**Chapter 2: A Theory of Youth**

1. **An Age of Youth**

a. Rebellion and Quest

Freud’s analysis of jokes, although unique in its combination of wit and law, was not alone in pointing to the religious sources of critique. Walter Benjamin’s extensive engagement with the concept of “youth” (*Jugend*) (encompassing the meaning of being young, the call for “youthfulness,” and its success or failure) generated another, albeit contrasting, contemporaneous discussion in which critique was dependent on theology. In contrast to the theological elements found in Freud’s analysis of jokes, this chapter shows how Benjamin’s conceptualization of youth draws on mysticism while it offers social criticism of mystical lore. I start by illustrating what youth means for Benjamin, how he articulates such a meaning theologically, and in what way theology of this sort relates to mysticism. The final section of this paper is dedicated to the manner in which the mystical underpinning of youth inform Benjamin’s concept of critique and what can be considered Benjamin’s critique of theology.

Youth was no doubt central to Benjamin’s early, mostly posthumously published writings from the period 1910-1917. These writings include a variety of philosophical works, and fragmented texts, such as “The Life of the Students” (*Das Leben der Studenten*), “The Metaphysics of Youth” (*Die Metaphysik der Jugend*), “The Youth is Still” (*Die Jugend Schwieg*), “Experience” (*Erfahrung*), “Socrates” (*Sokrates*),

“Two Poems by Hölderlin: The Poets Courage (*Dichtermut*) and Timidity (*Blödigkeit*)”, and “Dostoyevsky’s ‘The Idiot.’”[[1]](#footnote-2) They covered a wide range of themes and issues, like, the sources of language, the question of freedom, the origins of tragedy and its relation with play and aesthetics. But it was mainly the trope of youth and its intersection with these different issues with which Benjamin grappled in most of his early writings before and during the First World War.

To some extent, Benjamin’s extensive engagement with the idea of youth is not surprising. Youth, youthfulness, and being young were all widespread metaphors in the German cultural and intellectual sphere at the turn of the nineteenth century. As historians such as Walter Rüeggs, Frank Trommler, and Robert-Jan Adriaansen have pointed out, a concept of youth was employed as an emblem for an abstract breaking away from modern cultural, social and political reality.[[2]](#footnote-3) The reinvention of youth as a symbol for a social and cultural rupture occurred against the backdrop of growing distrust in positivism, materialism, and the rationalist ‘de-mystification’ of the world that was also regarded as the signature of a modern secular culture. Endemic to a range of cultural, intellectual, artistic and scholarly trends in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such a breaking away from modernity was visible in various neo-romantic, post-Nietzschean, and spiritual impulses that were highly attentive to the idea of a true human essence, or original term of being, that transcends articulation and understanding – the “hidden depths of the self” with which the human being may have an unmediated relation.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Within this cultural and intellectual context, the concept of youth was central. It often stood simultaneously for an iconoclastic revolt against oppressive modern conditions and an iconographic quest for an alternative return to nature, to community, and to a spiritual reverence for life.[[4]](#footnote-5) Against the Wilhelmine social and political order it represented a cultural revolt – a counter-culture, as it were – offering a remedy to feelings of alienation and to existential crisis. To the extent that modernity signified alienation, youth represented a return to an authentic, true human essence, or original term of being, which had been allegedly lost in the process of modernization, although what exactly such originality actually meant remained heavily disputed. Where modern life oppressed, youth redeemed.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Youth, then, encapsulated rebellion and quest. This particular interpretation of youth received attention in a wide range of cultural, artistic, literary, and intellectual spheres. Intellectuals such as Erich Gutkind and Oswald Spengler, for example, related, each in his own way, to a concept of youth as a symbol of pre-historical originality that stands over against the history of modernity.[[6]](#footnote-7) In a rather similar abstract tone, Karl Jung used the archetype of *Puer Aeternus –* forever young – to describe a psychological mechanism that not only refuses boundaries and limits but also “represents our totality, which transcends consciousness.”[[7]](#footnote-8) From a social perspective, Karl Mannheim placed the quandary of youth and of its reaching maturity at the center of his discussion of “generationality” (*Generationalität*), a dilemma that, to some extent, constituted the main theme in Frank Wedekind’s play, “Spring Awakening.”[[8]](#footnote-9) Similarly, Fidus’ popular drawings depicted the free and naked aesthetic figure of the young body, and the overall new style of “art nouveau” was endowed, at least in its German variation, with the meaning of a youth art (*Jugendstil*.).[[9]](#footnote-10)

The emergence and rapid growth of the German Youth Movement was, perhaps, the most salient example of the social and political impact of the new concept of youth.[[10]](#footnote-11) From the *Wandervogel*’s modest beginnings in 1896 in the Steglitz Quarters of Berlin, the German Youth Movement (and its later variant the *Freideutsche Jugend*) quickly became a significant cultural phenomenon, spreading far beyond the borders of the German Reich over the next decades. For members of the German Youth Movement, activities such as hiking, camping, singing or experiencing nature were a way of demonstrating rebellion against the modern way of life and were seen as being crucial to the quest for independence and self-assertion. Thus, in 1913, during the first all-German meeting of the youth movements at the *Hoher Meißner* mountain near Kassel, being young was defined as a search for an autonomous and free life, devoid of external interference; this entailed assuming the responsibility of following one’s untainted inner convictions, whatever they may be. This “Meißner formula” demonstrated the extent to which youth culture (*Jugendkultur*) offered an antidote to feelings of crisis and alienation induced by the modern way of life. It represented what historian Hartmut Böhme has called “the utopian potential of youth” in the eyes of many contemporary young German scholars, writers, intellectuals, and political activists, mostly young men, who belonged to the well-established educated bourgeoisie.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Benjamin was one of these young men. Making sense of what youth means marked for him both a personal quest and a sign of the times, bound up with notions of crisis and youth, rebellion and quest, alienation and redemption.[[12]](#footnote-13) “We are living in an age of Socialism, of the women’s movement, of traffic, of individualism” wrote the enthusiastic 18-year-old Benjamin. “Are we not headed toward an age of youth?”[[13]](#footnote-14) The social as well as metaphysical meanings of such an “age of youth” – ‘youth’s two bodies’, to play on Kantorowitzc’s famous concept – truly captured his intellectual imagination.

Around 1910 Benjamin was already deeply engaged with thinking about “an age of youth” and its relation to the social and political reality of Wilhelmian Germany.[[14]](#footnote-15) Between the summer of 1912, when he was 20 years old and a student at the University of Freiburg, and the outbreak of World War I, he became involved with what was then known as the “radical faction” of the German Youth Movement, which took its inspiration from Gustav Wyneken (1875-1964).[[15]](#footnote-16) Being “radical” denoted a commitment to an ideal of youth, rather than to a particular practice or political alignment. For the members of this faction, it was important that the concept should remain politically un-aligned and not reduced to the common practices and rituals of other contemporary youth movements. Upon returning to Berlin in the winter semester of 1912-1913, Benjamin, still a committed Wynekenian, devised the *Sprechsaal* (talking room) – a free association of friends who joined together in the spirit of “radical” youth. He attended the 1913 youth rally at the *Hoher Meißner* and in the summer of 1914 finally succeeded in being elected as Chair of the Berlin Independent Students’ Association, where he immediately arranged lectures from Martin Buber on his new book *Daniel* and from Ludwig Klages on his “life philosophy” (*Lebensphilosophie*).[[16]](#footnote-17) From 1912 he was also involved in Zionist student circles (his famed friendship with Scholem to follow) and combined his thoughts on youth with questions of Jewish identity and politics. Following the outbreak of World War I and the dramatic suicide of his close friend, the poet Frinz Heinle, Benjamin turned away from his early enthusiasm for Wyneken’s formula of youth and emphasized the failure of youth culture.[[17]](#footnote-18) Heinle’s tragic suicide was a particularly decisive factor in Benjamin’s eventual withdrawal from a positive approach towards youth.[[18]](#footnote-19) With this in mind, he composed his 1917 piece on “Dostoyevsky’s ‘The Idiot,’” which represents his last explicit engagement with the concept.[[19]](#footnote-20)

b. Transcendence, Divinity and Eternity

What, then, is the “age of youth” for Benjamin? When Benjamin speak of an “age” he is not simply talking about a distinct historical era (or “spirit” of the times, as evoked in German philosophical discussions since Hegel). More profoundly, he takes the notion of “age” to represent a human spiritual core that transcends social and historical circumstances. This means that the notion of spirit (*Geist*) does not signify a particular culture or historical stage; it refers instead to an innate and not-of-this-world characteristic of human beings. There is for Benjamin a human “individual time” which is not equivalent to a particular biological phase (for example, adolescence), but rather to an inner spiritual core of the human being that is free from any temporal (i.e. social and historical) conditioning.[[20]](#footnote-21)

An age of youth stands for such inner spiritual core. This is what an “intellectual autonomy of the creative spirit” signifies for Benjamin.[[21]](#footnote-22) Not just an inner human resistance to particular social and cultural circumstances (for example, a bourgeoisie upbringing, one’s educational background, or moral codes), but more radically a spiritual independence from all forms of external social, cultural, or political influences.[[22]](#footnote-23) Thus, for Benjamin, the “meaning of the word ‘youth’” lies in the fact “that from youth alone radiates new spirit, *the* spirit.”[[23]](#footnote-24) In the same vein, and in contrast with a “philistine” experience “devoid of meaning and spirit,” Benjamin presents an image of youth as “the voice of the spirit”: a site of human independence and freedom from any conditioning by history and society.[[24]](#footnote-25) Representing for Benjamin an inner human spiritual core – “the pure word for life” in an “inward, spiritual sense” – youth could be termed a site of “beyondness” because of its alleged existence beyond all possible social and historical enslaving circumstances.[[25]](#footnote-26)

It is this inner human element that lies beyond society and history that Benjamin articulates theologically, on the basis of three characteristics: transcendence, eternity, and divinity. This is, then, a second important issue to note because it points to a clear theological underpinning of the concept. Youth is transcendent because Benjamin conceptualizes it as an unmalleable inner human essence, separated from all worldly demands. To “faithfully serve the true spirit” or “true” human core is to remain above all transitory historical or social settings.[[26]](#footnote-27) Youth, one may say, transcends worldliness.[[27]](#footnote-28)

Benjamin’s short essay “The Life of the Students” could serve as an example to illustrate this last point.[[28]](#footnote-29) The text opens with a clear differentiation between two historical approaches: first, a “view of history” that is concerned with the ways in which “people and epochs advance along the path of progress”, and second Benjamin’s analysis of history that aims at grasping a “metaphysical structure, as with the messianic domain or the idea of the French Revolution.”[[29]](#footnote-30) Though embedded within history, such a “metaphysical structure” lies beyond its historical appearances and different manifestations. It is also separated from any historical notion of “progress” and advancement. In referring to a redemptive “domain” (that of messianism) or to an “idea” of an historical event (rather than to the event itself) it contains for Benjamin a certain “spiritual” essence that points to a double meaning – the logic of history, but also and more importantly, a differentiated inner core that transcends the social and historical.

This separation between history and its “spiritual” essence informs Benjamin’s distinction between true and false education, central to his “The Life of the Students.” Benjamin clearly distinguishes between academic “vocational training” and an autonomous student “spirit.”[[30]](#footnote-31) True education, for Benjamin, is about “living and working s*ub specie aeternitatis*,” a reference to Spinoza that he reiterates in a range of texts from this time.[[31]](#footnote-32) Echoing neo-romantic notions in particular, Benjamin represents true education as an “erotic” and “creative” core that “cannot be captured in terms of the pragmatic description of details (the history of institutions, customs, and so on)” but rather “eludes them.”[[32]](#footnote-33) The true “spirit” of education here relates to an imagined human essence that escapes history. Its fulfilment is not aligned with the historical process, and though it could be distilled from a certain social context (for example that of the students in Wilhelmian Germany) it marks an essence that lies beyond social conditions. What Benjamin then calls the “perversion” of universities lies in their attempt to transform “the creative spirit into the vocational spirit.”[[33]](#footnote-34) Conversely, Benjamin pleads for “a hazardous self-dedication to learning and youth.”[[34]](#footnote-35) “All these institutions,” argues Benjamin,

are nothing but a marketplace for the preliminary and provisional, […], they are simply there to fill the empty waiting time, diversions from the voice that summons them to build their lives with a unified spirit of creative action, Eros, and youth.[[35]](#footnote-36)

There is therefore a conflict between social institutions and the inner calling of “Eros and youth.”[[36]](#footnote-37) As Benjamin explains in a letter to Carla Seligson, Eros for him combines Platonic heavenly desire with Christ’s “Kingdom of God.”[[37]](#footnote-38) It connects a passionate desire for self-formation (*Bildung)* with self-elevation to the divine realm of truth, beauty, and totality.[[38]](#footnote-39) This entwining of youth with Platonic and Christian symbolism was a central theme in his fragment “Socrates.”[[39]](#footnote-40) Figuratively, self-formation of the individual (according to the concept of *Bildung*) appears as a re-enactment of the Socratic winged chariot in its trajectory of returning to the dominion of the divine, albeit in the Christian redemptive sense. Youth resonates in such a way with a *theia* *mania* (divine madness),and human life is thus re-enchanted.

Pedagogically, such a re-enchantment of human existence is not about learning a specific curriculum that prepares the young person for a productive and meaningful life in modern German society and culture; it is instead about transcending this curriculum. As the next chapter of this book covers, half a century later, Adorno returns to these notions in his own take on education from the 1960s. In Benjamin’s early vocabulary, an educational mission offers “the Eros of creativity” over against “bourgeois security.”[[40]](#footnote-41) For Benjamin, this radical approach takes the Humboldtian kind of “freedom,” with which Benjamin was familiar, to its logical end – a *Freiheit zum Grunde*, which is a conclusive form of freedom from all types of limiting actions.[[41]](#footnote-42)

If transcendence signifies Eros and self-fulfillment, it also aims at the “Kingdom of God.” This reference to the divine points to a second theological aspect of Benjamin’s concept of youth. His notion of youth and the sacred realm are interwoven, and transcendence seeks the divine. The combination of human existence and divine presence was central to Benjamin’s theory of language of that time.[[42]](#footnote-43) His much discussed 1916 fragment “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (*Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*), for example, underlines the “communion” of human language “with the *creative* word of God.”[[43]](#footnote-44) This is a rich text that encompasses a wide range of issues and themes that lie, however, beyond the scope of the discussion offered here. The relevant point to note is that especially in the text’s explicit reflections on the Bible, the communion between language and the divine “word” (also: logos) is seen as a form of “immanent magic” that represents a mythical moment of creation and revelation, providing language with its logic.[[44]](#footnote-45) The creative word of God enables human language to operate but also remains an “un-*mediated*” element that elevates the “*gift* of language” above nature.[[45]](#footnote-46) The aim of using written language, writes Benjamin to Buber, is therefore:

to lead the reader toward that which escapes the world; only when this non-verbal realm is opened up in its pure, inexpressible power, can the magic spark fly between word and motivating deed to the point of unity between these two equal realities.[[46]](#footnote-47)

What “escapes the world” is the divine word that represents a “non-verbal realm” and opens up to the human being who may then share “the same language in which God is the creator.”[[47]](#footnote-48)

Such a prelapsarian connection between humans and God is encapsulated in the human ability to “name” things. In pointing to this human competence, Benjamin relates to the biblical myth in which Adam “gave names” to all living creatures (Genesis 2:19). Hannah Arendt’s later remark that it was “not Plato but Adam, who named things” seems to relate to Benjamin’s theory of language since for him “God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge.”[[48]](#footnote-49) In human naming, then, there is a transformation – but also a “fall” – of the divine “word’ into human knowledge, which means “the translation of the nameless into name.”[[49]](#footnote-50) Translation denotes at this point a migration of divine elements into the profane realm of this worldliness. The translation in human language, however, does not entail the classification, grouping, or identification of objects that may serve as a common ground for human communication. “Naming”, in this sense, is not “a means to an end”; nor is it to be understood as a “way for people to converse.”[[50]](#footnote-51) Rather, “naming” for Benjamin is about a form of creation, a way for humans to touch upon a divine pure essence, which they share. Language is thus “Name” (*Sprache ist Namen*)in the Hebrew sense of relating to God (Hashem, which literally means “the name”). Scholem’s famous 1926 “confession” (sent to the moribund Franz Rosenzweig) resonates with this point rather well. Language, writes Scholem, “is Name” and in the name “the power of the sacred speaks out.”[[51]](#footnote-52)

Benjamin’s theory of youth runs along similar lines. Youth represents the presence of the divine within a transcendent human (spiritual) essence. In youth, as in the “name”, the sacred speaks out. In this sense, youth points to a certain human divine essence. We are dealing, then, with “youth by the grace of God.”[[52]](#footnote-53) The human being has a divine “spiritual” – or youthful – core; an element that the human being incorporates and may experience, but that, in its referring to God, escapes classification. Like language, youth represents a creative, divine, transcendent, element which the human being incorporates, may experience, but cannot grasp.

Following divinity, eternity is the last main aspect in Benjamin’s theological conceptualization of youth. For Benjamin, youth also relates to eternity, because it is in touch with the divine realm that cannot be grasped in terms of human experience in the world.[[53]](#footnote-54) Denoted by *Kairos*, youth-time is the “now” (*Jetztzeit*), or, better, represents the eternal-now moment.[[54]](#footnote-55) Benjamin reiterates a distinction between two concepts of time: the flow of time that characterizes this worldliness, and the other, removed, transcendent-eternal time of youth. Thus, for example, in “The Life of the Students,” understanding such “life” means for Benjamin thinking in terms of its everlasting, eternal nature.[[55]](#footnote-56) Here, the distinction between two concepts of time appears in the form of a separation between the time of history and that of youthful eternity.

In temporal terms, youth may denote, then, what contemporary sociologists had termed “moratorium” – a time in which all social laws, regulations, and duties are suspended by the young person.[[56]](#footnote-57) The point is worth mentioning, because it may provide a sociological explanation to Benjamin’s theory of youth. Yet Benjamin does not seem to be thinking here in sociological terms. Nor is he focusing on a psychology of youth as merely a break from infancy in anticipation of adulthood – as “a period of preparation” or a “period of waiting for marriage and a profession.”[[57]](#footnote-58) Rather, Benjamin aims at articulating the relation between eternity and temporality, informed by a theological association between divinity and eternity. The suspension of world-time points to such a theological aspect of Benjamin’s theory of youth exactly because it denotes for him the true divine time that lies beyond historical linearity; it echoes a religious dualism between transcendence and immanence; and it is meant to play on the gnostic themes of redemption and fall.[[58]](#footnote-59)

2. **Mystical Allegories**

a. “Young man, I tell you, stand up!”

Transcendence, divinity and eternity point to the theological imagination invested in Benjamin’s theory of youth. This imagination should be regarded, more particularly, as mystical. In order to make sense of the type of mystical thought that informed Benjamin’s symbolism, it would be helpful to consider Meister Eckhart’s writings, not just because of their strong mystical tone, but also because of what could be viewed as Eckhart’s own theory of youth.

Eckhart was a Dominican priest who served as the first provincial of Saxony and as vicar general of Bohemia in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. He was condemned, posthumously, for heresy by Pope John XXII (who himself was later accused for holding unorthodox views).[[59]](#footnote-60) Eckhart’s “unorthodox” views were mainly rooted in mysticism, and the accusations brought against him stemmed from the connections drawn between his mysticism and heresy. His accusers traced their suspicion back to his main work, *The Book of Divine Comfort* (1308), along with a range of “German sermons” composed in *Mittelhochdeutsch*, which were considered his most explicit mystical writings. These various texts were singled out as “spreading dangerous doctrines among the common people.”[[60]](#footnote-61)

The importance of these mystical writings for the discussion of Benjamin’s theory of youth lies in their modern reception. As Ingeburg Dengenhardt’s pivotal study has shown, Eckhart’s mystical writings received particular attention among intellectuals at the turn of the nineteenth century, when mysticism was once again “in the air.”[[61]](#footnote-62) In the nineteenth century especially, Eckhart was credited with being not only “the father of German mysticism” but also “the father of German idealism.”[[62]](#footnote-63) In 1857 Franz Pfeiffer published the first modern edition of Eckhart’s sermons, treatises, and lectures, which prompted a growing interest in Eckhart, culminating in 1903 with the appearance of two new German editions of the mystic-theologian’s writings – Gustav Landauer’s *Meister* *Eckharts Mystische Schriften* and Hermann Büttner’s *Meister Eckeharts Schriften und Predigten*, the latter being the more comprehensive and influential of the two.[[63]](#footnote-64) Eckhart’s impact was then visible in a wide range of literary, poetic, intellectual and scholarly outputs, as well as in the formation of völkischaspirations and in the rhetoric of German nationalism.[[64]](#footnote-65)

Eckhart’s mystical writings presented modern enthusiastic readers no less than Middle-Ages excommunicators with a theologically explosive substance. His allegorical interpretations of biblical texts were central and presented the birth of Christ not as an historical affair, but as an allegory for the manner in which God can potentially “awaken” his “son” in every human soul. The “son” becomes an emblem for a transcendent ground or the essence of the soul that can be “awakened” from slumber by the “father.” Jesus thus provides an allegory for the divine “son” within us all. Here, Eckhart adopted the formula of the “son” in the “soul” (underlined in the condemnatory bull of John XXII) to express the relationship between God and the human being, interpreted not historically but mystically.[[65]](#footnote-66) This relation is the fruit of a fusion between the rejection of worldliness and the move towards inner human experience which, through being “united” with God, transcends this world.[[66]](#footnote-67)

In Eckhart’s thinking, the image of an awakened “son” was symbolized by youth. Youth, therefore, marked an important aspect of the idea of divine presence embedded within human experience. He accentuated this last point in numerous sermons that became accessible through Pfeiffer’s collection and partly through Büttner’s translation.[[67]](#footnote-68) In three of these sermons, Eckhart focuses in particular on an episode from the gospels in which Jesus comes across a “widow” whose only son has died. As the coffin is carried forth, Jesus touches it and cries: “Young man, I tell you, stand up!” (Adolescens, tibi dico: surge! Luke 7:14).

Eckhart reads this passage as an allegory in which Jesus is seen to underline the divine, transcendent and eternal characteristics of being young. Here, there are three points to note. First, the text is charged with symbolic meaning. According to Eckhart, the widow represents the human soul devoid of God.[[68]](#footnote-69) The young man stands for the “son” or the (divine) essence of the soul – “the highest intellect” – that “can receive the divine light” and thus be awakened by God.[[69]](#footnote-70) Youth is where the soul is “Godlike: *there* she is an image of God.”[[70]](#footnote-71) And Eckhart comments:

Why did he say ‘young man’? […] ‘Young man’: All the powers that belong to the soul do not age […] Therefore, ‘Young man.’ The masters call ‘young’ that which is close to its beginning. In the intellect man is ever young […] Now he says, ‘Young man, arise.’ What does it mean ‘arise’? ‘Arise’ from the work, and let the soul ‘arise’ in herself![[71]](#footnote-72)

If ‘youth’ represents the divine within the soul, it also transcends this worldliness. It connects the “now,” the divine spoken word (“he says”), a command (“arise”), and youth – all are but elements of an inner development (an awakening, as it were) within the human “soul.”

A second point to note is that Eckhart’s symbolism involves images of femininity and masculinity. Elliot Wolfson for example pointed well to the significance of such images in Christian and Jewish mysticism.[[72]](#footnote-73) In Eckhart’s variation, the soul is presented as a “widow” while the young core within is seen as a virile “son.” Eckhart, then, does not only see youth as transcendent and divine, but also imagine it as masculine. Yet, while for Eckhart the figure of youth is masculine, he presents also an exchange between such a masculine characteristic of the soul and its feminine aspect. This exchange stands for the “intellect” or the “citadel” of the soul that enables its evolution.[[73]](#footnote-74) Thus, for him the soul is “virginal” (*Jungfrau* – also suggestive of a young woman) when it is free from “alien images.”[[74]](#footnote-75) It elevates itself to the position of “bearing fruit” and evolves into a “wife” only on being suffused with the “young man.”[[75]](#footnote-76)

Finally, youth is eternal. In Eckhart’s account, youth is the faculty of the human being that “touches neither time nor flesh”, otherwise defined as the “eternal now.”[[76]](#footnote-77) In her dissertation, Hannah Arendt argued that this “eternal now” was also St. Augustine’s conception of divine time, as distinct from the future-past linearity of this worldliness.[[77]](#footnote-78) This is true also of Eckhart. For him, in particular, the “eternal now” also denoted being young, corresponding to the notion of the “eternal life” of the soul.[[78]](#footnote-79) It is where the soul is “free from time” which means that it remains transcendent and separated from the world.[[79]](#footnote-80) There is here, it seems, a dualism between the eternal-divine and the temporal-worldly. This central theological trope, however, is reframed by Eckhart’s introduction of an eternal presence within the human experience. The godly-eternal is located with the young core of the human being, which remains therefore “free” and in this sense withdrawn from worldly affairs. Arguably, the location of the divine within the human ensures the possibility of salvation by means of a human regression into the innermost sublime, eternal-young, alien core. This also means that the retreat to the self rather than a connection to the world characterizes the redemptive feature of Eckhart’s mystical theory of youth.

Read through the prism of Eckhart’s allegories, in the mystical Christian tradition the essence of the human being is viewed as eternally young, and as such resides in a unity with the divine. In this way, youth guarantees salvation. It could be argued that such a theory of youth also points to the manner in which human time and worldly time are disconnected, because the first entails a divine presence, while the second is discussed in the wake of its absence. Whereas the divine remains forever young, the worldly is transitory, temporary and decadent. This also helps to explain why youth represents an inner core that cannot be grasped or articulated by the human being in any given way. To put it differently, for Eckhart youth represents a nothing, or a *nihil*. One of the celebrated aspects of Eckhart’s mysticism, nothingness is not specifically identified with the notion of complete emptiness. Rather, it underlines an ideal demesne that is categorically foreign to us because it lies beyond our capacities to understand, know or imagine, and even eludes any notion of nothingness that we may have. In this sense, nothingness indicates a completely transcendent, alien, not-of-this-world, free, youthful form of being.

b. The Metaphysics of Youth

It is useful to address the manner in which Benjamin’s theory of youth incorporated a reworking of such mystical allegories. Benjamin probably became familiar with Eckhart’s writings long before he enriched his personal library with a copy of Eckhart’s sermons.[[80]](#footnote-81) In using the pseudonym “Eckhart. phil” for his 1912 essay “School Reform: A Cultural Movement” he made clear, at the very least, his awareness of Eckhart. The main issue, however, is not whether Benjamin was directly influenced by Eckhart’s theory of youth, but rather in what manner he was precociously attuned to the type of mysticism that Eckhart’s writings exemplified. As presented above, Benjamin’s concept of youth reiterated notions of transcendence within a human spiritual core, the eternal-present, and the numinous unity with the divine realm that are central to the mystical imagination. In the same vein, his understanding of youth as an emblem of free experience, or better, the fundamental experience of being free, radiated mysticism because it reflected the same metaphors – like “awakening,” the “alien” soul, and the “divine” essence of “youth.” This does not mean that Benjamin’s articulation of youth did not bring together a wide range of other influences, including the contributions not only of romantics like Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schelling but also of early modern philosophers such as Spinoza and contemporaneous thinkers like Bergson. However, the mystical symbolism relating to the numinous unity with the divine, or to the “awakening” of the soul, became a central characteristic for Benjamin through his allusion to this range of influences (mainly German romanticism), or, perhaps more accurately, through his presentation of these textual and historical traditions with their theological common denominator.[[81]](#footnote-82)

Perhaps the most striking text into which Benjamin engraved his reworking of mystical allegories was “The Metaphysics of Youth.” The essay was written between 1913 and 1914, and according to Gershom Scholem it was left unfinished.[[82]](#footnote-83) As Steizinger points out, the text aimed at explicating the concept of “youth” in a way that integrated the prevalent themes from various other texts that Benjamin had written prior to that point.[[83]](#footnote-84) It did so, however, by employing a highly enigmatic style, which resists systematic scrutiny.[[84]](#footnote-85) Consequently, its value to an understanding of Benjamin’s philosophy, rather than poetics, remains heavily debated.

The style and content, nonetheless, seem to be useful to a more detailed analysis of Benjamin’s mystical orientation. At its core, the text describes a range of ordinary experiences from everyday life – dancing, conversing with friends, writing a diary, plus addressing sexual desire in venues that were then fairly common to members of the young bourgeoisie. Benjamin, however, does not wish to relate to this range of everyday experiences plainly. Rather, he opens with a call to his readers – most probably the circle of friends among whom the text was circulated – to decrypt the “uncomprehended symbolism” that “enslaves us” in our everyday life.[[85]](#footnote-86) This opening statement, together with Hölderlin’s poem, which Benjamin selected as a motto for his text, resonates well with Benjamin’s quest to understand the student’s life “as a metaphor, as an image of the highest metaphysical state of history.”[[86]](#footnote-87)

The reading of everyday life “as a metaphor” presents the issue at stake here. Can we not argue that it reflects a tension between the description of mundane experiences characteristic of youth (dancing, writing a diary, conversing with friends) and the elevation of these activities to an allegoric, and for Benjamin profound, order? Benjamin, arguably, reads life allegorically. As Talal Asad observed, for Benjamin allegory became “the appropriate mode for apprehending this world.”[[87]](#footnote-88) Such an “apprehending” of the world means that mundane experiences are seen as symbolic reflections of more abstract, metaphysical themes, raising these everyday experiences “onto a higher plane.”[[88]](#footnote-89)

It is this allegoric mechanism that is highly relevant to Benjamin’s metaphysic of youth. Indeed, taking on Benjamin’s call to engage with the text’s symbolism seems to be particularly fruitful in gaining insights into its interplay with mysticism. The text has three sections, labeled “Conversation,” “Diary” and “Ball.” Read allegorically, the first (conversation) explores youth mainly in terms of language and gender; the second (diary) conceptualizes youth in reference to time and temporality; the third (ball) may be seen as focusing on space and transcendence.

Benjamin’s “conversation” relates to language and gender because it is composed of an interaction between a “speaker” (appearing rather bluntly as “he”) and a “listener” (referred to as “she”) who also stand for masculinity and femininity, respectively.[[89]](#footnote-90) Here, Benjamin expands on a variety of rather challenging concepts, like “genius” and its counterpart “prostitute” (*Dirne*), manhood (*Mannheit*) and its feminine (*Weiblich*) equal. These, however, could be seen as symbols of an inner human experience – partly carried over from German romanticism – and not as references to individuals or social categories.[[90]](#footnote-91) They point to what Paul North called “a silent conversation in the soul.”[[91]](#footnote-92) As such, speaker and listener, masculinity and femininity, are aspects of the human soul, engaged in the elusive instigation of truth and meaning.

Thus, the speaker “receives meaning” from the “silent” listener, who is “the unappropriated source of meaning.”[[92]](#footnote-93) In this case the “source of meaning” – eventually what youth should stand for – is located in an experience (which Benjamin calls “silence”) that cannot be appropriated or grasped by the language of conversation. “Silence” in this particular way seems to be reminiscent of “the name” that Benjamin evokes in his theory of language. Such a connection is possible, since Benjamin terms silence as “the internal frontier of conversation” which he relates to the eternal and to the true, spiritual and divine essence.[[93]](#footnote-94) Like “the name”, silence points to a conversation that cannot appropriate its divine source which it nonetheless shares. It is through silence, perhaps, that the divine speaks out. It then becomes a paean for the fall of language in echoing “the name” which has been “lost” through its modes of operation.[[94]](#footnote-95) Here, and somewhat preceding his thoughts on language, Benjamin’s allegory presents the lost divine origin as the “source of meaning,” which also corresponds to the innate feminine essence of the masculine (*Sein Weiblich-Gewesenes*).[[95]](#footnote-96) It is possible, therefore, to see the variety of propositions relating to the woman who according to Benjamin “protects meaning from understanding” or who is referred to as “the guardian of conversation,” as allegories for the unappropriated source of meaning, which is innate in the human soul.

These are not random images. For Eckhart, being mute (*ohne Laut*), for example, characterizes the “original experience” (*ursprüngliche Erfahrung*) beyond understanding.[[96]](#footnote-97) In Benjamin’s adaptation of the idea, the focus on experiencing a moment beyond understanding is decisive. The enigmatic character of the text that Benjamin composes, for example, could be seen as intended to break with understanding. As in Eckhart’s mysticism, the source of meaning is internal, located within the human unmediated experience and points to an embedded transcendence of sorts.

The reading of Benjamin’s essay against the background of its mystical sources, could be relevant also of his application of masculine and feminine symbols, although these have a more elusive, abstruse appearance in the text. The feminine aspect that Benjamin plays with relates to two of the missions apparent in Eckhart’s writings. For example, the dialogue between the two figures Benjamin calls a “prostitute” and a “genius” may be taken as symbolizing the human soul devoid of the divine presence of “greatness”, and youth.[[97]](#footnote-98) Because of this lacuna “greatness has no claim upon her, for greatness comes to an end when confronted by her.”[[98]](#footnote-99) In playing with mystical symbolism, Benjamin’s “prostitute” echoes, arguably, human existence devoid of God (Eckhardt calls this the “widow”), in opposition to the so-called “virginity” of the spiritual soul.[[99]](#footnote-100) However, the feminine aspect (*weiblich*) of the soul marks, concurrently, the opportunity – the conditions, as it were – for human beings to touch upon their inner youthful and divine essence. Woman, therefore, is where the human “receives the silence.”[[100]](#footnote-101) The soul is, to begin with, feminine, in alignment with a long mystical tradition that, as mentioned above, has both Christian and Jewish variants. It appears, however, as part of the masculine, and as in Eckhart’s mysticism “the female is comprised in the male.”[[101]](#footnote-102) In being “the female of man” – in the words of Eliot Wolfson – woman is “the guardian of conversation,” the structural conditions, as it were, for the rise of “the youth of mysterious conversation.”[[102]](#footnote-103)

The second section of Benjamin’s text, the “Diary” (*Tagebuch*), explicitly engages with the question “in what time do men live?”[[103]](#footnote-104) It aims, then, at rethinking the same issues of youth, divinity, human existence and transcendence in terms of time and temporality.[[104]](#footnote-105) In his answer, Benjamin articulates two forms of time in which the human being lives. The first stands for the past-future linearity of this worldliness, and whose human characteristics are “mortality”, “emptiness”, “hopelessness” and loss of meaning.[[105]](#footnote-106) Like in Heidegger’s *Being and Time,* and preceding it, existence is articulated by Benjamin as a living towards death.[[106]](#footnote-107) Indicating finitude, death also stands for being empty, hopeless, and devoid of meaning.

Over against this “emptiness of time”, however, there is the second “eternal,” “youthful,” “true” and “immortal” time: “That time, our essence, is the immortality in which others die.”[[107]](#footnote-108) Eternity, here, marks a characteristic of youth and its “immortality” stands against the finitude that is associated with the temporality of this worldliness. Benjamin thus contrasts world-time (mortal, empty, moving towards death) and eternal-time (youthful, true, immortal).

As a “book of time” the diary points to the possible “act of liberation” from this worldly temporality (characterized by the “living towards death”) and the entering of the eternal-time. As “pure time” it suspends worldly temporality by the very experience of “timelessness” and “the birth of immortal time.”[[108]](#footnote-109) Against the “calendar time, clock time, and stock-exchange time,” where “no ray of immortality casts its light over the self,” the diary embodies the potential for the emergence of its opposite when “an ‘I’ that we know only from our diaries stands on the brink of an immortality into which it plunges.”[[109]](#footnote-110) Here, the “immortal” time stands on the other side of world-time. It penetrates world-time in the form of an “interval” (*Abstand* – to be read as “distance” too). Such an “interval” also represents “the diary’s silence” showing how the source of meaning is put in temporal terms.[[110]](#footnote-111) A diary becomes a symbol for the eternal-present youth, a point which also demonstrates the extent to which Benjamin’s accentuation of the interval as “pure time” relates to his overall theory of youth.

The stark distinction between the eternal and timeless on the one hand and linear and worldly on the other hand should command our attention. Because of this distinction between what Hans Blumenberg called life-time (*Lebenszeit*) and world-time (*Weltzeit*), a dualism of the kind expressed by Eckhart remains here a sound basis for Benjamin’s thoughts. As a “ray of immortality” the eternal may pierce into this worldliness and in this sense it is of a different constitution; as a suspending “interval” it cannot act through this worldliness or, better, cannot act by its means. The image that Benjamin seems to evoke relates to a certain act of penetration: eternity may erupt, disturb, suspend the other temporality, but cannot be reconciled or combined with it. Rather, it remains alien to it.

Benjamin seems to propose what Harry Jansen called “incarnated” time, which rejects rather than accepts a Hegelian conceptualization of the cunning of history, in which the advent of the divine-eternal is fulfilled by the workings of the worldly-temporal.[[111]](#footnote-112) To put it more polemically, Benjamin advocates not the advent of transcendent reason through history but rather its implosive eruption in history and against it. There is, then, the constant potential for salvation, for divine time may always, and at any given moment, implode in history. Though always present, and possible, however, this potential remains out of human control and beyond historical reach.

It should also be noted how, at this point, the mystic theme of “awakening” (*erwachen*) becomes meaningful to Benjamin.[[112]](#footnote-113) Ansgar Hillach rightly suggested that for Benjamin a concept of “awakening” is informed by a “utopian movement of the spirit.”[[113]](#footnote-114) Within the context of the diary, this utopian movement maintains the meaning of “resurrection” of the self “for immortality can be found only in death, and time rises up at the end of time.”[[114]](#footnote-115) Benjamin explicitly connects his concept of time with the “awakening” of the human being, in the same way that Eckhart talks of the redemptive awakening of the “son” embedded within each of us.[[115]](#footnote-116) The utopian movement relates in such a way to a mystical imagination. The trope of “awakening youth” seems, therefore, to be not just about obtaining self-consciousness. More profoundly, it represents for Benjamin the mission of the “new religion” in which “the spirit of youth will awaken in *all*.” In other words, it is the mystical opening up of “a spiritual reality.”[[116]](#footnote-117) “Awakening”, writes Benjamin under the pseudonym Eckhart.phil, “…is a consciousness of the unconditional value, the gaiety and seriousness of this new youth.”[[117]](#footnote-118)

Shifting the focus from time to space, the last section of the text, entitled “Ball”, could be seen as the succinct culmination of these discussions. Benjamin takes the example of a prom night to symbolize “a space for Elysium, the paradise that joins the isolated into a round dance.”[[118]](#footnote-119) In the allegory, this heavenly space of interaction between man and woman is where “we are truly in a house without windows, and a ballroom without world.”[[119]](#footnote-120)

We are dealing here, it seems, with a free space (i.e. free from external reality). One may argue that there is an image of immanent freedom on display that denotes the joining together of the different forces of our mental lives, which are part of the inner conversation of the soul. Youth is associated in this way with complete freedom and implies – one could say – a room of one’s own. It stands for a singularity in which “time is captured”, located not in the outer universe but rather within our inner experience – on the other side of the “outside world.”[[120]](#footnote-121)

Described from a mystical perspective, this singularity depicts the numinous unity of opposites. In alignment with mystical symbolism, the mysterious unity of opposites is embodied in Benjamin’s poetics by the joining together of the virile and feminine aspects of the human inner experience that was explored in the first part of his text.[[121]](#footnote-122) The “ball” culminates in such a unifying “dance” and thus dovetails with the potential of salvation – existing, but beyond reach; celebrated, but out of sight.

There is, then, a reiteration of mystical allegories that can be observed in the three sections of “The Metaphysics of Youth.” Jean-Luc Nancy pointed out – in quoting Meister Eckhart – that this type of mysticism brings the “nothing” into the center of “the world.” We are returning, then, to the notion of “nothing”, as presented in Eckhart’s mystical allegories. Such a notion represents that which eludes all possible articulations, presentations or imagination of divinity. For Nancy it is about praying to God to make us “free of God” (in keeping with Eckhart’s famous appeal).[[122]](#footnote-123) The act of awakening, according to Nancy, affirms an inner freedom, a pure spiritual singularity, beyond the possible, and as an imagined limitless limit that only nothing – *nihil* – can represent.[[123]](#footnote-124) Such an affirmation of nothing looks “where time and place have never entered” that is “beyond time, in eternity.”[[124]](#footnote-125)

Similarly, an affirmation of the nothing that remains is what Benjamin seems to be driving at. Youth, in this sense, depicts a pure, uncontaminated, not-of-this world, original, creating being. This being is truly transcendent to the extent that it contains no substance that could be captured by any form or articulation; it is truly divine if it is fundamentally detached from the world while remaining its creative force; eternal only in being non-temporal; existing in its non-existence; realized by not being realized.

Benjamin’s notion of nothingness did not go unnoticed. Gershom Scholem for example saw in it the most profound element in Benjamin’s work, placing him at the heart of Jewish mystical and messianic thought.[[125]](#footnote-126) The “nothingness of revelation” – as Scholem later termed it in a letter to Benjamin in 1934 – is an integral part of the Jewish mystical and Kabbalistic interpretations of redemption.[[126]](#footnote-127) It pointed to “the potential for redemption” that is embedded in every present moment; a fulfillment of time that is redemptive and therefore signifies the end of time. “This idea of fulfilled time,” wrote Benjamin, “appears in the Bible as its dominant historical idea: the messianic time.”[[127]](#footnote-128) To emphasize this, Benjamin at one point played with the Jewish concept of “*schechinnah*” which he articulated as the symbol of divine potency embedded in the world.[[128]](#footnote-129)

But especially within the theory of youth, Benjamin’s approach to Messianism is not exclusively based on one single source.[[129]](#footnote-130) The messianic undertones of Benjamin’s theory of youth present, perhaps, more of an admixture of Christian and Jewish mystical sources, or, to follow Elliot Wolfson, a deep rooted area of thought in which both sources concur – “Christian ethics (or Jewish ethics, if you will)” as Benjamin rather cunningly put it (the proposition “or” signifying affinity, not differentiation).[[130]](#footnote-131) Thus for example the “messianic time” is redolent of the type of allegories that Eckhart expressed in particular because it is not about divine involvement in and through history, but rather the breaking of, indeed the suspension of, its engagement with historical time. In messianic terms, the youthful “time of the now” represents a nothingness that can occur only as an “extra-historical” event within history.[[131]](#footnote-132) It can be fulfilled in history, one may suggest, only by not being historically fulfilled. It is in such a way, however, that Messianism involves what could be termed a tensions of constant expectation. As in the Jewish tradition, a fulfillment of time is not so much concerned with the transformation of eschatological time into historical progress; instead, it symbolizes a break from history, or else the possibility of a rupture within history.[[132]](#footnote-133)

**3. True Criticism**

a. A Critique of Theology

Youth, however, is not only a theological concept. It is also a critical category. We are returning here to the manner in which Benjamin’s theory of youth points to the relation of critique to theology. Benjamin’s “metaphysics of youth” does not only depict the most intimate stances of the mystical mystery: the fortress of the soul, unity with the beyond, femininity and eternity, nothingness and the fulfillment of time – all are indeed part of the young Benjamin’s enthusiastic – perhaps too enthusiastic – imaginaries. It also brings the mystical allegories to bear on his social criticism.

Critique is already a central concept in Benjamin’s early writings. The points is made for example by Richard Wolin who argues that for the young Benjamin, taking a “critical” approach means exercising understanding and in so doing gaining knowledge in accordance with the tradition of the enlightenment.[[133]](#footnote-134) From such a point of view, Benjamin’s critical thinking (like Freud’s) mainly includes charting the sources (*Quellen*), scope (*Umfang*) and boundaries (*Grenzen*) of its object, while at the same time “removing” all possible “errors” “independently of all experience” *(unabhängig von aller Erfahrung*).[[134]](#footnote-135)

But especially in his theory of youth Benjamin articulates such independency from “all experience” in a unique way: A liberation from all social and historical circumstances. “The sole aim of criticism” is then “…by means of knowledge, to liberate the future from its deformation in the present.”[[135]](#footnote-136) Bernd Witte rightly pointed out that this particular passage presents for the first time Benjamin’s emphasis on critical thinking and its meaning.[[136]](#footnote-137) “True criticism” means an “exposing” of a pure and hidden “inner nature” from its entrapment in present historical and social circumstances.[[137]](#footnote-138) Liberation from errors and independency from all experiences denotes such an act of liberation. Arguably, the object of critique (the “essence” that needs to be released) appears in the form of a “future” potency because it resists an already existing social and historical reality. What Benjamin seems to point to is an act of liberation (and in this sense exposure of a hidden potential) that resonates with a distancing from any of its manifestations that are expressed in society and over history. “Independency” from experience in this sense means a departure from all manifestations of social and historical conditioning. This is not about emancipating concepts from particular historical, material, or social circumstances, but from worldly circumstances as such.

This last point may explain why Benjamin articulates critique in temporal terms. He simply perceives experience as historical experience, misuse as past articulation, and a “purified” concept as a “pure” potency that endures the transience of temporality. This, however, does not imply an advancement of reason in history because the potency that Benjamin evokes transcends all historical appearances, even if embedded in history. As a way of freeing its object from any pre-existing conditioning, critique, for Benjamin, stands for the liberation of the pure essence of a certain concept or idea from enslaving worldly circumstances. One may than argue that the “tutelage” of the “other”, that Kant had in mind when encapsulating his idea of freedom, denotes here worldliness. In the same vein, a “cleaning up” of the “completely overgrown” ground may mean the liberation of a “pure” concept from its former worldly appearances – also to be understood as a liberation from all possible circumstances, whereby some imagined pure essence is freed, not from a particular misuse, but from any of its former binding articulations. “True Criticism” is therefore about liberation from all worldly conditions.

Youth stands for such an act of critique. If anything, being young represents for Benjamin freedom in this exact sense. A spiritual core of the human being, beyond understanding and articulation, youth indicated an arena of pure deliverance from all worldly social and historical conditions. Youth is thus a critical category, releasing a potency of the human being that transcends all existing distortions. This is not just to say that youth is an object of study for Benjamin’s analysis, but that it epitomizes for him the notion of liberation from present “deformations” and that corresponds to a release or a discharge of a pure inner human “nature” from social and historical entrapment.

This act of liberation, however, exposes an inner surreptitious truth that Benjamin understands theologically. This point is crucial because the pure, youthful, fundamental of the human being that escapes the world, is transcendent, eternal and divine. What is liberated from the different material or worldly appearances, by means of critique, is the godly constituent of human existence. Especially here, critique seems to be much more than an analysis that brings about understanding, as Wolin would argue. It also comprises a release of a “pure”, divine, young core from the tutelage endowed by all its former, one may say enslaving, circumstances. It could be then said that Benjamin expands on the notion of liberation (from “errors” and from “all experience”) that formed part of Kant’s definition of critique. This liberation, however, now includes a theological argumentation about a release of an eternal and transcendent “spirit” from the immanent worldly reality.

Can we not argue, then, that “true criticism” is starkly informed by the mystical notion of liberation, central to the concept of youth? What enables such a conjecture about critique and mysticism is that Benjamin’s critique presents a mechanism of liberation of a hidden, “pure”, element from its materiality, and such an idea can be traced back to its theological, and in Benjamin’s case mystical, sources. To put it differently, critique is about “awakening”: informed by mystical categories of transcendence, eternity and divinity it aims at a deliverance of an imagined spiritual core from all possible worldly conditions. As in the mystical allegories of youth, there is a pure essence to be salvaged from its enslavement, and critique presents the manner in which this act of deliverance can be addressed. Articulating “true criticism” as a form of “exposing” the “inner nature” of a certain object means that there is always some eternal essence to be liberated from its range of worldly, and in this sense deformed, appearances.

The association between critique, release from worldliness and deliverance seems to characterize many of Benjamin’s references to critique in his early writings. His speaking of critique in terms of the “decomposing” of a particular substance may present one salient example. This is no doubt a somewhat opaque chemical metaphor. But it refers to the release of a matter’s imagined essence from its own materiality. Indeed, what could be more suggestive of Benjamin’s theological articulation of critique than the metaphor of the extraction of the genuine, original essence of a matter from its concrete, worldly, and in this sense non-genuine material appearance?

Benjamin’s somewhat associative allusion to humor and laughter may offer another example. The trope of humor is quite different than that of decomposing matter, but Benjamin’s argument seems to be comparable. The point to note is that the “distinguishing between the genuine and the non-genuine” – which is the task of criticism – constitutes the concern of humor. Thus:

only in humor can language be critical. The particular critical magic then appears, so that the counterfeit substance comes into contact with the light; it disintegrates. The genuine remains: it is ash. We laugh about it.[[138]](#footnote-139)

Not very far removed from Freud’s theory of jokes (though without arguing that Benjamin was necessarily aware of it), criticism acts as a form of revelation. As in the case of the metaphor of decomposing, what is revealed is some “genuine” essence in the form of a residue or “ash.” Laughter simply erupts when a surreptitious truth is revealed as Freud argued. And for Benjamin as well, all this relates to “the metaphysical origin of a Talmudic witticism [that] comes to mind here.”[[139]](#footnote-140) Nonetheless, the difference between Benjamin and Freud is also noticeable. Unlike the turning of the law against itself for the purpose of supporting its composition, so central to Freud, Benjamin’s critique suggests a full retreat from any such conformation. For him, the essence at stake lies beyond any possible articulation of the law by which we live, and it enters the magical arena of the “nothingness” of mysticism. Informed by mysticism, critique endeavors to defend, perhaps even save, the eternal and divine spirit from all that is transient and worldly.

Benjamin’s critique is then of mystical lore. Here, we are presented with another form of critique of theology, in which a social critique emerges out of a theological tradition. Like in the case of Freud, the concept refers not to a critical attitude towards religion, but rather to the intersection of critique and theology, central to Benjamin’s conceptual commitments. In particular, we are dealing with an immanent critique that redeploys mystical imagination. No doubt, critique could be accentuated as containing a normative dimension: the acting against and overcoming of the circumstances that limit freedom. Max Horkheimer, one of the instigators of critical theory, made a similar argument by suggesting that a critical approach aims at “human emancipation” – the liberating of human beings “from the circumstances that enslave them.”[[140]](#footnote-141) For Horkheimer as well such a critical approach is mainly concerned with revealing the “secret” of a given social and historical reality. Such an act of revealing differentiates for example critical theory from a “traditional” one.[[141]](#footnote-142) In Benjamin’s case, however, it would be wrong to make sense of this “task of criticism” without fully taking into account its mystical underpinning. Critique is mystically informed because its aim is to rescue the pure experience of a transcendent truth, indeed to rescue the ability to defend such an experience, which is inaccessible to any classification within this world. It entails, therefore, a theological redemptive (one may argue messianic) mission to go beyond limits and into the limitless that only nothingness can represent.[[142]](#footnote-143) The same goes for the concept of liberation, which is not only liberation from the shackles of this world, but also the liberation of a religious experience of nihility, or better, the rescuing of the liberating potential of such an experience.

It is for this reason that “Kant’s system of critique” as Benjamin called it, “must be conscious of eternity” and “must account for religious experience in the modern age.”[[143]](#footnote-144) Such consciousness includes a revisiting of the theological sources of any philosophical critique making the “handmade of theology” redolent of mysticism. In this particular sense “the new philosophy is thus synonymous with theology.”[[144]](#footnote-145) There is here it seems a modern appeal for a “new religion” that aims at connecting “the religious significance of our times” with “the religious significance of knowledge.”[[145]](#footnote-146)

One of the possible implications of such a critique of theology, however, is that transcendence is restricted within an exclusively human, critical endeavor. I believe this last point deserves attention because it presents Benjamin’s redeploying of mystical sources in a complicated light. Benjamin’s modern approach to mysticism may be seen as containing an inner tension. On the one hand, the presence of the divine in Benjamin’s theory of youth still reverberates with the same mystical logic as expressed in Eckhart’s writings. On the other hand, as a form of critique, youth reframes transcendence within an independent human experience in the world and in such a way stands for a distancing from the original mystical orientation towards the divine. Is it not possible, then, to argue that Benjamin’s critique of theology evokes mystical notions and turns against them at the same time? What is emphasized, in this sense, is Benjamin’s mystical turn against mysticism.[[146]](#footnote-147) To follow this idea through, Benjamin’s modern reworking of mysticism takes mysticism to its radical, heretical conclusion: It signifies a break with the mystical tradition, which is nonetheless a performance that is consistent with this tradition’s original message (that of a break with a tradition).

Such a compound structure of thought is not exclusive to Benjamin. Adolf von Harnack’s *Marcion*, for example, makes an analogous case.[[147]](#footnote-148) Published in 1924, ten years after Benjamin composed his “Metaphysics of Youth*”,* Harnack’s book suggests that Marcion of Sinope was the true disciple of Paul because he introduced a type of radical, and for Harnack gnostic, dualism that breaks with the Pauline tradition. Here, a specific break with a theological tradition represents a pure theological formulation of that tradition. Marcion is thus an inventor of a “new religion” precisely because he follows Paul’s theological message to the letter. Bernhard Grainer and Christoph Schmidt pointed out that such an exercise maintains the religious principle (e.g. rebellion, heresy, transgression, the turning against) while rejecting its former historical religious manifestation.[[148]](#footnote-149) They regard this exercise as a “dialectic” form of liberating a theological principle from its bondage to previous historical expressions. The turn against a theological tradition constitutes, in this sense, its pure fulfillment. To put it differently, a theological tradition is fulfilled by not being fulfilled.

Benjamin’s critique of theology seems to present a similar argument. The critical compartmentalization of transcendence within human experience, the human self-awakening, or the relocation of the divine constitute a turn against mysticism that nonetheless does not lose sight of the original mystical message. These compositions signify, perhaps, being religious to a fault (to put it ironically), or pushing the limits of a religious message, such that an original doctrine is taken so seriously that it is broken altogether. Mysticism, one could argue, is here fulfilled by means of its critical rejection, or perhaps by not being fulfilled. In such a way Benjamin presents a turn against mysticism that nevertheless aims at its confirmation. A reference to theology, then, means taking critique to its radical end and it is the mystical modes of standing against the world that power critique’s distancing from mysticism. As in Benjamin’s suggestion of a critique that is “conscious of eternity”, we are dealing here with a mystical idiom in which an awareness of the eternal and transcendent God marks a precondition for freedom from God.

This last statement may indicate how in Benjamin’s critical-theological interchange each form of thinking (critical or theological) is conditioned by the other. On the one hand, for Benjamin operating critically means acting in a way that always involves the eternal, transcendent and divine. On the other hand, theology perceives ‘being critical’ in its most radical, one could say pure, sense. Theology is therefore not demarcated as a language of faith but as pure criticism, while operating critically is defined, circularly, as a theological endeavor. The gaining of knowledge through critique is endowed with religious significance, and theology is secularized because it is reduced to a systematic, conceptual examination (rather than exercising devotion, or proving the existence of God), even if such examination originates in an object that lies beyond any possible examination.

Arguably, the interdependency between critique and theology denotes the obscuring of the boundaries between the two forms of thinking. Such obfuscating of the two concepts disintegrates any ability to clarify each of them independently. Indeed, Kirk Wetters illuminates rather brilliantly how Benjamin associated such a structure with an idea of “ambiguity” or, more accurately, “demonic ambiguity” (which goes back to its mythical origins through Goethe’s “Demon”).[[149]](#footnote-150) For Wetters, such ambiguity – combining the idea of medium with that of a mythical force, the very concept seeming to be evidence of its content – aims at fusing together laws and their transgression, philosophical concepts and their theological orientations. Laws in general, and modern norms in particular, “remain ambiguous in essentially the same way as transgressions against the demons were for primitive man.”[[150]](#footnote-151) The concept of ambiguity itself, relevant to Benjamin’s later work (for example his “Critique of Violence”), is thus ripe with theological significance.[[151]](#footnote-152) In the case of the relation of critique to theology, ambiguity seems to work in a way that supports the pairing of reason and revelation, the divine “word” and human “knowledge.” Thus, only as a theological endeavor, critique can present human beings with the type of knowledge that it was designed to facilitate.

b. Secularization and Political Imagination

Critique of theology is also its secularization (*Verweltlichung*) in the sense that it reframes transcendence within independent human experience in the world. Arguably, what interests Benjamin is this experience in what Robert Cover called “the world in which we live.” Buck-Morss, for example, pointed out how Benjamin’s literary critique represent “a form of secular revelation” which is a form of secular thinking that does not lose sight of its theological origins.[[152]](#footnote-153) In still referring to its theological sources, secularization seems then to denote two interrelated issues. On the one hand, it implies a holding to mystical language and symbolism. Benjamin’s critique of theology is thus mystical in its retreat to the numinous unity with the divine, which Benjamin describes as an eternal-present messianic moment of awakening and salvation. On the other hand, secularization also points to a certain transformation of such notions because the human being encounters an alleged human inner true self – i.e. youthfulness – without, however, leaning on simple faith in a unity with God. When Benjamin, for instance, discusses the “awakening” of the inner-transcendent capacity, he focuses on an exclusive human experience. In Benjamin’s allegory what “awakens” the humanity of the human being is the human being; a self-referring self, one might say, which stands for the former mystical “divine self-revelation.”[[153]](#footnote-154) As Kohlenbach argues, such a “self-reference” serves as an image “of the absolute, or of a God who is no longer found in traditional religion.”[[154]](#footnote-155) The traits that were associated with a divine sphere are reset to define an autonomous, self-referring human being.

As in the case of the “Metaphysics of Youth”, the notion of God is relocated (rather than disappearing – God is not “dead” in the strict sense) because transcendence is compartmentalized within human experience with no excess beyond it.[[155]](#footnote-156) Put differently, a mystical interaction between the human and the divine is restructured as an exclusively human affair. Transcendence is maintained by pointing nonetheless to an innate human faculty, rather than the presence of an almighty God; a spiritual trait that may be fulfilled in any mundane human action or simple communication (such as dancing, conversing or composing a diary), yet which is not conditioned directly by divine providence. Secularization thus implies a transformation of mysticism that is marked, however, by the tracing back of modern critique to religious symbolism.

The mechanism that powers Benjamin’s secular thinking is not secular but rather mystical and it is theology that informs critique’s secular focus on this world. Moreover, those are the mystical ideas that power the secular distancing from mysticism. In this sense Benjamin offers a form of immanent critique that redeploys rather than dismisses theology. The notion of an “eternal within the worldly” that was relevant to Freud may be of the essence here, even if this means in Benjamin’s case a play on mysticism rather than a reference to the law. Here as well we find an “immanentization” that “does not announce the demise of transcendence” but rather underlines its “new modes of being.”[[156]](#footnote-157) Applied to Benjamin’s concept of the secular, such an “immanentization” captures a compartmentalization of the eternal, transcendent and divine within a stark interest in the human experiences in this world.

Because of this particular interest in worldly affairs, Benjamin’s critique of theology may provide some insights into his early engagement with politics. If youth stands for a “higher, mystical principle of authority”, it points not to a rejection of a particular political authority, but to all forms of political control.[[157]](#footnote-158) Arendt’s observation that Benjamin’s theology was aimed at refusing all available forms of (for her political) tradition could be seen as relating to this last point.[[158]](#footnote-159) It underlines a comprehensive refusal that segues from a commitment to a pure, not-of-this-world, spiritual principle that is represented by youth and that leads to a clear distancing from all the political options that were then available. We are dealing, perhaps, with a critique of politics that denotes a radical resistance to all forms of political ideology. If the possibility of redemption lies beyond history (even if this does not mean that it is external to it) it also resides, ceteris paribus, beyond any concrete political realization. Taking Talal Asad’s argument that “the political” is a sphere “necessarily (not just contingently) articulated by power” as a point of reference, Benjamin’s critique makes a case for a complete resignation.[[159]](#footnote-160)

This radical rejection of politics may indeed represent what scholars have termed “theocratic anarchism”, bringing Benjamin closer to the so-called anarchic *Antipolitik* of Gustav Landauer.[[160]](#footnote-161) In his “Critique of Violence” for example, Benjamin points to the manner in which such Anarchism may eschew the arena of politics. [[161]](#footnote-162) Nonetheless, Anarchism in Benjamin’s case induces a stark refusal to all known forms of politics, Landauer’s socialism included. What is being separated, then, is the messianic potency from the actual political sphere. One may argue that the possibility of an actual political-theology – though not the concept itself – is rejected and that the flow of history continues to be differentiated from its embedded messianic potential.

This conclusion may extend to the political notion of authority. Here, the “higher principle of authority” that Benjamin speaks of implies being beyond any possible articulation of authority that we may put to the political test. If such “higher” authority relates to the nothing of mysticism, it may be upheld only by being nullified. Freedom may therefore point to a full retreat from the sphere of power that authority represents.

Are we not dealing here also with a radical interpretation of the notion of exile? This particular term, central to Jewish political imagination, does not appear in Benjamin’s early writings on youth. But it does, nonetheless, seem to encapsulate rather well his approach towards politics. Exile may represent the complete refusal of any worldly form of authority, control and power. Exile, to put it differently, is an emblem for endorsing a retreat from any possible political structure. What makes this notion radical is its universalization. It does not signify the loss of sovereignty in particular, but rather a withdrawal from the realm of politics in the most general sense. This argument may be extended to include the political character of youth. Here, to the extent that youth lies beyond this worldliness, its endorsement includes being exiled from all political affairs. Youth thus demonstrates the definitive, redemptive, out-of-this-world nothingness that Benjamin contemplated, perhaps as a prelude for becoming “a peripatetic exile.”[[162]](#footnote-163)

Thinking of exile in such a way brings Benjamin’s social criticism closer to his engagement with particular Jewish political themes.[[163]](#footnote-164) “The problem of the Jewish spirit” writes Benjamin to Buber in 1916 “is one of the most important and persistent objects of my thinking.”[[164]](#footnote-165) Arendt, in rare agreement with Scholem, took this statement seriously enough to argue that the young Benjamin’s coming to terms with Judaism became an “eminent personal question.”[[165]](#footnote-166) The Jewish “question” – to follow Arendt – corresponded to Benjamin’s notion of a true and transcendent, not-of-this-world, spiritual being. Judaism thus represented for Benjamin “the most distinguished bearer and representative of the spiritual.”[[166]](#footnote-167) The “spirit of Judaism” is in this way elevated to match the “abstractness of pure spirit” which is called youth, as Witte, for example, pointed out.[[167]](#footnote-168) Judaism is, to put it bluntly, a spirit of exile.

This last point seems to be important. Unlike the “Essence of Judaism” as articulated, for example, in the context of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and some of its later variants, Benjamin’s spiritual “essence” is designed to escape any historical, social or political framing. It cannot be rationally grasped, studied or articulated in historical terms. At the same time, it is not about adherence to divine laws. One may think of Leo Baeck’s 1905 famous article, “The essence of Judaism” which presented – in answering Harnack’s “Essence of Christianity” – a “character of Judaism” that rests on an ongoing response to the divine law.[[168]](#footnote-169) Conversely, Freud’s early engagement with the trope of jokes presented a secularization, and to some extent a universalization, of such adherence to laws, which entails a turning against the law in order to enable its continuous sway over human life. Even if in widely dissimilar ways, both Leo-Baeck and Freud related to laws and commands.

The Jewish “spirit” for Benjamin, however, deviates from this range of possibilities. In accordance with his modern approach to mysticism, Benjamin seems not to endorse the law, but rather to underline what always remains beyond our conceptual and normative reach – the so-called “ash” – a potent metaphor for that which remains. The ongoing suspense of the potential of redemption, at any given moment, is not brought about by the thick normative walls of adherence to the law. It is, somewhat differently, realized by the constant non-realization of the messianic moment. One may suggest that Judaism itself may be thus fulfilled by not being fulfilled, pointing to the extent to which Benjamin’s “Jewish spirit” is aligned with his critique of theology.

One of the implications of this approach is that Benjamin expresses a stark critique of the so called “assimilation” of Jews.[[169]](#footnote-170) Such a critique of the Jewish “Bourgeois milieu” was rather dominant among many of his friends at that time.[[170]](#footnote-171) His allusion to a Jewish spiritual core, however, makes a unique case because it underlines his rejection of the very possibility of assimilation of a Jewish “spirit” in existing social and political circumstances. In virtue of there being such a fully transcendent core, a complete assimilation is not made undesirable but rendered impossible. Thus, a retreat to an original spiritual sphere – the so-called “Jewish spirit” – invited a call for migrating away from assimilation, although what could be entailed in such a call, in practice, remains rather vague.

Yet, this is also true of Benjamin’s critique of Zionism. In these early years, Benjamin was already exposed to Jewish nationalism through his encounters with Zionist student circles in Freiburg and Berlin and his subsequent close friendship with Gerschom Scholem.[[171]](#footnote-172) “Here” wrote Benjamin, “for the first time I have been confronted with Zionism and Zionist activity as a possibility and hence perhaps as a duty.”[[172]](#footnote-173) His reproach of these circles was nonetheless evident. For him “Their personality was inwardly by no means defined by Jewishness; they preach Palestine but drink like Germans.”[[173]](#footnote-174) Though articulated rather polemically, Benjamin’s reproach echoes a more fundamental issue. For Benjamin, Zionism, with all its baggage of sovereignty, authority and control, could not dovetail with his arguments for a true, Jewish, not-of-this-world, spiritual singularity.

A Benjamin-Scholem controversy on the topic of youth could be suggested along these lines. Like Benjamin (and given the beginnings of their friendship at that time) young Scholem also wrote extensively in these early years and during the upheaval of the First World War about the meaning of youth and being young for the “awakening” Jew.[[174]](#footnote-175) This was particularly evident in his blatant attacks on the Jewish youth movements. Over against what he characterized as the loss or absence of the element of “movement” (*Bewegunglosigkeit*), he advocated a youth movement that was marked by a return to “wholeness, spirit and greatness” (*Ganzheit, Geist und Größe*).[[175]](#footnote-176) While the first (loss of movement) represented for him a spiritual vacuum, the second (return to wholeness, spirit and greatness) stood for the renewal of a youthful, spiritual core. For the young Scholem, Zionism represented this re-emergence of youth, or what he would later term a “religio.”[[176]](#footnote-177) Indeed, years later, Scholem would still maintain retrospectively that “it should never be forgotten that Zionism was essentially a youth movement”, reiterating to some extent his early attention to the symbol of youth and its political implications.[[177]](#footnote-178)

Scholem’s Zionism is, of course, the object of continuous fascination and long-standing scholarly interest. Yet the point to make here is much more modest. It relates particularly to what could be seen as Scholem’s theory of youth. For the young Scholem, youth is a spiritual venture that is interwoven with the call for Jewish sovereignty. Youth, in this sense, is an emblem for a concrete political-theology. To take part in a metaphysical quest for youth is therefore “to move totally and in totality to Zion” or “to go to Erez-Israel, and to appropriate an awareness.”[[178]](#footnote-179) Through the interaction between notions of youth and politics, the Zionist mission becomes a call for a political articulation of Jewish life and a reminder of a messianic articulation of politics.[[179]](#footnote-180)

Totality or wholeness, however, lead Benjamin to the exact opposite conclusion. In accordance with the complete resignation of his mysticism, a true, youthful, spiritual, Jewish core refuses the type of Zionist aspirations that Scholem advocated. Making an “example” of domination, Benjamin replies to the fervent Scholem, should be replaced by the devotion of a total spirituality that Benjamin takes to be the sign of “tradition.”[[180]](#footnote-181) Such a tradition constitutes the refusal of all forms of its realization in terms of worldly authority and political control.

Benjamin’s critique of theology therefore invites a shift from Scholem’s political-theology. As in Scholem’s case, it presents a return to messianism, even if in its secular guise. But it also stands for the exorcism of the demons of sovereignty that are entailed in this return. One may conclude that Benjamin’s critique of theology is not about the final judgment of messianism, but rather about maintaining its enduring suspension. However, this approach goes hand in hand with the intention to hold onto messianism. In such a convoluted messianic approach one holds onto an unholdable object of redemption – perhaps a conscious withdrawal from the full burning implications of messianism, if put to the political test.

Especially in the light of this controversy of youth, Benjamin’s approach could be captured by his own slogan “Myth and Modernity” (*Mythos* *und* *Moderne*) which means, in this context, a critical take on mysticism, which is aimed at, perhaps even constructed for, drafting answers to modern Jewish social and political conditions.[[181]](#footnote-182) Here, modern critique and mysticism symbolism come together to bear on Benjamin’s overly far-reaching thoughts that extend from secular modernity to “envision a place for Jews in the polity.”[[182]](#footnote-183) Like Freud, he seems to suggest something of a program for an imagined “discharge” of the “tension of election” embedded in Jewish political life, even if differently thought out and rather inversely concluded. Yet, is it really possible to create a tangible political program on the basis of constant distance, and continuous metaphysical refusal? Is it not probable that a liberating mechanism may very well end up becoming an oppressive myth if it intrinsically relates to a not-of-this-world object and remains a guiding beacon beyond reach? Nothingness may present a rather shaky basis for a valid political agenda, and a mystical “higher” principle of authority could collapse in the wake of an emergent need for the protection that only an actual political constitution, state, or social institution can provide. Benjamin’s critique of theology could be seen, then, as more than simply evidence of his rich and vibrant intellectual world, standing “at the crossroad of the modern intellectual landscape.”[[183]](#footnote-184) It is also a reminder of a vulnerability that perhaps accompanied its author to the last crossroad of his life.

1. Some of these texts were published by Benjamin in a variety of journals, and especially in Barbizon and Bernfeld’s *Der Anfang*, which was considered the “journal of youth.” Most of them, however, remained unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime. See: Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 24. The texts were collected in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften.* Vol. II (1-3), eds. von Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhauser (Frankfurt aM: Suhrkamp, 1991). An English version of these texts is presented in: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 1: 1913-1926 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996) and Walter Benjamin, *Early Writings 1910-1917* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Walter Rüegg, “Jugend und Gesellschaft um 1900,” in *Kulturkritik und Jugendkultur,* ed. Walter Rüegg(Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), 47-59; Trommler Frank. “Mission ohne Ziel: Über den Kult der Jugend im modernen Deutschland,” in “”*:*, eds.Thomas Koebner, Rolf-Peter Janz and Frank Trommler (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1985), 14–49; Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, *The Rhythm of Eternity, The German Youth Movement and the Experience of the Past, 1900-1933* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See, for example: Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997); William Borrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought 1848-1914* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000); Christoph Schmidt, *Der Häretische Imperative: Überlegungen zur theologischen Dialektik der Kulturwissenschaft in Deutschland* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2000); Steven. E. Aschheim, *Beyond the Border: The German Jewish Legacy Abroad* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007); Yotam Hotam, *Modern Gnosis and Zionism: The Crisis of Culture, Life Philosophy and National Jewish Thought* (London: Routledge, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See, for example: Heiko Stoff, *Ewige Jugend. Konzepte der Verjüngung vom späten 19. Jahrhundert bis ins Dritten Reich* (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2004); Yotam Hotam, ed., *Deutsch-Jüdische Jugendliche im Zeitalter der Jugend* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2009.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Hotam, *Deutsch-Jüdische,* 6; Adriaansen, *The Rhythm,* 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Erich Gutkind, *Siderische Geburt: Seraphische Wanderung vom Tode der Welt zur Taufe der Tat* (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1914); Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* (München: Beck, 1922). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Karl Jung, *Answer to Job* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969), 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Karl Mannheim “The Problem of Generations,” 1923. Reprint in Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge, ed. Karl Mannheim (New York: Oxford UP, 1952), 276–320; Frank Weddekind, *Frühlings Erwachen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Fidus was the pseudonym of the illustrator Hugo Reinhold Karl Johann Höppener (1886-1948). See also: Peter Janz, “Die Faszination der Jugend durch Rituale und sakrale Symbole. Mit Anmerkungen zu Fidus, Hess, Hoffmannsthal und George,” in “*Mit uns,* 62-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Walter Ze'ev Laqueur, *Young Germany: A History of the German Youth Movement* (London, 1962); George L. Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Boulder: Westview, 1988); Peter D. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement 1900–1945* (New York: McMillan, 1981); Hotam, *Deutsch-jüdische*; Adriaansen, *The Rhythm.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Helmut Böhme, “Das Verewigen und das Veralten der Jugend,” in *Jugend: Psychologie-Literatur-Geschichte. Festschrift für Carl Pietzcher,* eds. K. M. Bogdal,G. Ortrud and J. Pfeiffer,(Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), 25-39. The type of *Männerbund* that the Youth Movement represented, with its aesthetic ideal that related mainly to the male body, and the fundamental experience that assumed at its center the psychology of the maturing boy, induced Hans Blüher, the first scholar to present a study of the German Youth Movement, to underline it as a homo-erotic phenomenon. See: Hans Blüher, *Wandervogel: Geschichte einer Jugendbewegung* (Berlin: Bernhard Weise Buchhandlung). See also: George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality* (New York: H. Fertig 1985); Ofer Nur, *Eros and Tragedy, Jewish Male Fantasies and the Masculine Revolution of Zionism* (Brighton: Academic Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (NY: Columbia UP, 1982), 5; Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin a Biography* (London: Verso, 1990), 56-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Benjamin, *Early Writings,* 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Chronik* (Stuttgart: Suhrkamp, 1970), 33-40; Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Witte, *Walter Benjamin,* 22-23; Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2014), 39-40; Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin,* 50-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Benjamin, *Berliner Chronik,* 39-40; Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin* Chicago: (University of Chicago Press 1994), 69; Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin,* 57; Witte, *Walter Benjamin,* 23; Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 13; Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin,* 90-91; Witte, *Walter Benjamin,* 34-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. See Rolf Goebel, “Einschreibungen der Trauer: Schrift, Bild und Musik in Walter Benjamin’s Sonetten auf Christoph Friedrich Heinle,” [*Weimarer Beiträge*](https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/revista?codigo=9961)*: Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft, Ästhetik und Kulturwissenschaften* 59 vol. 1 (2013): 65-78; Reinhold Görling, “Die Sonette an Heinle”, in *Benjamin Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. B. Lindner (Stuttgart: J.B Metzler, 2011), 585-59; Erdmut Wizisla, “Fritz Heinle war Dichter. Walter Benjamin und sein Jugendfreund,” in *Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen.* *Frankfurt Benjamin-Vorträge (1988–1991),* ed. L. Jäger (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 1992), 115-131. See also: Erdmut Wizisla, “‘Krise und Kritik’ (1930/31): Walter Benjamin und das Zeitschriftenprojekt”, in *Aber ein Sturm Weht on Paradiese Her: Texte zu Walter Benjamin,* eds. Michael Opitz and Wizisla Erdmut (Leipzig: Reclam, 1992),270-302. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Johannes Steizinger, *Revolte Eros und Sprache* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2013), 222. See also Michael W. Jennings, “Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Weimar Criticism,” in *Weimar Thought: A Constant Legacy,* eds. Peter E. Gordon and John P. McCornick(Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013), 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Benjamin *Selected Writings,* 43-44; Benjamin, *Early Writings*,136. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Ibid. SINCE THERE ARE TWO ITEMS IN THE FOOTNOTE ABOVE YOU CANNOT USE IBID—SPECIFY WHICH ONE [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Benjamin, *Early Writings,* 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin,* 16; Steizinger, *Revolte Eros,* 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. This text was based on a speech that Benjamin gave at the Berlin Free Student Group. See: Witte, *Walter Benjamin,* 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 37-38. This particular text was based on a speech that Benjamin gave at the Berlin Free Student Group. See: Witte, *Walter Benjamin,* 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. See, for example: Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 58, 70, 90; Eiland and Jennings*, Walter Benjamin*, 34; Witte, *Walter Benjamin,* 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Benjamin *Selected Writings,* 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Benjamin *Selected Writings,* 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Benjamin, *Early Writings,* 104-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin,* 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969). On Benjamin’s familiarity with Humboldt, see: Witte, *Walter Benjamin,* 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. See, for example, Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamin: Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt aM: Suhrkamp, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 66-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Benjamin, *Correspondence,* 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 68. For Arendt’s remark see: Detlev Schöttker and Edmunt Wizisla, *Arendt und Benjamin: Texte, Briefe, Dokumente* (Frankfurt aM: Suhrkamp, 2006), 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. Gerschom Scholem “Confession on the Subject of our Language,” in *Acts of Religion,* ed. Jacques Derrida (New York: Routledge, 1926), 226-227. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. Benjamin, *Early Writings,* 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. Michael G. Levine, *A Weak Messianic Power: Figures of a Time to Come in Benjamin, Derrida, and Celan* (New York: Fordham UP, 2014), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. See, for example: Reuven Kahane, *The Origins of Post Modern Youth: Informal Youth Movements in a Comparative Perspective* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter & Co., Scientific Publishers, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. Benjamin, *Early Writings,* 41, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. Steizinger, *Revolte Eros,* 30. See also: Agata Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2014), 83-122. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York: A Herder & Herder Book The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009); Joachim Kopper, *Die Metaphysik Meister Eckharts* (Saarbrücken: West-Ost, 1955); Niklaus Lagier, *Bibliographie zu Meister Eckahrt* (Freiburg die Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. Eckhart, *The Complete*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. Ingeburg Dengenhardt, *Studien zum Wandel des Eckhartbildes* (Leiden: E. J. Brill. 1967), 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. Eliot Wolfson, “Theolatry and the Making-Present of Nonrepressentable,” *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy,* 25 (2017): 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. Franz Pfeiffer, *Deutsche Mystiker des Vierzehnjahrunderts: Meister Eckhart* (Leipzig: G. J. Göschensche Verlagshandlung, 1857); Gustav Landauer, *Meister* *Eckharts Mystische Schriften* (Berlin: Karl Sehnabel 1903); Hermann Büttner, *Meister Eckeharts Schriften und Predigten* (Leipzig: E. Diedrichs, 1903); Ingeburg, *Studien,* 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. Ingeburg, *Studien,* 239-266; Wolfson, “Theolatry”, 8-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. Eckhart, *The Complete*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. Kopper, *Die Metaphysik,* 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. Eckhart, *The Complete*, in particular Sermons 8, 21, 37, 79, and 80. See also: Büttner, *Meister Eckeharts,* v.2: 149-156. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. Eckhart, *The Complete*, 576. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. Ibid., 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. Ibid., 396. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
71. Ibid., 396. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
72. Elliot R. Wolfson, “Patriarchy and the Motherhood of God in Zoharic Kabbalah and Meister Eckhart,” in *.*Veds. Ra’anan S. Bourstan, et al. (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 1049-1088. Wolfson points here in particular to the similarity between Eckhart’s symbolism and Kabbalah. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
73. Ibid., 77-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
74. Ibid., 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
75. Ibid., 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
76. Ibid, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
77. Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine,* ed. Joanna Cecciarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
78. Eckhart, *The Complete*, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
79. Eckhart, *The Complete*, 394. See also: Kopper, *Die Metaphysik*, 50-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
80. Benjamin, *The Correspondence,* 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
81. Reiner Dieckhoff, *Mythos und Moderne: Über die Verborgene Mystik in den Schrifter Walter Benjamins* (Köln: Janus Press 1987), 22; Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe. A Study in Elective Affinity* (London: Athlone Press, 1992), 99; Steizinger, *Revolte*, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
82. Asaf Angermann, ed., *Theodor W. Adorno, Gershom Scholem Briefwechsel, 1939-1969* (Frankfurt aM: Suhrkamp, 2015), 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
83. Steizinger, *Revolte*, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
84. See also Eiland & Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
85. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
86. Ibid.*,* 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
87. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
88. Asad, *Formations,* 65. See a similar point made by Bainard Cowan, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory,” *New German Critique* 22, (1985): 109-122; Steizinger, *Revolte.* [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
89. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
90. See the point also made by Eiland & Jennings, *Walter Benjamin,* 56, who highlight the close relation to Hebert Belmore’s parallel toying with the symbolic significance of the prostitute. On the centrality of the romantic image of the “genius” see also: Kirk Wetter, *Demonic History: From Goethe to the Present* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2014), 124; Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012), 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
91. Paul North, *The Yield: Kafka’s Atheological Reformation* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2015), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
92. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
93. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
94. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
95. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
96. Büttner, *Meister Eckeharts Schriften*, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
97. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 53. See also: Benjamin, *The Correspondence*, 35-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
98. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
99. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 35-36, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
100. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
101. Wolfson, “Patriarchy,” 1049-1088. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
102. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 9-10. For Wolfson, see his “Patriarchy”, 1056. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
103. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
104. Steizinger, *Revolte*, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
105. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
106. See also the point made by Steizinger, *Revolte;* James McFarland, Constellation: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin in the Now-time of History (New York: Fordham UP, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
107. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
108. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
109. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
110. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
111. Harry Jansen, “In search of new times: Temporality in the Enlightenment and Counter-enlightenment. *History and Theory* 55 vol. 1 (2016): 66-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
112. See also Johannes Steizinger, “Zwischen Emanzipatorischem Appell und Melancholischem Verstummen Walter Benjamins Jugendschriften,” in *Benjamin-Studien*, eds. D. Weidner and S. Weigel (München: Wilhem Fink Verlag, 2011), 225-238. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
113. Ansgar Hillach, “Ein neu entdecktes Lebensgesetz der Jugend: Wynekens Führergeist im Denken des jungen Benjamin,” in *.*V, eds.K. Garber and L. Rehm (München: Wilhem Fink Verlag, 1999), 890. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
114. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
115. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
116. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
117. Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
118. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
119. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
120. Ibid.*,* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
121. Ibid.*,* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
122. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-enclosure: The deconstruction of Christianity* (New York: Fordham UP, 2008), 36; North, *The Yield*, 26; Wolfson, “Patriarchy,” 1061; Wolfson, “Theolatry,” 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
123. Ashok Collins, “Towards a saturated faith: Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Luc Nancy on the Possibility of Belief after Deconstruction,” *Sophia* 54 (2015): 332; North, *The Yield,* 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
124. See: Wolfson, “Patriarchy,” 1063, who points to Eckhart’s concept of “Unbirth” that represents the locus of such eternal nothingness, beyond time, located within the human soul and as an essence of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
125. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin – Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt aM.: Suhrkamp, 1981), 18; Benjamin, *The Correspondence,* 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
126. Gershom Scholem, ed. *Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem: Briefwechsel* (Frankfurt aM: Suhrkamp, 1980), 157. See also the discussions in: Moshe Idel, “Transfer of Categories: The German-Jewish Experience and Beyond,” in *The German Jewish Experience Revisited,* eds. Steven E. Aschheim and Vivian Liska (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 25-26; David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter –History* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982), 129-130; Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991), 108-110. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
127. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
128. See his letter to Scholem: Benjamin, *The Correspondence*, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
129. On Benjamin’s Messianism see, for example: [Stéphane](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA51134743560002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,German%20Jewish,AND&mode=advanced&pfilter=creationdate,exact,10-YEAR,AND&offset=110) Symons, *Walter Benjamin: Presence of Mind, Failure to Comprehend* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011); Sami, R. Khatib, *“Theleologie ohne Endzweck” Walter Benjamins Ent-stellung des Messianischen* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2013); Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
130. Benjamin, *Correspondence,* 20. See also the points made by Scholem and Adorno in their correspondence: Angermann, *Briefwechsel,* 462, 467. For Wolfson see: Wolfson, “Patriarchy,” 1051-1052. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
131. Margarete Kohlenbach, *Walter Benjamin: Self –Reference and Religiosity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
132. Khatib, *Theleologie”,* 217; Jacobson, *Metaphysics,* 28; Frisby David, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
133. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin,* 9. See also Michael Trabizsch, *Walter Benjamin. Moderne, Messianismus, Politik. Über die Liebe zum Gegenstand* (Berlin: Verlag der Beeken,1985), 61-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
134. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 101; Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
135. Benjamin, *Early Writings,* 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
136. Witte, *Walter Benjamin*, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
137. Benjamin, *The Correspondence*, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
138. Benjamin, *The Correspondence,* 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
139. Benjamin, *The Correspondence,* 94. THIS COULD BE IBID In his letter to Scholem, Benjamin suggests that witticism presents the essence of the whole Talmudic teaching. See in particular: Scholem, *Tagebücher,* Bd. 2. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1999), 206. Irvin Wohlfarth then further suggests that Benjamin makes connections between the mythical origin of the law and his idea of ‘play’ or between “*Trauerspiel* and the Jewish joke.” See: Irvin Wohlfarth, “On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin,” in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
140. Max Horkheimer, Critical Theory (New York: Seabury Press 1982), 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
141. Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in , ed. Max Horkheimer (New York: Continuum, 1972), 188-243. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
142. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin,* 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
143. Benjamin, *Early Writings,* 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
144. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin,* 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
145. Benjamin, *Early Writings,* 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
146. Benjamin, *Early Writings,* 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
147. Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom Fremden Gottes* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrisch’sche Buchhandlung, 1924). [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
148. Bernhard Grainer and Christoph Schmidt, eds. *Arche Noah Die Idee der ‘Kultur’ im deutsch-jüdischen Diskurs* (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
149. Kirk Wetters, *Demonic History: From Goethe to the Present* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2014), 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
150. Ibid., 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
151. Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 236-152. For the relevance of ambiguity to the understanding of Benjamin’s later work, see for example: Jennigs, *Walter Benjamin*, 165; Kohlenbach, *Walter Benjamin*, 34; Frisby, *Fragments*, 214; Gabriele Guerra, *Judentum zwischen Anarchie und Theokratie: Eine religionspolitische Diskussion am Beispiel der Begegnung zwischen Walter Benjamin und Gershom Scholem* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2007), 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
152. Buck-Morss, *The origin of Negative Dialectics,* xiii; see also a similar analysis of Benjamin’s later concepts such as “Aura” in Frisby 1985, 258 [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
153. Kohlenbach, *Walter Benjamin,* 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
154. Kohlenbach, *Walter Benjamin,* xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
155. Fenves, *The Messianic*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
156. Agata Bielik Robson, “The God of Myth Is Not Dead” Modernity and Its Cryptotheologies: A Jewish Perspective,” in *The Making of Modern German Thought*, eds. Willem Styfhals & Stephane Symons (New York: SUNY, 2019), 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
157. Guerra, *Judentum*, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
158. See: Schöttker and Wizisla, 2006*:* 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
159. Tala Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
160. On Benjamin’s “anarchism” see, for example: Guerra, *Judentum,* 126-135; Jacobson, *Metaphysics,* 28-29. On Landauer and especially on his mysticism see: Joseph Schwartz, “Gustav Landauer and Gerhard Scholem: Anarchy and Utopia,” in *Gustav Landauer: Anarchist and Jew*, eds. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Anya Mali (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter: 2015), 172–190; Joseph Schwartz, „Martin Buber and Gustav Landauer: The Politicization of the Mystical,” in *Martin Buber: Neue Perspektiven/New Perspectives*, ed. Michael Zank, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck: 2006), 205-219. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
161. Benjamin, *Selected Writigns,* 236-152. For the relevance of ambiguity to the understanding of Benjamin’s later work, see for example: Jennigs, *Walter Benjamin*, 165; Kohlenbach, *Walter Benjamin*, 34; Frisby, *Fragments*, 214; Gabriele Guerra, *Judentum zwischen Anarchie und Theokratie: Eine religionspolitische Diskussion am Beispiel der Begegnung zwischen Walter Benjamin und Gershom Scholem* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2007), 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
162. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin,* 3. Similarly Witte, in *Benjamin,* 28-29, emphasizes Benjamin’s position as a political “outsider” in order to make the case for his total resignation. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
163. See also a similar point made in Agata Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos* (London: Routledge, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
164. Benjamin, *Correspondences,* 79. For the centrality of his Jewish identity at the time, see also Benjamin’s letters to Balmore and Seligson: Benjamin, *Correspondences,* 18, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
165. See in: Schöttker und Wizisla, *Arendt und Benjamin,* 76. See also Eiland & Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 4, presenting a Benjamin whose Jewishness lies “at the core of his being.” [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
166. See: Benjamin, *Gesammelte,* Vol II, 839. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
167. Witte, *Walter Benjamin,* 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
168. Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism* (London: Macmillan, 1936). [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
169. See for example: Wolin, *Walter Benjamin,* 7; Witte, *Walter Benjamin,* 28-29; Gary Smith, “Das Jüdische versteht sich immer von selbst. Walter Benjamins frühe Auseinandersetzung mit dem Judentum,” *Detusche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literatur und Geisteswissenschaft*, 65 vol. 2 (1991): 318-334; Schöttker & Wizisla, *Arendt und Benjamin,* 76; Sandro Pignotti, *Walter Benjamin – Judentum und Literatur: Tradition, Ursprung, Lehr emit einer kurzen Geschichte des Zionismus* (Freiburg: Rombach, 2009), 7; Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin,* 52; Steizinger, *Revolte*, 119; Guerra, *Judentum,* 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
170. See for example: Aschheim, *“*German Jews,” 31-44; Dieckhoff, *Mythos,* 8; Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
171. Gershom Scholem, *The Story of Friendship* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1981); Gary Smith, “Das Jüdische,” 318-334; Pignotti, *Walter Benjamin,* 7; Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin,* 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
172. Benjamin, *Correspondence,* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
173. Benjamin, *Gesammelte*, 838. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
174. During this period Scholem contributed mainly to Buber’s *Der Jude* and the short-lived journal *Blau-Weisse Brille.* See for example: Gershom Scholem “Jugendbewegung, Judenarbeit und Blau-Weiß,” in *Blau-Weiß Blätter. Führerhnummer: Monatsschrift für Jüdisches Jugendwandern 1917-1919*. Vol. 2, ed. Von Walter Modes, 27, 30. IS VON WALTER MODES THE EDITOR? WHAT IS THE PUBLISHER? [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
175. See the March 1917 edition of *Der Jude.* [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
176. Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*: *Memories of my Youth* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980), 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
177. Scholem: *From Berlin,* 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
178. Scholem’s entry in *Der Jude.* March 1917, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
179. For the first full analysis of Scholem’s political-theology see: Christoph Schmidt, “The Political Theology of Gershom Scholem,” *Theory and Criticism* 6 (1995): 149-160 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
180. Benjamin, *Correspondance,* 92-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
181. Walter Benjamin, *Briefe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), 672. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
182. Rose Sven-Erick, *Jewish Philosophical Politics in Germany 1789-1848* (Waltham: Brandeis UP, 2014), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
183. Stephane Moses, *The Angle of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Stanford: Stanford UP 2009), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)