Between Creation and Last Judgement, the Creaturely and the Holy: Benjamin and Secularization

Sigrid Weigel

Abstract:
This article analyses how Benjamin takes Kraus's reference to the creaturely (*Kreatur*) as a symptom of an ahistorical attitude which projects the state of genesis, i.e. the world of God's creatures, into history. It reads the essay on Karl Kraus as a main site for Benjamin's dialectical approach to secularization, which is characterized by the distance both from genesis and redemption. The awareness of the fundamental difference which separates human concepts from biblical ideas or words which may be observed in many of Benjamin's texts (such as the book on the Baroque *Trauerspiel* and the essays on language, on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, and on Kafka) forms a kind of leitmotif of his work. It is only from this radical separation that he is able to deal with the echo realm of the sacred in modernity.

Keywords: creaturely, sacred, holy, secularization, law, Last Judgement, religion

It is characteristic of Walter Benjamin's simultaneously fascinating and difficult writing that he neither presents his thoughts in a discursive continuity, ordering them in terms of subject-matter, themes and aspects, nor provides his readers with a conceptual resumé. Rather, although the composition of his texts is founded on a conceptual systematic, he unfolds his arguments and his work on concepts and theorems by means of readings, quotations and thought-images. His way of writing means that even after multiple readings, passages can catch the eye which have hitherto attracted little attention in scholarship, and which set in train new and different ways of reading his works. An example of this is a long quotation from Adalbert Stifter in the 1931 essay 'Karl Kraus', one of the few places where Benjamin talks overtly about *secularization*. For the purposes of my essay it forms the starting-point for an investigation of his concept of secularization, or rather his way of dealing with secularization: for Benjamin does

not so much work with a theory of secularization, a term which he anyway seldom uses explicitly, but his approach to language, concepts and images itself represents a rhetorical and epistemological practice conducted vis-à-vis scenes of secularization.[1]

'This insolently secularized thunder and lightning': the holy, the law and Creation

The aforementioned passage is a commentary on a lengthy quotation from the preface to Stifter's *Bunte Steine* (*Coloured Stones*) (1853), in which Stifter describes natural phenomena as the 'effects of far higher laws' and compares the 'wonder' felt in relation to them with the reign of the moral law in the 'infinite intercourse of human beings'. Benjamin comments on this passage:

Tacitly, in these famous sentences, *the holy* has given place to the modest yet questionable *concept of law*. But this nature of Stifter's and his moral universe are transparent enough to escape any confusion with Kant, and to be still recognizable in their core as *creature*. (GS II.1, 340; *SW* II, 437; emphases added)[2]

In his reading of Stifter's at first glance apparently harmless nature-description, Benjamin picks out his description of natural phenomena as the effect of 'far higher laws' and thus discovers in it a far from harmless operation: a tacit substitution of the holy with a concept of law whose origin in religion is only to be discerned in the attribute 'higher'. He continues:

This insolently secularized thunder and lightning, storms, surf, and earthquakes — cosmic man has won them back for Creation by making them its answer, like a statement of the Last Judgement, to the criminal existence of men. Only the span between Creation and the Last Judgement here finds no redemptive fulfilment, let alone a historical overcoming.[3]

What instantly catches the attention here is the word 'insolently' (*schnöde*). It separates Stifter's version of a poetic secularization of natural phenomena both from a different form of secularization which would somehow not be insolent and from one more than insolent, say contemptible. Notable, too, is the characterization of the concept of law as 'modest yet questionable'. The ambiguity of the attribute *bescheiden*, which means 'moderate', but might also be read as 'scanty' or 'insufficient', is echoed in the oscillation of *bedenklich* between 'requiring interrogation' and 'dubious', even 'discreditable'.

Benjamin's commentary on this insolent secularization consists of two arguments. The first is that in Stifter's talk of the 'effects of far higher laws', the concept of the holy has been replaced by the concept of law, a substitution which, since it has occurred 'tacitly', remains concealed. The questionable character of the concept of law is not least the result of the tacit substitution through which the formulation 'higher laws' can continue to profit from the allusion to the holy even as it seems to have left the sphere of the holy behind. The second argument is initiated with the word 'but' and stresses the transparency of Stifter's nature and of his moral universe, through which their creaturely status remains discernible, meaning that they cannot be confused with the Kantian moral universe. A closer examination of the opposite, that is, of a form of appearance not transparent, but obscure, in which the creatureliness of Stifter's nature would then not be recognizable, is not undertaken by Benjamin at this point. At most, it is hinted at through the reference to the Kantian moral universe. The pathos formula in the *Critique of Practical Reason* of the 'two things' which 'fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe', in the much-quoted formulation 'the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me',[4] is contradicted in *Bunte Steine* through the way in which Stifter distinguishes between them. 'Conspicuous events' in nature are seen by Stifter as manifestations of general laws which act silently and incessantly in nature, while 'the miracles of the moment when deeds are performed' are for him only small signs of a general power, namely the moral law, which, in Stifter's view, 'acts silently, animating the soul through the infinite intercourse of human beings' (cited from GS II.1, 340; *SW* II, 437). Hence admiration in the face of natural laws is distinguished from the admiration owing to moral laws. In his commentary on Stifter here, Benjamin indirectly criticizes Kant's ethics which, in assuming a life of 'intelligence' independent of the entire world of the senses,[5] overlooks the creaturely core of nature — including human nature. Although Benjamin emphasizes the greater transparency in Stifter's differentiation between nature and moral universe, what troubles him here is Stifter's use of the concept of law as a covering term for a concealed notion of the holy.

The definition of a form of secularization which is *not* insolent remains a gap in Benjamin's text, and the task of imagining it is left to his readers. This much is clear, however: the question involuntarily posed by the word 'insolently' concerning the possibility of different forms of secularization points towards the issue of the *cognizability* of those substitutions through which secularizing operations take

place. Benjamin's observation that Stifter's substitution has taken place 'tacitly' implies that a different linguistic or rhetorical mode would be required if it were to become cognizable. Secularization which does not operate insolently is thus implicitly defined as a *reflexive* attitude in one's dealings with the legacies of religion in the modern age. The argument so far has established the following: in the context of secularization, Benjamin criticizes the concept of the law as a covering term to the extent that it conceals within it the precise relationship between the *holy* and the *creaturely*. Thus the passage gathers together three central terms—the *law*, the *holy* and the *creature*—which have been the object of widespread interest in recent Benjamin scholarship.

In order to clarify what insolent secularization has to do with Karl Kraus, the context of the passage needs to be explained. The quoted sentences occur in the first part of the essay 'Karl Kraus' of 1931 which is composed as a triptych bearing the three chapter headings 'Cosmic Man' (*Allmensch*), 'Demon' and 'Monster'. In this essay, Kraus is represented as a polemicist with an attitude which Benjamin characterizes as noblesse in armour. Kraus's criterion for world-historical villainy, according to Benjamin, lies beyond any bourgeois respectability which is only suited to trivial misdemeanours. Commenting on Kraus's tact, he describes it as a 'theological criterion'. Tact is thus understood not as a skill which eases social interaction, but as 'the capacity to treat social relationships, though not departing from them, as natural, even paradisal, relationships, and so not only to approach the king as if he had been born with the crown on his brow, but the lackey like an Adam in livery' (GS II.1, 339; SW II, 436–7). This means that tact is, far from adherence to a social norm, a means of treating the creature as a divine Creation.

Kraus 'in the temple of the creature'

In order to clarify what the theological means in this context, Benjamin interprets Kraus's concept of the creature as an inheritance from theology. Kraus's concept of creature 'contains the *theological inheritance* of speculations that last possessed contemporary validity for the whole of Europe in the seventeenth century' (GS II.1, 339; SW II, 437; emphasis added). These speculations have not been able to maintain their validity in unchanging form; rather, the theological legacy in the concept of creation has undergone a transformation in order for it to find expression, for example, in the 'cosmic-human

[*allmenschlichen*] credo of Austrian worldliness' (GS II.1, 339–40; SW II, 437; translation modified).[6] This credo is expressed by Benjamin in a telling image: that of incense in the mists which occasionally still recalls the rite in the church into which Creation has been turned. Incense and church are here interpreted as the zero degrees of rite and Creation. For Benjamin, then, Kraus's concept of the creature is a symptom of the *theological legacy* in a world in which the idea of Creation has been transformed into an ecclesiastical order, or in other words, in which the cult has been institutionalized. This is the constellation which marks that insolent secularization which Stifter is introduced as representing.

By contrast with the unambiguous positioning of Stifter as the representative of a 'cosmic-human credo of Austrian worldliness' or, alternatively, of a 'patriarchal [*altväterliches*] credo' (GS II.1, 341; SW II, 438), the position which Benjamin ascribes to Kraus is more ambivalent. For the latter, too, the diagnosis holds that he is operating in 'the span between Creation and Last Judgement' without finding any 'redemptive fulfilment' (GS II.1, 340; SW II, 437). Landscape is for Stifter's prose what history is for Kraus, so that 'for him, Kraus, the terrifying years of his life are not history but nature, a river condemned to meander through a landscape of hell' (GS II.1, 341; SW II, 437; translation modified). The image makes it clear that Benjamin's critical gaze is not just directed at the mythologizing process, at the perception of history as nature. What particularly interests him is the virulently theological topology (the 'landscape of hell'). For Kraus, Benjamin writes, history is 'merely the wilderness [*Einöde*] dividing his genus [*Geschlecht*] from Creation, whose last act is world conflagration', and '[a]s a deserter to the camp of animal creation—so he measures out this wilderness.' (GS II.1, 341; SW II, 438; translation modified). Apocalyptic world view and devaluation of history are therefore not just two sides of the same coin. In Benjamin's perception, they also evoke an attitude in which the human subject allies itself with the animal creature and finds itself mirrored in it. The role of the animal creature thus becomes a symptom of an *anti-historical theological mythologization* in modernity, an attitude which Benjamin describes as a legacy of the Baroque.

Benjamin elucidates the attitude towards the creature from both sides, in terms of affection towards animals, and in terms of their transformation into Creation's mirror of virtue, an act of imagination. He sees an echo of the 'all-human credo' wherever 'Kraus concerns himself with animals, plants, children' (GS II.1, 340; SW II, 437;

translation modified). Benjamin treats the way in which Kraus 'inclines toward' the animal 'in the name of the creature' with undisguised irony; the animal is for Kraus, says Benjamin, 'Creation's true mirror of virtue, in which fidelity, purity, gratitude smile from times lost and remote.' (*GS* II.1, 341; *SW* II, 438). His irony is directed at the projection involved where the virtues that have only grown up in the course of human cultural history are mistaken for the innocence of paradise and where 'purity' is discerned, of all things, in animals. The name 'creature' stands precisely for this projection of the state of Creation within history. When the human being looks into his own face in the mirror of the animal creature, Creation and history merge into one. In the animals as emblems of Kraus's attitude Benjamin discovers something 'infinitely questionable', above all because they are his own creations, since 'recruited solely from those whom Kraus himself first called intellectually to life, whom he conceived [*zeugte*] and convinced [*überzeugte*] in one and the same act' (*GS* II.1, 341; *SW* II, 438). Here Benjamin takes Kraus as an example of an autopoietic system whereby one's own imaginative projections are regarded as the embodiments of creation, in whose mirrorings a reflection of the Creation falls back upon the author. The critique is intensified in Benjamin's image of the 'temple of the creature'. Benjamin formulates a lapidary objection against such a procedure, one central to present debates about fictionalized works of Holocaust witness: 'His testimony can determine only those for whom it can never become an act of procreation [*Bestimmen kann sein Zeugnis nur die, denen es Zeugung nie werden kann*].' (*GS* II.1, 341; *SW* II, 438; translation modified).[7] With this, Benjamin criticizes the reference to animals as representatives of a creaturely state of innocence, conferred upon them as it were as God's creation, which disregards the real living animals. But more than this, he reserves the act of witness (*Zeugnis*) for a constellation which is not the result of an 'intellectual' procreation (*Zeugung*), that is, the generation of 'life' through an act of imagination.

Benjamin's commentary on the ambiguity of meaning which characterizes the speeches and writings of Karl Kraus cannot be discussed in detail here. However, in the course of his discussion of the concrete themes, objects and motifs of Kraus's texts, Benjamin comes back again and again to the basic structure of a significant historico-philosophical topography: the 'span between Creation and Last Judgement'. For Benjamin, Kraus embodies a stance which — in the midst of modernity and its technological developments — takes up a relation to the theological inheritance through such concepts as

that of the creature, albeit without these leading into a redemptive history. He presents Kraus to us as a *persona* operating in a complex and complicated intermediate space between the world of Genesis and the present. By neglecting history which would fill this intermediate space in the form of a time-span, Kraus finds himself in a position on the threshold to the Last Judgement (*GS* II.1, 348; *SW* II, 443). Its perspective is compared by Benjamin with the foreshortening in a Baroque altar painting. Where Creation and Last Judgement abut on one another in a relation of immediacy, with no intervening historical time, their orders come into conflict, a conflict which is one of principles: 'If he ever turns his back on *Creation*, if he breaks off *lamenting* [*Klagen*], it is only *in order to accuse* [*anzuklagen*] at the *Last Judgement*.' (*GS* II.1, 349; *SW* II, 443; emphases added, translation modified). *Anklage*, the language of the law, and *Klage*, the language of creatures, are directed at different authorities; not only are they incompatible, they are in conflict with one another. This conflict finds expression in a multiplicity and polyphony of linguistic and bodily gestures. Polemic, headstrong stubbornness, biblical pathos, theological tact, lamentation, demonic voice are the effects of a stance with which the speaker, maintaining his position on the threshold, turns first in one direction, then in the other, addressing himself as he does so to different authorities. What is at issue in the Kraus-essay is not so much the historical figure of Karl Kraus as the illumination of this intermediate space and the clarification of the after-effects of the theological inheritance in specific present concepts. Benjamin's engagement here is rather directed at the precise analysis of the various overlays, substitutions, transformations and references which connect contemporary concepts to ideas derived from a divine order.

In two of the central motifs, that of the creature as the mirror of virtue or morality and that of the perception of history as nature, Benjamin's Kraus essay connects back to his book on German tragic drama, developing ideas first set out there concerning secularization. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin had explored the Baroque attitude to the world, in the view of which history appears as itself a tragic drama. In such drama, history and Creation have become indistinguishable. And this is precisely the theological legacy of speculations from the seventeenth century which for Benjamin belong to the pre-history of that insolent secularization through which the 'wonders of nature' are seen in the literature of the nineteenth century as the effects of higher laws.

The 'secularization of the historical in the state of Creation'

In Benjamin's book on German tragic drama, the Baroque is not only the scene of the sovereign prince who, on account of his Janus-like stance between 'the unlimited hierarchical dignity, with which he is divinely invested' and his state as a poor human being, can develop in both ways, to become a tyrant and 'victim to the disproportion' between the two states (*GS* I.1, 250; *OGTD*, 70). In this book, the creature takes on a similar significance to that in the Kraus essay:

The creature is the mirror within whose frame alone the moral world was revealed to the baroque. A *concave mirror*, for this was not possible without distortion. Since it was the view of the age that all historical life was lacking in virtue, virtue became of no significance also for the inner constitution of the *dramatis personae* themselves. It has never taken a more uninteresting form than in the heroes of these *Trauerspiele*, in which the only response to the call of history is the physical pain of martyrdom. And just as the inner life of the person *in the creaturely condition* has to attain mystical fulfilment, even in mortal pain, so do authors attempt to freeze the historical events. The sequence of dramatic actions unfolds *as in the days of Creation*, when it was not history which was taking place. (*GS* I.1, 270; *OGTD*, 91; translation modified; emphases added)

Under the conditions of history in which virtue and historical life have become separated, the person reverts to the creaturely condition — a constellation which for Benjamin is characterized by three elements: the standstill of history, physical pain and the meaninglessness of inner virtue. This description may help to explain Benjamin's not very readily accessible interpretation of the Baroque as the comprehensive secularization of the historical in the state of Creation (*GS* I.1, 271; *OGTD*, 92).

The Origin of German Tragic Drama occupies a particular position in Benjamin's works in that he actually does speak of secularization in it, that is, he uses the term explicitly. It is admittedly less striking when he calls the Baroque *Trauerspiel* a 'secularized Christian drama' (*GS* I.1, 257; *OGTD*, 78) or when he refers to the king in the Spanish Baroque drama as a 'secularized redemptive power'. The notable formulation concerning the 'comprehensive secularization of the historical in the state of Creation', which he describes as the last word in the escapism of the Baroque is not so easy to understand, however. The unusual reference to the 'secularization of the historical', which runs counter to conventional notions of secularization as a process of transformation

which goes from the sacred or the theological to the historical and not *vice versa*, already introduces a complex dialectic into secularization. With the 'secularization of the historical in the state of Creation', Benjamin thematizes a form of transformation of history back into a precarious version of the natural state, a kind of 'restoration of the timelessness of paradise' (*GS* I.1, 271; *OGTD*, 92) with the effect that history merges into the setting, thus disappearing in its capacity *as* history.

For the concept of secularization being addressed here, then, the image of the creature is central. If the reduction of the human being to the creaturely state is understood by Benjamin as secularization, then this process must be accompanied by the withdrawal of the significance which points beyond the creaturely state and which belongs to the historical. Even if this significance has accrued around the human being within history, it is an indication of his origin in another sphere. Elsewhere, in the 'Critique of Violence', Benjamin wrote of the double meaning of such words as 'existence' and 'life' as being derived from their reference to 'two distinct spheres' (*GS* II.1, 201; *SW* I, 251). What is withdrawn from the human being in the 'secularization of the historical in the state of Creation' is that aspect of existence which is *more* and *other* than 'mere natural life' (*GS* II.1, 200; *SW* I, 250). Drawing on a biblical idea, human existence, understood as simultaneously natural and supernatural, is a product of history. Where this other sphere is present in knowledge, the consciousness of loss which finds expression in the concept of the creature is nevertheless informed by that knowledge. When persons who find themselves reverted to mere life understand themselves to be in the state of Creation, then their notion of the creature refers to their sense of loss, and not to the original state of Creation. In this sense, originating in Creation is inscribed into the concept of the creature just as much as the *distance* from the 'innocent first day of Creation' is (*GS* I.1, 253; *OGTD*, 74; translation modified). The implication is that the concept of secularization in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* appears as a kind of counter-concept to messianism. While the *messianic* aims at redemption through the fulfilment of history, *secularization* here means the withdrawal of sacred significance within history, the transformation of existence back into the creaturely state or of history back into nature.

In another passage concerned with the figure of the tyrant, Benjamin ascribes to the dictatorship of the tyrant the utopia of a 'restoration of order in the state of emergency': this, too, is then a

form of transformation of history back into nature, more precisely into the 'iron constitution of the laws of nature' (*GS* I.1, 253; *OGTD*, 74) whereby standstill, in the sense of petrifaction, is seen as the ideal and the goal of dictatorial force. The image of a counter-historical or anti-historical stance appears as a leitmotif in the Baroque tragic drama, setting the direction for the constitution of the Baroque without being able to lessen the distance from the 'innocent first day of Creation'. As there can be no return to the paradisiacal state in which nature and Creation were still identical, that world image which is the product of an anti-historical attitude bears the features of an — in the final analysis impossible — imitation of Creation: 'The sequence of dramatic actions unfolds as in the days of Creation, when it was not history which was taking place.' (*GS* I.1, 270; *OGTD*, 91). Benjamin speaks in this context of an anti-historical re-creation. This renewed creation is not only directed against history, but also presumes — in opposition to history — to be able to orientate itself in respect of the world of Creation.

Benjamin discusses the embodiment of an 'anti-historical new-creation', for example in the case of the 'chaste princess' of the martyr-drama who, like Gryphius's Catharina, resists the tyrant despite being subjected to mortal pain. Her 'chastity' is as far removed from 'innocence' as nature is from paradise. Rather, it is the result of a stoic technique, not dissimilar to the 'iron laws of nature' which the tyrant attempts to substitute for history. The difference is that, unlike with the tyrant, it is not the result of unlimited absolutist power, but rather of a kind of enabling act to 'a state of emergency in the soul, the rule of affects', through 'stoic technique' (*GS* I.1, 253; *OGTD*, 74 translation modified). Analogies in the Kraus essay are biblical pathos and the empty phrase which are described as an 'Ausgeburt', a spawn of technology (*GS* II.1, 336; *SW* II, 435; translation modified).

In comparison with the complex constellation of secularization in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the relevance of secularization to modernity in the Kraus essay is patently reduced, while the theological inheritance of the Baroque is above all tied to the concept of the creature. Perhaps this also helps to explain why in 'Karl Kraus' the talk is only of an insolent secularization. In claiming that 'cosmic man' has won back for Creation the 'insolently secularized thunder and lightning, storms, surf, and earthquakes' by turning them into a Last Judgement's answer to the criminal existence of men, Benjamin is emphasizing the other side of secularization: less the withdrawal of a supernatural significance in the state of nature than the tacit

sanctification of 'natural wonders' as the 'effects of far higher laws', which goes hand in hand with the idea of Creation.

The resonant space of the holy

If one looks back from the Kraus essay over Benjamin's earlier writings, then the work on a dialectic of secularization becomes visible as a constant motif. It is relevant to his theory of language, derived from the caesura between Adamite language and the language of signs, in his early texts. It is relevant to the interpretation of translation as the measure of the distance from pure language in the essay on the task of the translator, his analysis of the relation between justice and the law in the 'Critique of Violence' and the figure of the counter-striving constellation of the profane and the messianic as a lesson in the theory of history — all of these reflections from the early 1920s. It is relevant, too, to his critique of the attempt to appropriate a divine mandate in the theology of poetry propagated by Stefan George and his disciples, and to the discussion of the idea of a natural guilt context in the essay on Goethe which followed a few years later, the examination of the Janus-like figure of the sovereign and of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and the figure of profane illumination in the essay on Surrealism from the late 1920s — to mention only the most important stages on the way. And of course, the trail continues even after the Kraus essay, for example in the way Benjamin elucidates the after-life of such theological concepts as inherited sin, guilt and shame in the world of Kafka's *Trial* which appears to the characters who people it as a purely creaturely world, for they have lost the doctrine and the knowledge of the theological origins of their concepts; also in his primal history of modernity, the *Arcades Project*, in which the phenomena of a world saturated with technology and machines appear to those who have produced them as natural history and modernity itself as the time of hell; and finally in the concept of the Now or *Jetztzeit*, as the model of messianic time, in the theses on the concept of history.

In order to read these projects as Benjamin's specific contribution to secularization, a number of different approaches or detours — 'detour is method', as Benjamin wrote — are imaginable. One possibility would be to go through his writings tracing a line along significant concepts, for example that of the *holy*. Taking this concept as the focus, one might start with the short text *Socrates* (1916) and its 'holy' question awaiting an answer which Benjamin introduces as a contrast

to the Socratic question. The twenty-four-year-old Benjamin criticizes the latter as a 'mere means to compel conversation', caricaturing it as the 'erection of knowledge'. Here, the holy forms a horizon in front of which the degradation of the question to a mere pedagogical method is subjected to a biting critique:

The Socratic inquiry is not the holy question which awaits an answer and whose echo resounds in the response: it does not, as does the purely erotic or scientific question, already contain the *methodos* of the answer. Rather, a mere means to compel conversation, it forcibly, even impudently, dissimulates, ironizes — for it already knows the answer all too precisely. (*GS* II.1, 131; *SW* I, 53)

The holy question distinguishes itself from being a mere means above all through the echo which resounds in the response, through granting a space of 'life' to language. This resonant space is further illuminated by a reading of the essay written in the same year, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', in which speaking *about* nature with the aid of language as a medium is distinguished from the scenario in which recognizing and naming, the translation of the mute into the sonic, come together as one. From here on in, the critique of *mere means* can be traced as one of the most important leitmotifs of Benjamin's thought. When something is turned into a mere means for another purpose, when something is *enlisted into the service* of something else, as a typical phrase of Benjamin's has it, then this is an indication that the dimension of the holy within it has been eradicated. It is in this sense that the enlistment of the services of theology, which 'today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight', by the 'puppet called "historical materialism"', as in the first of the thought-images of 'On the Concept of History', is an indicator for the desecration of theology which is the necessary precursor to its deployment as a means to an end (*GS* I.2, 693; *SW* IV, 389). This in turn recalls the Kraus essay's diagnosis that cult and creation have been transformed into the mists of incense and church. The notion of the holy as a resonant space resists in principle a rhetoric in which 'holy' is used as an attribute, be it the characteristic of the supernatural, a heavenly or theological authority, or any other kind of unity. Already on these grounds it becomes plausible that Benjamin rejects the 'dogma of the sacredness of life' in the 'Critique of Violence' because a unity such as the mere life, sometimes 'all animal and even vegetable life', or quite simply human life is thus sanctified (*GS* II.1, 202, 201; *SW* I, 250). As an attribute, 'holy' can only apply to language to the extent that it moves within the resonant space of the holy text, as thematized in

'The Task of the Translator' (1921). This essay speaks of 'Holy Writ' and scripture and of the 'hallowed growth of languages' (*GS* IV.1, 21, 14; *SW* I, 262, 257).

In the works of Benjamin that followed, the concept of the holy disappears into the background somewhat, only to re-emerge at prominent points in the Kraus essay where it is deployed in a number of different directions. While the commentary on the Stifter quotation criticizes the concealment of the holy in the concept of law, the *sanctification of the word* takes on central importance for poetic language. In a passage on Kraus's linguistic gesture, his 'sanctification of the word' appears in opposition to Stefan George's use of language as a mere means to aid his ascent to Olympus. At issue is music. First, Benjamin notes that Kraus, in his lectures on Offenbach, 'confines music to limits narrower than were ever dreamed of in the manifestoes of the George school' (*GS* II.1, 359; *SW* II, 450). However, this anti-musical attitude does not yet make of him the partisan of the school whose programme Benjamin had criticized in the Goethe essay, as a requisitioning of a divine mandate (*GS* I.1, 159; *SW* I, 323). In what follows, he immediately takes back the closeness posited between Kraus and George on account of their antipathy towards music:

This cannot, of course, obscure the antithesis between the linguistic gestures of the two men. Rather, an exact correlation exists between the factors which give Kraus access to both poles of linguistic expression — the enfeebled pole of humming and the armed pole of pathos — and those which forbid his *sanctification of the word* to take on the forms of the Georgean cult of language. To the cosmic rising and falling that for George 'deifies the body and embodies the divine', language is simply a Jacob's ladder with ten thousand word-rungs. Kraus's language, by contrast, has done away with all hieratic moments. It is the medium neither of prophecy nor of domination. It is the theatre of a *sanctification of the name* — with the Jewish certainty, it sets itself against the theurgy of the 'word-body'. (*GS* II.1, 359; *SW* II, 451; emphases added)

In the one, language is a vehicle for the ascent of the genius, in the other language is the site for the sanctification of the word: Benjamin sees the latter as founded in the tradition of the sanctification of the name, the *Kiddusch Haschem* (Leviticus 22:32), that is the highest principle of the Jewish religion. In this respect, poetic language is seen by Benjamin as the inheritor of this religious tradition, as a kind of resonant space of the biblical linguistic scene.

When, in the continuation of the essay, he places the poetic praxis of Kraus's *The Forsaken* under the much-quoted motto 'The more

closely you look at a word the more distantly it looks back' and calls it 'a Platonic love of language', he is seeing it as a language which is 'intimately bound to Eros'. Features of the poetological praxis concerned with expressing this binding are rhyme and name, dedication and quotation: 'As *rhyme*, language rises up from the creaturely world; as *name*, it draws all creatures up to it.' (GS II.1, 362; *SW* II, 453; emphases added). With this, the capacity is ascribed to poetic language of enabling the creature to gain access to another sphere, beyond that of the creaturely world. This notion, too, is illuminated if one thinks back to the primal scene of naming and recognizing in the early essay on language, to the translation of the mute language of things into human language, that biblical primal scene of naming in which Creation receives a language through being named.

As in the passage quoted from the Stifter commentary at the beginning, here, too, the holy and the creature are brought together, but in a radically different context from that in the Stifter commentary. If the holy is granted a surprisingly positive significance here, it is neither as a separate sphere — as for example in the opposition of the sacred and profane — nor as a quality ascribed to an authority, a species or a concept. Rather, what is at issue in the sanctification of the word, described with reference to Kraus's poetic method, is a *linguistic praxis* standing in the line of inheritance of a *cultic attitude* which has disappeared from cultural history. By contrast with the *theological* inheritance of the cosmic-human concept of Creation, which resulted in a insolent form of secularization, here it is a matter of an active shaping of the after-life of *religion* in the modern age, which now can be understood as a perspective for a non-insolent secularization.

This has nothing to do with a religious attitude to art, nor with the worship of art in the aftermath of the 'death of God'; this linguistic praxis traces its origins back to biblical language. The poetic praxis which Benjamin appreciates is that which stands in the resonant space of the image of divine justice *as* language (GS II.1, 349; *SW* II, 444). It is a Jewish-biblical notion which also underpins Benjamin's view of language as the matrix of justice in his much-quoted theory of the quotation: 'In the quotation that both saves and punishes, language proves the matrix of justice. It summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely thereby calls it back to its origin.' (GS II.1, 363; *SW* II, 454). When Benjamin goes on to characterize origin and destruction as the 'two realms' which in the quotation 'justify themselves before language', then he is developing

his theory of quotation in accordance with a messianic model. The perfection of language follows the pattern of the completion and perfection of history in salvation. For he continues: only where origin and goal interpenetrate — in the quotation — is language perfected. Thus the quotation has a similar position in relation to language as salvation has in relation to history. The linguistic praxis which is oriented towards the sanctification of the word is based upon a messianic concept.

The final sentence of Benjamin's theory of quotation returns once more to the contrast between this attitude and the cosmic-human concept of Creation he had criticized earlier. While the creature in whose name Kraus 'inclines toward' the animals is caricatured in the first section of the essay as Creation's true mirror of virtue 'in which fidelity, purity, gratitude smile from times lost and remote' (GS II.1, 341; *SW* II, 438), here the quotation becomes the mirror of 'the angelic tongue in which all words, startled from the idyllic context of meaning, have become mottoes in the book of Creation' (GS II.1, 363; *SW* II, 454). When, in the modern age, a mirror relationship to Creation is established through an approach to religious tradition, this can only take place in language, since the idea of *Creation* stems from the book of Creation, *Genesis*. The essay's second section deals with Kraus's efforts to develop in his critique of the law a similarly resonant space of language as the matrix of justice. Benjamin expresses this in the image of 'the linguistic rules of court' (*Sprachprozeßordnung*),[8] an attempt which he interprets as a 'Jewish *salto mortale*': 'To worship the image of divine justice as language — even in the German language — that is the genuinely Jewish *salto mortale* by which he tries to break the spell of the demon.' (GS II.1, 349; *SW* II, 444; translation modified)

The concepts which preoccupy Benjamin in his essay on Karl Kraus are closely related to his work on the Kafka essay on which he spent several years. The first sketch for this essay, the 'Idea of a Mystery' (1927), presents a constellation comparable to that with which Kraus embodies on the threshold between Creation and Last Judgement: 'To represent history as a trial in which man, as an advocate of dumb nature, at the same time brings charges against all Creation and the failure of the promised Messiah to appear.' (GS II.3, 1153; *SW* II, 68; translation modified) And it is not far from the poetology which upholds the principle of a sanctification of the word to Kafka's literature which, in Benjamin's reading, takes on those questions which

are orphaned in a world without religion:

Kafka's work, which is about the darkest concerns of human life (concerns which theologians have time and again attended to but seldom in the way that Kafka has done), derives its poetic greatness precisely from the fact that it carries this *theological secret* entirely within itself, while appearing outwardly inconspicuous and plain and sober. (GS IV.1, 467; my translation; emphasis added)

Benjamin's concern will not be to throw light on this theological secret, but rather to examine the ways in which the laws and rites of tradition live on in Kafka's world of creatures without being recognizable to them as such. He adopts from Willy Haas the interpretation that the 'mysterious centre' of Kafka's *Trial*, described as 'forgetting', derives from the Jewish religion, and he quotes Haas: 'The most sacred... act of the... ritual is the erasing of sins from the book of memory.' (GS II.2, 429; IL 127; ellipses in the original)

At the centre of Benjamin's own reflections on the *creature* and *Creation* is not the holy or the sacred, but the ways in which the stance towards religious cults, consigned to the past by secularization, nevertheless still finds expression in the modern age. That the terms secularization and the holy occur relatively seldom in the course of Benjamin's pursuit of these questions must be regarded as his own theological secret. Since his reflections largely take the form of *thought-images*, his approach to secularization will in what follows be traced in relation to those figures, images and scenes through which his work on the dialectic of secularization is articulated. The focus here is both on secularization as a descriptive historical category and on an attitude that bears the dignity of a method.

The scene of secularization: remoteness from Creation

Benjamin's thinking about secularization is elaborated topographically, via historical constellations which appear in the form of thought-images and scenes into which history has passed. One of these images, and one which is at the very core of his theory of history, is the *remoteness from Creation*. It is a figure to be understood as literally the foundation and central thought-image of his historico-theoretical reflections.

The most important reference point for this figure is the early essay on language, in which Benjamin reads the Book of Genesis as a historico-theoretical narrative. This text presents the end of the paradisiac state of language, or the Adamite language of naming, as a

Fall of the spirit of language which arises at the moment in which language enters the state of history. With the beginnings of a language of signs in which human beings speak *about* things, a language defined by characteristics such as judging, differentiation between good and evil and the possibility of abstraction, with the entry into a language that operates within history, in other words, the access to Adamite language is cut off. Its characteristics can now only find expression through a variety of non-communicable modes. By contrast with the mute language of nature and things, which in the Adamite state is translated into the verbal language of human beings, after the caesura of the Fall there begins an 'other muteness', in so far as the 'over-naming' of nature by men gives rise to lament (GS II.1, 155; SW I, 73). *Lament* is thus seen as the creature's form of expression once it has become distanced from Creation.

Five years later, in 'The Task of the Translator', the constellation of a caesura which marks the end of paradise and the beginning of history reappears, but now in relation to the space which is opened up beyond the Fall, conceived by Benjamin both as distance from Creation *and* as distance from revelation. In the messianic perspective, the gaze is directed not backwards, toward what is lost, but forwards, toward that revelation which stands at the end of history. As far as the theory of translation is concerned, the decisive epistemic step consists in not pursuing the familiar debate about literal translation versus translation focused on meaning. Instead, Benjamin ascribes to translation a symptomatic character: it is a test of the distance from revelation. Even when he states that the interlinear version of Holy Scripture is 'the prototype or ideal of all translation' (GS IV.1, 21; SW I, 263), the issue is not how to approach this ideal, but rather the reflection on the distance from the prototype. Since the task of translation catches fire upon the eternal life of the works and the perpetual renewal of language, it is up to translation to put the growth of languages to the test:

If, however, these languages continue to grow in this way until the messianic end of their history, it is translation that catches fire from the eternal life of the works and the perpetually renewed life of language; for it is translation that keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation? How close can it be brought by *the knowledge of this remoteness*? (GS IV.1, 14; SW I, 257; emphasis added)

It is in this sense that Benjamin understands 'all translation' as a 'somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness

of languages'. Translation is, in this reading, a symptom of the distance from Creation and of the remoteness from revelation. Translation and lament in Benjamin form a kind of corresponding configuration. While translation presupposes a conscious knowledge of the remoteness from Creation and revelation, lament is an unreflective expression of this remoteness in the sense that it is addressed within history directly to Creation.

In the Kraus essay, published a decade later, the position 'on the threshold of the Last Judgement' becomes one in which those linguistic gestures through which the modern age relates back to Creation are tested for their effectivity. The image of Kraus on the threshold between Creation and Last Judgement is a dialectical figure. The counter-gesture of lament within it is interpreted as an attitude which addresses Creation directly, as if there were no distance from it; it turns back, rather like the lyrical 'I' in Scholem's poem 'Gruß vom Angelus' ('The Angel's Greeting') in the line 'Ich kehrte gern zurück' ('I would gladly turn back'). The gesture of 'Anklage', accusation or complaint, meanwhile, arises out of a reversal or an interruption of lamentation, whereby the authority to which the complaint is addressed in a world which has turned its back on Creation is modelled after an image of divine judgement: as 'Weltgericht'.[9] While lament is completely dependent on a notion of Creation which sees history as nothing but a time of waiting before the kingdom of salvation comes, complaint is by contrast a profane form of speech, imitating a divine court. This threshold position, described in terms of a simultaneity of incompatible linguistic gestures and thus not permitting any durable, unambiguous meaning, goes some way to explaining the text's closing image, in which a 'new angel', an 'Unmensch', an a-human being appears.[10] On this 'evanescent voice', Benjamin claims, 'the ephemeral work of Kraus is modelled. Angelus — that is the messenger in the old engravings' (*GS* II.1, 367; *SW* II, 457).

In the thought-images of the theses on the concept of history (1940), written a decade later, this a-human being reappears as the 'Angelus Novus', albeit now quite clearly and explicitly differentiated from human beings. The reversal between Creation and Last Judgement, lament and complaint which characterized the earlier position on the threshold is here transferred into a configuration of opposing forces. In it, lament and the gaze backward onto the distance from Creation are ascribed to a mute angel who fixes his stare on the catastrophe while 'a chain of events appears before *us*' (*GS* I.2, 697; *SW* IV, 392). The Janus tone of lament and complaint is

here distributed between two positions looking in different directions: between 'our' gaze from our standpoint as subjects within history, outside of which we cannot step except at the price of our status as human beings, and the angel's, who gazes in the direction of paradise, back to where history originated in the Fall. As the double of the historical subject, the angel embodies the knowledge of the distance from Creation which quite literally runs counter to the knowledge of the chain of events. This also means, however, that our gaze and the angel's cannot be reconciled within a single perspective.

In the 'Angelus Novus', Benjamin presents a dialectical image which he had discussed almost two decades earlier in a conceptual thought-image in the 'Theologico-Political Fragment' as a counter-striving constellation: the image of two arrows pointing in different directions, in which messianic intensity and the dynamic of the profane, while opposed to one another, nevertheless propel each other forward (*GS* II.1, 203–4; *OWS*, 155). In this historic-philosophical lesson, Benjamin uses a critique of political theocracy as the basis for developing the core philosophical thought of his dialectic of secularization — a reason why his theory of history should not be confused with political theology. This core thought is that the order of the profane cannot be built upon the idea of the kingdom of God. Rather, messianic intensity is inscribed within the profane as rhythm. Benjamin describes the messianic rhythm of nature as happiness and argues that the earthly *restitutio in integrum* leads to the eternity of downfall. This recalls both the biblical notion that man is made of earth and must return to earth and the contemporary biological view of mortality as the assimilation of the organic to the inorganic, which Sigmund Freud adopted in the same period in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In Freud, the death drive as a general drive of everything living to return to the anorganic world and Eros as a life-preserving drive are opposed to one another.[11] But where Freud describes the death drive and Eros as a constellation of counter movements, the same constellation in Benjamin conjoins mortality and the search for happiness: 'For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.' (*GS* II.1, 204; *OWS*, 156). When he writes that earthly striving is directed simultaneously toward happiness and downfall — toward its downfall *in* happiness — then this rhythm alludes both to messianism and to the findings of modern science. Benjamin's lesson in the philosophy of history, which begins with the rejection of theocracy for the order of the profane, thus ends in a double reference to biblical and scientific viewpoints.

The language of secularization: ambiguity or double reference

What is the implication of these reflections for the conceptualization of language in the scene of secularization? Benjamin's observation comes to mind that in Kraus's polemic, his rhetoric and his gestures, progress and the archaic coincide. Benjamin describes Kraus's polemic as 'the most intimate intermingling of a technique of unmasking that works with *the most advanced means*, and a self-expressive art operating with *the most archaic*' (GS II.1, 345–6; *SW* II, 441; emphases added). A leitmotif of the Kraus text is equivocality, a specific dual semantics which must be seen as the linguistic effect of the position on the threshold between Creation and Last Judgement, between lament and complaint. The sensations and opinions pilloried by Kraus as the bad principles of the daily press are countered by him, says Benjamin, on the one hand with lament, as when he opposes the daily press with 'the eternally fresh "news" of the history of Creation: the eternally renewed, uninterrupted lament' (GS II.1, 345; *SW* II, 440). On the other, he leads a linguistic battle in the name of justice, the *Sprachprozeßordnung* mentioned earlier. For in Kraus's judicial chamber, it is language that presides. Justice and language remain, for him, 'founded in each other'. What does this mean, though, and what is the consequence of this being 'founded in each other'? Benjamin characterizes Kraus in this context as a zealot who places the legal system itself under accusation, attacking the law, not for individual judgements, i.e. misjudgements, but 'in its substance'. For he accuses the *law* of its betrayal of *justice* — and Benjamin adds: 'More exactly, betrayal of the word by the concept, which derives its existence from the word' (GS II.1, 349; *SW* II, 444). The abbreviation holds the key. What it is saying is: just as the concept derives from the word, so the law derives from justice; and Kraus charges both derivations — law and concept — with high treason vis-à-vis the idea to which they owe their existence. His accusation thus relates to the betrayal of concepts such as justice and the word in whose name the complaint is simultaneously filed. In other words, complaint of this kind, conducted within history or within the order of the profane, while appealing to notions of divine order, produces a paradox. In it the victims of the betrayal (justice and the word) and the authorities to whom the appeal is made are identical.

It is only on the basis of this constellation that the full sense of that *salto mortale* becomes clear which Benjamin discerns in Kraus's linguistic judicial procedure: 'To worship the image of divine justice as language — even in the German language — this is the genuinely Jewish *salto mortale* by which he tries to break the spell of the demon.' (GS II.1, 349; *SW* II, 444; translation modified). The passage presents in condensed form Benjamin's thinking about justice as an idea which precedes the positive law since it originates in a biblical context. In so far as legal order, as a historical order, takes the idea of divine justice as its point of orientation, while positive law, as human law or the law made by human beings, simultaneously marks the distance from the sphere of divine justice, the law is characterized by a structural equivocality. Indeed, Benjamin speaks in the Kraus essay of the 'constructive ambiguity of law', a formulation which captures his perception that an unavoidable dual semantics is inscribed into the constructive function of the law within history, because justice in historical terms carries within itself a reference to the idea of Justice in a pre-judicial, biblical sense. By contrast, justice in this latter sense acts destructively against the law if it is appealed to in the critique of present concrete jurisdictions. As Benjamin states in the last passage of 'Karl Kraus': 'Destructive is therefore that justice, which stops the constructive ambiguities of law.' (GS II.1, 367; *SW* II, 456; translation modified).

To conclude: among the dominant theories of secularization, the most prominent version assumes that secularization is to be understood as a phenomenon of transferral or translation. This places the rhetoric of secularization at the centre of attention.[12] Against this horizon, Benjamin appears as distinctive, for he operates by contrast in a historical scene in which secularization is conceived of as a test of the distance from Creation or revelation, that is, always in terms of a *difference from Creation*, but in the knowledge of the origination of one's own present language in biblical language, its derivation from a beginning which must be thought of as always already irretrievably lost. The terms of this language cannot be simply transferred into secular concepts — justice into ethics, for example. Rather, they function as a standard which can be neither avoided nor met. In this space defined by its remoteness from Creation, though, language acquires its double sense only via the detour of a clear distinction between concepts which are derived from a divine or biblical order and those of a profane order. Their referentiality and their specific ways of alluding, each according to their kind, to biblical language, to divine justice and the idea of Creation can only be discussed on the basis of this distinction. A reflexive secularization which acts in the knowledge of this constellation of history does *not* express itself in transferrals and translations, the results of which present themselves as

the products of complete secularization, while in fact being marked by the precarious ambiguity of their Janus-like form. In opposition to these, Benjamin sets thought-images and figures which do not seek to reconcile Creation and history or bring them onto the same level, but which reflect the double reference to both profane and religious ideas: double reference in the place of ambiguity.

Translated by Georgina Paul

NOTES

1 This article is based on the first chapter of my new book: *Walter Benjamin: Das Heilige, die Kreatur und die Bilder* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2008).

2 Translation modified: creature instead of creation for German 'Kreatur'. Since all English translations of the Kraus essay translate 'Kreatur' as creation, Benjamin's reflections on the relations and tensions between *Kreatur*/creature, *Geschöpf*/creation, and *Schöpfung*/Creation in the sense of Genesis get lost in translation. Benjamin's 'Kreatur' emphasizes the relatedness of human beings to animals, i.e. to creaturely life, whereas 'Geschöpf' means a product of men's creation imitating God's Creation. At the same time, the relationship between Genesis (*Schöpfung*), generation (*Erzeugung*), and procreation (*Zeugung*) opens up the field of sexual connotations. For this see my 'Eros and Language: Benjamin's Kraus Essay' in *Benjamin's Ghosts*, edited by Gerhard Richter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 278–98. For the problem of translations of Benjamin's writings see my article 'Lost in Translation: Vom Verlust des Bilddenkens in Übersetzungen Benjaminscher Schriften', in *Perception and Experience in Modernity, Benjamin Studies* 1 (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2002), 47–63.

3 Translation modified: 'like a statement of the Last Judgement' instead of 'world-historical' for German 'weltgerichtlich' (not 'weltgeschichtlich'). Benjamin's reference to 'Weltgericht' in its double meaning of Last Judgement and world court is crucial for the whole essay in which he illuminates the biblical legacy in Kraus's references to justice and to worldly courts/laws. What is at stake here is the notion of a Last Judgement which casts its shadow on all notions of justice already within *this* world.

4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 161.

5 *Critique of Practical Reason*, 161–2.

6 Benjamin's usage of 'allmenschlich' connotes not only the cosmic but also the ordinary notion of human, whereas the 'Unmensch', title of the third part, personifies the lack of all ordinary human attributes and attitudes. He is less a monster rather than an a-human being similar to the angel.

7 In respect of the aftermath of the Holocaust, I have analysed the concept of 'Zeugnis' by differentiating between the gesture of witness and the historical and legal notion of testimony. See my article 'Zeugnis und Zeugenschaft, Klage und Anklage: Zur Geste des Bezeugens in der Differenz von *identity politics*, juristischem und historiographischem Diskurs' in *Zeugnis und Zeugenschaft, Einstein Forum Jahrbuch 1999* (Berlin: Akademie, 2000), 111–35.

8 'Sprachprozeßordnung' is an artificial creation, substituting the element of penalty (*Strafe*) in the German word *Strafprozeßordnung* with language (*Sprache*).

9 See note 3.

10 See note 6.

11 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 18, 1–64 (38).

12 Hans Blumenberg, *Legitimität der Neuzeit*, revised edition (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1996).

Paragraph

A Journal of Modern Critical Theory

Volume 32, Number 3, November 2009

Passage-work: Walter Benjamin between the Disciplines

Edited by Andrew Webber

Contents