind of community with our children, we must immerse ourselves.⁵³

The letter, we recall, comes to terms with an essay on Zionist education. This passage implies that Scholem suggested to build the Zionist community on relations of dependence between the student and the teacher: the former depends on the exemplarity of the latter. In response, Benjamin offers a different model of congregation, one that is based on

student (of a former Rabbi), and characterizes the uniqueness of what each Rabbi transmitted. Thus, the tradition is individually encompassed, while serving as a medium of transformation from student to teacher. For further elaboration see my "The 'Enormous Freedom of the Breaking Wave'."

⁵² See Bram Mertens, *Dark Images, Secret Hints: Benjamin, Scholem, Molitor, and the Jewish Tradition* (Bern: Lang, 2007), 178, who significantly ties the dissolution of the subject in the "tradition letter" to the Foreword of Benjamin's *Origin*.

⁵³ Benjamin, *The Correspondence*, 95.

tradition. Benjamin implicitly inverts the Enlightenment's view of tradition as a principle of gathering. Instead of a principle of dependence on the external authority of what was handed down, he thinks of it as a medium in which one can immerse and break what was handed down in the process of its transmission. Rather than the past determining the subject from without, what is handed down is a medium in which multiple transformations can occur if the subject dissolves its subject-position within it. Tradition is thus offered as a transformative, discontinuous medium of gathering.

Let us now return to the relation between critique and tradition. Attention to the Kantian concept of doctrine allows thinking of non-inimical relations between critique and tradition. In Kant, critique is propaedeutic for doctrinal philosophy and for a horizon of scientific progress in philosophy, and thus implicitly prepares the ground for a continuous tradition of philosophy. In Benjamin, one of the main things that is transmitted from Kant is a struggle to conceive doctrine. This is what is acute in his own times, with their unique experience of the precariousness of experience and their "hopes and expectations" for the future.⁵⁴ This calls not to continue the progress Kant foresaw, but rather to historize critique and transform Kantian philosophy so as to enable philosophical teachings of experience in the present. The possibility of such teachings of modern experience requires different concepts of knowledge and experience, which will include religious experience. What we saw in this section is in what sense tradition is part of this experience: an epistemic, ethical, and political experience involved in the unfolding of teachings. It is to this kind of experience, beyond the subject-object dichotomy, which critique needs to make room if it is to serve as propaedeutic to teachings in modernity. However, there is a well-known problem with this idea: what if there are no teachings in modernity? For the Talmudists, even if they decomposed the Torah and doubted it in the process of transmission as Scholem claimed, there were still teachings to unfold, and a community that gathered in the medium of their transmission. But what if, as Benjamin has it in his Kafka essay almost two decades after the 1917 letters, there are no teachings that are transmitted in modernity? Would that undermine the entire argument concerning the interest of critique in tradition as a transformative medium?

Conclusion

In his famous essay on Benjamin's concept of critique, Jürgen Habermas claims that "in the face of the rise of fascism, political insight forced Benjamin to break with that esoterism of the true for which the young Benjamin had reserved the dogmatic concept of doctrine."⁵⁵ Habermas implies an opposition between two phases of Benjamin's treatment of critique, an early one in which critique is related to doctrine, and a later one in which it is not, the latter being the significant phase for Habermas.

This seems to delimit the significance of my argument on the critique-tradition relation, for it is based on the critique-doctrine relation, which Benjamin has forsaken in his later developments of critique. What makes this all the more significant for the discussion is that Habermas identifies this later stage of critique with the act of redeeming contents from tradition.

⁵⁴ Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 1:100.

⁵⁵ Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising," cited in Brian Britt, *Postsecular Benjamin*, 175.

Thus, while he might accept the significance of the medium of tradition for a critique that prepares the ground for teachings, he would not accept this is the case for Benjamin's ripe concept of critique. In this phase, critique draws from tradition the missing contents to modern secular societies which "cannot interpret the world in terms of" their "own needs," or fulfill "the claim to happiness."⁵⁶ Habermas takes Benjamin's famous definition of critique in the *Origin of German Trauerspiel* – the mortification of the work of art – as characterizing critique as what "transpose[s] the beautiful into the medium of truth."⁵⁷ It is this kind of critique that redeems, according to Habermas "the true moments of tradition" for the messianic future.⁵⁸ This would suggest that the relation between critique and tradition in Benjamin is utterly content-oriented. It has no interest in tradition as a medium, but only in "the utopian contents of tradition" that are lost in "the atheism of the masses."⁵⁹

In this sense, Habermas's 1972 interpretation of Benjamin can be seen as a prelude to the former's stance regarding the role of critique in a postsecular age in the second millennium. In this age, modern secular societies should not disregard the contents of religious traditions, for these can assist in realizing a just rational order – one that would be characterized by solidarity, and would not throw aside those who cry "out to heaven."⁶⁰ In his Benjamin interpretation and in his stance on the postsecular, it is only *contents* of tradition in which critique is interested. It does not concern tradition as a medium of transmission and congregation. In the Habermasian framework, a genuine public sphere provides us with a political form in which the problems and paradoxes of modern societies can be addressed. In this sphere, the contents of tradition are welcomed as they might assist in advancing a just social order in the reformist politics of consensus Habermas promotes, but tradition as a medium of congregation is not welcomed. Habermas detaches the contents from their medium in favor of a reformist postsecularism.⁶¹

While this coheres with Habermas' critical stance, it does not cohere with Benjamin's. What Habermas misses is the potential of tradition as a medium of transformation and discontinuity. Benjamin is, of course, interested in redeeming contents from both religious and cultural traditions, saving them from the danger that "threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it."⁶² Yet, when we inspect the relation between critique and tradition in later Benjamin, we find a clear interest in the medium of tradition as a transformative medium.⁶³ Moreover, Benjamin's critique of art and more broadly of culture, exhibits the power of

⁵⁶ Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising," 57.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 44.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 43.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 42.

⁶⁰ Habermas, "An Awareness," 19.

⁶¹ I take the attribution of "reformist postsecularism" to Habermas from Schewel's "Transformational Post-secularism," in which he describes him aptly as aiming "to utilize the resources of religion to reform liberal-democratic politics." (1090)

⁶² Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 4:391.

⁶³ Benjamin might be thus considered as a "transformational post-secularist," albeit in a very different context from that to which Benjamin Schewel referred to while coining this term in his "Transformational Post-secularism," namely that of axial age theories such as that of Karl Jaspers.

tradition as a transformative medium and thus makes room and legitimizes the experience of tradition in modern experience. I cannot fully develop this claim here. I only wish to bring an example from Benjamin's grandest incomplete critical endeavor, *The Arcades Project*, to initially justify it.

This unorthodox, materialist project on the 19th century was famously supposed to offer a "Copernican revolution" in historical perception and to collectively awaken Benjamin's contemporaries. The concept of tradition appears in various places in the project, including famous passages in Benjamin's methodological convolute (N) and in the title of the last section of the ripest stage of the project, his manuscript of the Baudelaire book. However, I focus here on the first instance, appearing in one of his earliest notes. There, Benjamin contemplates on the potential of treating the 19th century as tradition:

...What would the nineteenth century be to us if we were bound to it by tradition? How would it look as religion or mythology? We have no tactile relation to it. That is, we are trained to view things, in the historical sphere, from a romantic distance....Only the presentation of what relates to us, what conditions us, is important. The nineteenth century – to borrow the Surrealists' terms – is the set of noises that invades our dream, and which we interpret on awaking.⁶⁴

What does it mean to be bound to the 19th century by tradition in Benjamin's times? This is a very broad question, but from this passage one thing is clear: such an adoption of tradition in modernity requires a change of habits in historical perception. In contrast to traditional societies and their relation to an archaic past, people in Benjamin's society are not accustomed to treat their immediate past as tradition. For that sake, what they need to unlearn is their (19th century) habit to put the past at a distance, in analogy to an object of sight. In other words, they will need to train themselves in a relation to the past that does not follow the paradigm of subject-object relations. The alternative Benjamin suggests is that of a tactile relation to the past. Meaning, presumably, that a commitment to the 19th century as tradition, as if the past were the religious teachings that ought to be handed down, would lend it the presence of our surroundings, of what is most close to us, or, in the terms of Benjamin's letter to Scholem, of the medium in which we are immersed.

What is the significance of this experience of the past as tradition? According to the above passage, the result is not a revival of this past or its continuation. Instead, there is awakening and recognizing a collective dream. In other words, this immersion in the past as tradition offers a medium for recognizing a collective consciousness in a moment of discontinuity, of a change of the state of consciousness. As in his early writings, tradition here does not imply continuity but rather discontinuity. And finally, this immersion has a critical impact close to the common philosophical usage of the term, in the sense of presenting the conditions of this collective, of an "us." Even without elaborating the details of this kind of critique, or the more particular question of how this brings the 19th century to sound as noises within a dream of the 20th century, we can observe that the adoption of tradition as a relation to the past is the basis for

⁶⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 831.

the critical act Benjamin envisions in this early stage of his incomplete *magnus opus*. It is this adoption that is to bring a transformation of consciousness: a collective awakening, an awareness to the collective's conditions.

Benjamin thus attempts to bring tradition back to modernity not merely by capturing its "true moments," its "contents," but rather as a collective medium of transformation and discontinuity. Tradition provides him with a form of gathering a collective, albeit momentarily, in relation to interruption and discontinuity rather than continuity. His politics are not aimed, as in Habermas, at advancing the realization of a rational social order, but rather at interrupting the catastrophic continuity of the capitalist social order which has the semblance of rationality. And for this sake, at least, critique requires tradition.

There are significant treatments of the political potency of Benjamin's insistence on tradition as discontinuous in his late writings.⁶⁵ However, the point of this essay was to situate this both in the context of his Kantian beginnings and in the contemporary context of the postsecular debate. A Kantian view of Enlightenment might provide a basis for inimical relations between critique and tradition, yet an age such as ours that dissipates the fantasy of universal secularization raises the question of these relations anew. Habermas sees this as an opportunity for dialogue between secular and religious communities according to the needs of the former. In this context, critical thought is enlisted both for an awareness of what is missing in secular consciousness and for filtering the contents of religious traditions through the universal form of reason. Habermas' reading of Benjamin as offering redemptive critique is somewhat similar as it suggests the redemption of traditional contents for the future. But this, I argue, misses what Benjamin offers for the reinspection of the problem of critique-tradition relations.

By reading Benjamin's engagement with Kant in 1918 and other texts from that period through this question, I offered what I believe to be a novel option for rethinking these relations, surely within a Kantian-inspired framework. Rather than an inimical (Kant) or instrumental/dialogical (Habermas) relation to tradition, Benjamin's engagement with Kant implies critique as preparing the ground and making room for tradition in modern experience. Through conceptual work that aims to purify metaphysics from structures that block it from coming to terms with the experience of religion and of tradition as a religious order, Benjamin makes room for tradition as part of an epistemic, ethical, and political experience beyond the metaphysics of the subject.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ E.g. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 153-154; Sami Khatib, "Where the Past Was, There History Shall Be: Benjamin, Marx, and the 'Tradition of the Oppressed,'" *Anthropology and Materialism*, no. 1 (2017). journals.openedition.org/am/789; Phillippe Simay, "Tradition as Injunction: Benjamin and the Critique of Historicism," in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), 137-155.

⁶⁶ To refer to yet another significant line of postsecular thought, if for Saba Mahmood secularism "emerged from a distinctly Euro-American and Protestant conception of religion. Soaked as it was in individual subjectivity," then Benjamin's use of tradition dissolves this kind of subjectivity. Udi Greenberg and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "Introduction," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88, no. 1, (March 2020): 7.

Critique thus has a propaedeutic role in relation to tradition: it ascertains tradition's place in modern experience not as a medium of conservation, but as a medium of discontinuity, transformation, and freedom – a medium of congregation that puts these three categories at its center. In spite of the changes in Benjamin's practices of critique, and the abandonment of "teachings" as what critique prepares for, Benjamin continues to exhibit in his critical work the significance of the medium of tradition in modernity. Tradition is thus not merely an epistemic, ethical, and political experience required for the unfolding of doctrine, but a medium that is highly significant for critique even if there are no teachings for which it prepares. Critique exhibits the potential it has as a form of gathering after it was outcasted in modernity.

This should inform our reading of Benjamin's famous normative demand regarding tradition. "Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it."⁶⁷ The danger that "threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it"⁶⁸ requires that critique not merely redeem traditional content for a future messianic moment, but that it rescue tradition in modernity as a medium of dual transformation in the present – that of tradition and that of its recipients. The postsecular age is an opportunity to recognize this task, to problematize it, and perhaps, to further realize it.

⁶⁷ Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 4:391.

⁶⁸ Ibid.