

Life after Life: a figure of thought in Walter Benjamin*

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Benjamin's afterlife is overwhelming today. Numerous if not countless are the occasions and places where he is conceived as a vital thinker; again and again we hear – or even proclaim ourselves – how relevant he is today, while more and more writings of Benjamin, both in German and in translation appear, let alone the overwhelming mass of research on him. As a telling fact, we do not only have two critical editions of the complete works in Germany which is more than of any other philosopher of the twentieth century. We also have a wide scope of multi-volume editions in language as different as Corean, Catalan, Italian not to mention English, French, Spanish, and Portugese. Of course, this is all the more remarkable given the relatively small scope and the scattered nature of Benjamin's oeuvre, which actually only emerged as an oeuvre by the collecting and editing efforts of his friends. As an oeuvre, Benjamin's work emerged only posthumously – it is the very product of an afterlife.

Moreover, Benjamin himself analyzed these processes of reception, their possible belatedness and political implications. The theory of history he developed in the Passagen-project is mainly an attempt to understand the afterlife of cultural artifact politically, and, by that, to understand the present as well. In that endeavour, he was particularly interested in what has been marginalized and merely forgotten, in the tradition of the suppressed which is always a suppressed tradition, or, in another image, the debris of the official history. Benjamin is thus a thinker of the afterlife – writing about the belated reception of important authors, as the in case of Carl Gustav Jochmann, or about saving memory of what tends to be forgotten, as in *Deutsche Menschen*, he seems to speak of himself.

Today, as afterlife has become an important topic in cultural studies, these ideas and impulses are of fundamental importance. It is, however, all the more remarkable that Benjamin's actual engagement with the idea of 'afterlife' (Nachleben) does play a rather insignificant role in Benjamin studies. Benjamin uses the term rarely but often assigns a systematic importance to it. Throughout his writings, we can conceive an attempt – not very prominent, but clearly recognizable – to conceive history as a relation of life and after-life: In *The Task of the Translator*, he does not only state that the original "survives" (überlebt) in translation, but formulates programmatically that, in order to understand the historicity of art, one has to

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conceive the “life and continuing life (Leben und Fortleben) of the works of art” (GS IV 10f). Later, in the book on *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* he characterizes the pre- and posthistory of the works of art as “natural life” (GS I 227)., in other notes, he projects a doctrine of the continuing life (Fortleben) of the work of art as a project to be worked out (GS VI 174). Even in the essay on Eduard Fuchs from 1937 which argues in materialistic terms, he describes historical understanding as “afterlife of what is understood, whose effects can be sensed even in the presence” (GS II 468) . Finally, in the notes on historical method of the *Passagen-project*, he generalizes once more: “Historical understanding is generally to be conceived as an afterlife of what is understood, therefore, what was recognized when analyzing the afterlife of Works or the Fame (‘Ruhm’) is to be conceived as foundation of history.” (GS V, 574f). In this context, where Benjamin reflects on ‘the tradition of the suppressed’ it is quite remarkable that he refers to ‘Ruhm’; and this is symptomatic both for the enduring importance of his idea of afterlife and for the difficulty to fit it into the new context.

In Benjamin-studies, these passages were quoted frequently but hardly conceived as a specific project.¹ Especially, the relation between afterlife and life – which seems to be obvious and is even highlighted by the quote on “the life and afterlife of works of art” – is usually not discussed explicitly; by consequence, the idea of afterlife is taken out of its context, loses its specificity and becomes a mere metaphor. Of course it is true, that the idea and the very term of afterlife is probably less important than other concepts of Benjamin, as construction, salvation, tradition, quotation; it is also true that the reference to afterlife tend to be less present and especially less programmatic in Benjamin’s later texts, as if he had given up the idea. Nevertheless, the reflections on afterlife do reveal a particular thread in Benjamin’s thought. Moreover, it presents Benjamin’s way of thinking in an extraordinary way, namely it allows us to conceive the way he sets up certain concepts or rather figures of thought. Let me first briefly explain what I mean by figures of thought before I elaborate on the very figure of afterlife.

¹ Studies which discuss Benjamin’s Nachleben explicitly are rare in the huge literature on Benjamin’s concept of history and memory, and they usually format the afterlife by other concepts as “quotation” (Bettine Menke: „Das Nach-Leben im Zitat. Benjamins Gedächtnis der Texte“, in: Anselm Haverkamp/ Renate Lachmann: Gedächtniskunst: Raum – Bild – Schrift, Frankfurt a.M. 1991, S. 74-110) or „heritage“ (Stefan Willer: „‘Nachleben des Verstandenen’. Walter Benjamin und das Erbe des historischen Materialismus“, in: Text + Kritik 31/32 2009, S. 88-96). For a broader philosophical context of Benjamin’s Reflections cf. also Gerhard Richter: Afterness. Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics, Columbia UP 2011.

Benjamin often counts as a somewhat ‘literary’ thinker, and for good reasons.² He deliberately crosses the border between philosophical and literary discourse both in terms of subject matter and in his style of writing. Even more important, as every reader of Benjamin knows, his formulations are often central in themselves, since he often develops his argument by language, i.e. by referring to certain uses of languages, e.g. when he speaks of immediacy, Unmittelbarkeit, and stressing the media, die Mitte. As I will try to show, the idea of after-life is developed in similar ways; it is less a clear-cut concept but generated by the transformation and displacement of language, which is, in this case, not simple everyday language, but a peculiar idiom, namely the contemporary philosophy of life. Benjamin actually uses the idea and term of ‘life’ which is full of the most different connotations at the beginning of the 20th century – as it is now -, and displaces it towards the idea of after-life, and it is only if we take this displacement into proper account that we understand his use of afterlife.

It is this interplay between common use and displacement which I understand as figuration: a (markedly) different use of language. The figurative nature of Benjamin’s thinking, if we take it for granted at least on this occasion, has important hermeneutic consequences. For it should no longer allow us to treat Benjamin’s ‘concepts’ as a mere terminology, i.e. as a series of idiosyncratic terms that might be rearranged and reconstructed in this or that way, which is, sad to say, a habit in quite a few Benjamin studies. Benjamin’s ‘concepts’ have to be taken literally, that is, in their very wording, but they have to be related to the context, the common usage they refer to, as well. For it is only in that tension that we see how his texts work and what their productive potential is still today.

In what follows, I will thus first unfold the context of Benjamin’s reflections on afterlife, namely the use of the term in early twentieth century discourse, before I analyze Benjamin’s ideas about historical life focusing on “The task of the translator”, for it is here that the idea of a historical life is most visible in his writings. I will thirdly highlight the paradoxical nature of ‘afterlife’ which implies the idea of a ‘life after life’ which is neither life nor its opposite, finally I will reflect on the religious context this evokes.

I Life and afterlife around 1900

If we conceive *Nachleben* as a figure of thought to be placed into its discursive context, it is essential to understand the common usage of the term at the time when Benjamin refers to it.

² Cf. Among many others Sigrid Weigel: *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit. Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise*, Frankfurt a.M. 1997, and Samuel Weber: *Benjamin’s – aibilites.*, Cambridge UP 2008, on afterlife cf here p. 79-94.

For neither is the term in itself exceptional, nor does Benjamin seem to have a peculiar source, as Aby Warburg, since both the term and the idea of *Nachleben* is rather common by that time. The term is an established title for the history of reception in classical studies, both in the history of antique art and in classical philology, where we usually find sections on the *Nachleben* of certain ideas and practices. At times, it is even elaborated in programmatic ways. Let me quote a random example which is quite symptomatic for the semantic implications of *Nachleben* in German discourse around 1900, even if we do not assume that Benjamin would have read it: the booklet *Das Nachleben der Antike, The after-life of antiquity* published in 1919 by Otto Immisch, a well known philologist and strong partisan of the classical humanist gymnasium.

Immisch argues that antiquity is not dead for us, that we do or at least should feel its significance today, in the time of crisis: “The stars do shine again, even for us. We see that something is wrong with the Uniqueness of historical phenomena, there is a renovation, a revival, that is more than historical reconstruction.”³ In the realm of the mind, there is a law of conservation of energy: “The Spiritual (das Geistige), if it is formed, remains ‘a coined form that develops vitally’” – the last formulation being a famous quotation from Goethe’s *Urworte, orphisch* (“keine Zeit und keine Macht zerstückelt / Geprägte Form, die lebend sich entwickelt”). Immisch continues: “And since it lives, it also affects. Its affectation however is cut off from its origin, adapts to new circumstances, continues to live and act in its own right and generates continually new effects which are in turn independent and flexible.” Therefore, the historical phenomenon is not identical with its very place in history, but consists in a long series of cultural effects: “Everything that lived and effected continues to live and effect.” Thus, our task is to free the antiquity from its encrustations: “It appears as a part of our own live-process, which implies that, as all living things, it is flexible to generate future effects”.

Immisch’s use and idea of *Nachleben* is symptomatic in several respects. The formula of a living antiquity is not only a cultural agenda which claims that classical knowledge still has more than an antiquarian function, it also implies a certain idea of history as a process of life, which generates meaning from the ‘roots’ or ‘seeds’, moreover, this meaning is itself living, i.e. flexible, and not dead, i.e. fix. Finally, this life appeals to us in so far as it asks us to make it part of our life, to re-live it or to live according to it, as one might translate the ‘*nacherleben*’. Therefore, *Nachleben*, as Immisch uses it, implies specific though vague ideas of history, tradition, and reception. It is part of a much wider discourse, namely the historic

³ Cf. The following quotations in: Otto Immisch: *Das Nachleben der Antike*, Leipzig 1919, S. 15ff.

hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey and his followers, who would stress the importance of ‘*nacherleben*’ as historical understanding, and even wider, the philosophy of life, which was prominent in Germany from Nietzsche and Dilthey to Ludwig Klages and Alfred Bäumler, that is from the 1880s to the 1930s when at least Bäumler was heavily involved in the National socialist movement.

At first glance, the idea of history implied in this discourse on life and afterlife seems to be a ‘biologistic’ one, and this is of course true to a certain extent. It refers, however, to a specific form of biology, which is epitomized by the Goethe-quotation: a morphology which is more concerned in the individual life in history than with life in a biological sense as we tend to conceive it. Thus, for Dilthey, the fundamental expression of life is the autobiography, namely Goethe’s *Dichtung und Wahrheit* in which the individual understands itself and represents its time in a way that we can understand it by ‘*nacherleben*’. Life in this sense is therefore essentially cultural and historical. By the end of the century, however, life tends to assume more and more connotations finally denoting all that is alive in contrast to what is fix, mechanic, antiquarian, reified, or part of the establishment. It becomes a catchword, a slogan, an absolute metaphor which meaning is only made up by its contrasts.

And even this contrast tend to collapse. We can see the widening of the meaning of life most clearly in Georg Simmel – an author held in high esteem by Benjamin – who described culture as tragic due to a permanent conflict between the stream of subjective life and its products, the fixed objective forms. This conflict, as Simmel elaborates in *Lebensanschauung* from 1918 is even intrinsic to life itself: „Life finds its essence and its fulfillment in being more-life and more-than-life (two compound nouns *Mehr-Leben* and *Mehr-als-Leben*) its positive degree is always its comparative one.”⁴ Life is, to use a later formula by Helmut Plessner Excentric to itself, namely in two senses: On the one hand it is permanent movement and generation of new life (more-life), on the other it transgresses itself towards its other, namely death (more-than-life), for Simmel argues that death is actually part of it. This Life to death or death in life is of course symptomatic for the time and can be found in other discourses of World War I, examples being Freud and Heidegger. In all cases we can see how the discourse of life integrates even its opposite, in Simmel in particular it is symptomatic that this leads to certain compound formula (more-life and more-than-life) which express figuratively what cannot be said literally in a discourse in which the meaning of life tends to

⁴ Georg Simmel: *Lebensanschauung*, in Gesamtausgabe Bd. 16, p. 209-425, here p. 235.

become all-encompassing. Already here, we see how the discourse of life leans toward paradox, and is this potential that Benjamin will use

II Benjamin's historical life

Life is a fundamental concept in Benjamin's early writings. This is all too obvious in the very early writings on youth and *Das Leben der Studenten* but it also informs his fragments on anthropology and numerous other texts at least until the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. Obviously, he thought along the lines of the philosophy of life, which is, however, downgraded in Benjamin studies, mostly for political reasons. For the dominant reception of Benjamin by critical theory considered the philosophy of life as dangerously irrational and biologicistic; it would naturally lead to the racism which would finally result in Benjamin's death. Therefore, most readers of Benjamin would be eager to stress his differences with the *Lebensphilosophie*, highlighting e.g. his critique of myth. True as this may be, in my eyes, this not only overstates the difference, but misses the point, since the essential question is not whether Benjamin 'differs' with the philosophy of life, but *how* he does so and how he actually refers to its potential to formulate his own conception of history. In this respect, a reading of the translator-essay might prove helpful, as I hope to show.

As already quoted, Benjamin states that the translation of a work is part of its afterlife. Again, most interpretations of the essay hardly mention Benjamin's reference to life but tend to focus on pure language, form, literal translations, and other concepts. Even if these ideas may prove more important in the end of the essay, the reference to life plays an important role for the opening and thus the context of the argument. For after Benjamin's apodictic beginning which denies any communicative function of art and translation and introduces the concept of form, he establishes the relation between original and translation as "vital connection", or "relation of life" ("Zusammenhang des Lebens", G S IV 10) and exemplifies how he wants to understand this relation: "Just as expressions of life are connected in the most intimate manner with the living being without having any significance for the latter, a translation proceeds from the original." (ibid.) The following paragraph elaborates this relation of life and generalizes its meaning: "The notion of the life and continuing life of works of art should be considered with completely unmetaphorical objectivity." (ibid. 11) For life is not only a feature of the organic: "Rather, it is only when life is attributed to everything that has a history, and not to that which is only a stage setting for history, that this concept comes into its own." (ibid.) These somewhat enigmatic statements clearly fit into Dilthey's concept of historical life as the primary domain of the humanities. Benjamin thus proposes to analyze

translations as part of a general process of historical understanding. What might be specific for him is the stress on “unmetaphorical objectivity” which implies that life is more than a metaphor; indeed, the text tries to take the idea of a historical life literally in the following, e.g. by claiming that works of art have different phases of life, as generation, growth, and inheritance: “The history of great works of art knows about their descent from their sources, their shaping in the age of the artists, and the periods of their basically eternal continuing life in later generations.” (ibid.) It is to the latter realm, which he also calls the realm of fame, that translation belongs, for in it “the original's life achieves its constantly renewed, latest and most comprehensive unfolding” (ibid.). The unfolding here is probably best understood in the vegetative sense of the unfolding of the ‘leaves’ or of a ‘seed’, as an expressive relation. This genealogical and expressivist motives are quite important for the argument of the essay since they allow Benjamin to dismiss the traditional ideas of ‘concord’ or ‘similarity’ between translation and original. That original and translation have a vital connection implies that they do not have to resemble each other – descendants do not have to resemble those who have generated them - and that the conventional criteria of translation, freedom and fidelity, are problematic. For, as we might paraphrase the implicit argument, they tend to compare original and translation as isolated entities and do not take their historicity into account, that actually changes their relation and even the meaning of the original, as Benjamin stresses later: “For in its continuing life, which could not be so called if it were not the transformation and renewal of a living thing, the original is changed. Established words also have their after-ripening.” (ibid. 12) Therefore, translation is part of the essential life of the historical entity. Its historicity does not merely consist in its original historical place but in its effects, in its being part of history that continues. This continuity, however, is conceived quite differently than e.g. in *Immisch*.

III Life and Afterlife

Benjamin does not simply use the semantics of life, but displaces it at the same time, namely when after-life but not life in itself becomes most prominent. This is most obvious in the passage where Benjamin introduces the concept, postulating a ‘vital’ connection between original and translation.

Just as expressions of life are connected in the most intimate manner with the living being without having any significance for the latter, a translation proceeds from the original. Not indeed so much from its life as from its "survival" [*Überleben*].

Nonetheless the translation is later than the original, and in the case of the most significant works, which never find their chosen translators in the era in which they

are produced, indicates that they have reached the stage of their continuing life
[Fortleben]. (GS IV, 10f)

Here Benjamin moves from ‘live’ to ‘survival’, from ‘Leben’ to ‘Überleben’ and ‘Forleben’. In comparison to Immisch, he shifts the emphasis: from *afterlife* in the sense of continuity he turns to *afterlife* as a life after the original. Systematically, this shift is essential since it distinguishes between original and translation is set up in an asymmetric way: Whereas the translation is ‘generated’ by the original in some way, this does not hold true for the other way round. For even if the meaning of the original continues to live in translation – and continues to grow and to undergo the process of ripening –, its actual literal form does not, since it is and remains fixed letter. It is this difference which is essential for Benjamin’s conception of translation and distinguishes it from other conceptions e.g. of a hermeneutic of reception or of a Freudian idea of belatedness according to which the significance of a historical phenomenon is permanently created anew. For Benjamin, the work of art lives on, but it lives on differently, it survives, it has its afterlife and that is a life after life.

By this turn, however, the entire idea of afterlife becomes paradoxical, for what could be a life after life? An afterlife, if we follow Simmel’s argument from *Lebensanschauung* would be either the other of life, conclusively, afterlife would no longer be life. Or, it is still part of life, however, then there would be no *afterlife* but simply life. Benjamin’s concept of afterlife expresses the limits of the semantics of life, but it does so in an indirect, and paradoxical way. Or, in rhetorical terms, one cannot speak of ‘afterlife’ literally, but only *figuratively*. Therefore, the displacement from life to afterlife is also a displacement from concept to figure, from philosophical thought to philosophical writing and thus to the form which is characteristic for Benjamin.

The text quoted highlights this turn in several ways. First by the anacoluthic sentence which actually does nothing else than performing the displacement: “Not indeed so much from its life as from its “survival” *[Überleben]*.” By its construction, the sentence does not decide if survival is nothing else than another term for life or what is the exact difference between the two: Do the poems on which Benjamin speaks here, cease to live when first written down, or in their final version, when their author dies or when they change their language as in translation? This remains essentially undecided.

Secondly, the aim of the displacement, the ‘survival’, stands in quotation marks and therefore, according to the German convention, not meant literally. Again, this may have different implications: it may be an idiosyncratic use, i.e. not the usual sense of survival, but may be in the sense of sur-vival, über-leben, as a higher form of life, or more-than-life that Simmel

elaborated. Or it is meant metaphorical which would have the somewhat perplexing consequence that the work of art would live in an unmetaphorical sense but survive only metaphorically – whereas we tend to see it the other way round. In consequence, the quotation marks make the survival even more ambivalent and transform the figure of thought from a simple word into a more complex set of transformations which makes it all the more difficult to reduce it to any literal meaning.

Finally, the survival is immediately followed with another third term, the continuing life, the German “Fortleben” which evokes still other connotations, as already Samuel Weber has pointed out, namely ‘living on’, but also ‘living away’.⁵ Once more, the semantic relation remains unclear: is continuing life synonymous with survival or not, and how are the two related to life itself. The metonymic chain from life to survival is thus continued which hinders us to make clear distinction between the different terms and, thereby, try to ‘define’ what Benjamin means with afterlife, which does not exist in one term, but in three. In other word, the text does not allow us to retranslate the disquieting figure of afterlife into a concept. In the rest of the essay, the idea of a living or surviving of the work of art is elaborated on different occasions. E.g. Translation is describes as growing and unfolding – but a growth that has a hybrid and unnatural moment. Whereas in the original, ‘content’ and language have a natural relation – Benjamin speaks of fruit and paring -, it becomes more loose in translation, where language is to content rather a baggy coat. In translation, according to Benjamin the original is “transplanted” into a higher realm , or as another formulation goes. “the original grows into a quasi higher and purer realm of Language, in which it is however not able to life in the long run (GS IV, 14). ‘Growing’ and ‘being transplanted’ are two reciprocal movements that figure the process in an ambiguous way, as does the figure of the after-ripening of words.

IV Death and Afterlife of religion

What distinguishes Benjamin’s conception of afterlife from that of Immisch as well as of many other authors is the difference between life and afterlife which is also a difference between the mere continuity and a more complex relation to the historic past. This distinction implies a recognition of a caesura between life and afterlife, namely a recognition of death: Afterlife is the life after death. Remarkably, but consistently, this is never stated explicitly in Benjamin’s text, in which we would not find any reference to ‘death’ or ‘dying’. Remarkably, since the reference to death belongs quite naturally to the context of surviving or even

⁵ Samuel Weber: Benjamin’s Aibilities, p. 67.

afterlife. Consistently, since – as we have already seen in Simmel – death as the unmarked other of life cannot be addressed explicitly by the discourse of the philosophy of life, but only indirectly, by compound construction as more-than-life, *Überleben*, *Nachleben* etc. Let me just mention another indirect reference in Benjamin, namely his relation of the afterlife of works of art to their fame, den ‘Ruhm’, an idea which is essentially linked to death in the literary tradition at least since Horaz: Fame is what the poet achieves after death, it is poetic immortality.⁶ This reference is all the more important, since the topic of fame plays a decisive role in one of Benjamin’s immediate intellectual contexts, the literary criticism of the George-circle.

Here, I would like to elaborate on another moment that actually fuels the paradox of after-life as Benjamin conceives it, namely the religious one. Again, this implication comes quite naturally, for how could the claimed ‘immortality’ of the after-life be conceived apart from a religious semantics, be it a Christian or Jewish idea of an eternal life or a pagan fear of ghosts and specters? Thus, the figure of after-life would not only mark an idea of history which takes death and human finitude into account, but also its religious dimension.

We can see this religious dimensions most clearly in a couple of reflections on ‘tradition’ and ‘teaching’ (*Lehre*), which Benjamin developed in 1917 and 1918 together with Gershom Scholem. Tradition, too, is a form of historical life, a living form of truth in contrast to abstract philosophical principles. In a letter to Scholem from 1917, Benjamin stresses that tradition is an essentially religious context, which is to be conceived as “the medium in which the pupil continually transforms into the teacher”: “Who understands his knowledge as being transmitted is able to transmit it itself.”⁷ To describe this relation, Benjamin finally refers to an image: The teaching of tradition is “like a wavy sea, for the wave, if we take it as an image for man, everything that counts is to devote itself to the movement of the sea so that it grows to its crest and breaks effervescently”.⁸ In this figure of the wave and its crest, the continuous wash of the waves is connected with their breaking, thus implying that even the interruption of tradition is part of the tradition itself. This image seems so fitting to the paradoxes of tradition that Scholem will come back to it, when talking about Kafka in the 1930s, arguing that even the places where nothing seems to be left of tradition may be part of it as the wave

⁶ On the tradition of (poetic) fame cf. Leon Braudy: *The Frenzy of the Renown, Fame and its History* New. York and. Oxford: Oxford. University. Press., 1986.

⁷ Cf. the German original: „Wer sein Wissen als überliefertes begriffen hat in dem allein wird es überlieferbar“, Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Briefe I*, 382).

⁸ *Ibid.* S. 383

trough is part of the sea.⁹ Again, it is not only important that this idea can be expressed by an image only, but also that it represents a limit case in which the continuity and the interruption of tradition are indiscernible.

This idea of teaching with its strong religious connotations also plays an important role in the translator essay. Here, it is the end of the text which closes with a the statement that a text would be ‘absolutely translatable’ (übersetzbar schlechthin) in so far as it is part of teaching of true language (GS IV 21). This ending has often been read as ‘messianic’ closure of the argument, as if Benjamin, by a recourse to some form of messianic belief, tries to avoid the deconstructive consequences of his own approach – as the influential reading of Paul de Man argues. However, Benjamin does not argue theologically in a straightforward way here, but rather refers to a certain model of the sacred text which is paradigmatic for the cultural life he wants to talk about. The sacred text, as one might paraphrase the implicit argument, lives as long as it is being commented, as it is glossed and translated, as it continues to generate meaning for the future generations – his life is his afterlife, as one might say, all the more so since it was never in its making since his sacredness tend to obscure its historic origins.¹⁰

That Benjamin does not point to a messianic fulfillment *beyond* all language or a least beyond the differences of translation, but to this very difference itself, is highlighted by the closing line of his text which does not refer to teaching itself – but to its translation: “The interlinear version of the sacred text is the paradigm or ideal of all translation.” (GS IV 21) The interlinear translation indeed expresses that original and translation belong together; it is by no means a final abrogation of difference, but rather highlights and marks it. This is all the more evident, if we imagine that Benjamin has an interlinear version of the Hebrew scripture in mind. For due to the different direction of reading, a German (or English, or Portuguese) interlinear translation of a Hebrew text would not be readable in any usual sense – one would have to read each word from left to right, but follow the line from right to left, thus, so to speak reading in Epicycles. The reference to the holy text does thus not evoke a fulfillment of truth or a messianic return of an adamic language, but rather a complex and indirect movement of reading, a movement, which refers the reader to a different script from which he, as reader of the translation, is excluded at the same time.

In both cases, in speaking of the breaking of tradition and the interlinear version of a sacred text, the reference to a religious dimension does not imply an transgression of a secular

⁹ Cf. Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem: Briefwechsel, 286.

¹⁰ On this idea of scripturality of scripture cf. Brian Britt: Walter Benjamin and The Bible, New York 1996, esp. p. S. 51-69

problematic towards a transcendent sphere, but rather highlights the implicit tensions in the former. Here too, the figure of afterlife can be read in two ways, depending how we understand the genitive of “afterlife of religion”: On the one hand, Benjamin conceives the cultural afterlife as in the afterlife of a work of art by using religious terms, as the ‘immortality’ of afterlife. On the other hand, though, these terms are not simply at hand but underwent a certain decline and crisis, as in becoming figurative and paradoxical. What we face in reading Benjamin is thus less religion proper, but the afterlife of it. This ambivalence is, as I think highly productive not only to understand the function of Benjamin’s so called theology, but also the persistence of religious meaning in a modern, seemingly disenchanted world.

Benjamin’s idea of afterlife is thus a very specific and even idiosyncratic one, however, it draws on resources of contemporary discourses, namely the philosophy of life. It is essential that we take this implication into account, for only if we know the theoretical and ideological horizon, we can understand what Benjamin actually does: He takes the idea of ‘life’ for literal and unfolds it to the very point where its hidden implication surface – namely the idea of death. Afterlife, as life after life seems to be paradox, but it is by that paradox that it allows to articulate a more complex relation to the past which takes into account both continuity and discontinuity. Being aware of the caesura that is always possible, a caesura of which death is only the most radical manifestation, allows to conceive a history that is mindful of vulnerability and mortality, a history that is able to open up those self enclosed history as the history of progress, the history of art, into a multifaceted experience. This opening does also include an opening towards the religious past, a past that is, according to Benjamin, neither dead or alive so as we can neither adopt nor avoid religious language; instead, we have to deal with its afterlife.