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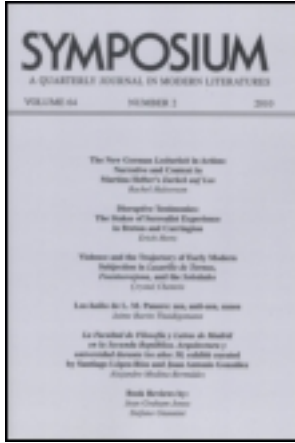
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Divine Justice and Profane Power: Benjamin's and Kafka's Approach to Messianism

Intrinsically dialectical in nature, sudden messianic change and the resolute character of the law are so closely connected with one another that both concepts should be among the key factors shaping a broad understanding of global cultures today. Whether we await the coming of the messiah as the Jewish religion teaches or commemorate his having come and died as most Christian teachings hold, it appears that Walter Benjamin's "now of a particular recognizability" (The Arcades Project 493) remains elusive, especially with respect to the correlation between the past and the future. In the spirit of temporal vectors that converge, Benjamin's and Franz Kafka's approaches to messianism are considered within the dialectics that make divine justice and profane power pivotal concepts of twenty-first-century cultural theory.

The dialectics underlying revelations of divine justice and demonstrations of profane power imbue Walter Benjamin's spiritual and secular thought with its antithetical tension. Eruptive and apocalyptic, messianic promise resists the systematic logic instilled in canonic bodies of law as well as historical approaches to political governance. Assuming that legal constraints maintain their validity only if the exceptional has not infringed on them, it has become customary to characterize what transcends legal authority as morally, politically, and ethically objectionable, on the one hand, or an act of God on the other. The implication is that extremes eradicate norms, lending credence to the potential for change lodged in the enigmatic and the revolutionary. Revolutions and manifestations of the messianic abrogate rules, not only those pertaining to the spiritual world but also those that define historical progress. Hence, the dialectics of messianic

revelation and temporal rule is thrust into the vortex of debate on the teleology of social progress and secular viewpoints of the utopian, even when the anticipation is that these should be within the scope of most temporal orders. In the spirit of vectors that elude teleological and utopian notions, the following proposes to examine Benjamin's and Franz Kafka's approaches to messianism by contemplating them within the dialectics that make divine justice and profane power central concepts of twenty-first-century cultural theory.

What is excluded from the profane order, because it does not comply with historical dynamics and evokes the messianic, and what is integrated into historical codifications that bring divine legitimacy into play have undergone numerous transformations as religious and secular convictions have evolved. Recognizing that both ends of the temporal spectrum withstand explanation, Benjamin writes, "the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic. [. . .] From the standpoint of history it is not the goal, but the terminus" (*Selected Works 3*: 305; hereinafter cited as *SW*). His "Theological-Political Fragment" calls for a clear division of political and theological tenets, maintaining that profane societies should not be erected on the idea of the divine kingdom, since theocracies are coupled with religious beliefs and have little hope of advancing political affiliations. Whereas profane orders tend to resist being subsumed under divine categories, they are still capable of harboring the messianic as an undercurrent. This raises the question as to what the true essence of revelation might be, at least in Benjamin's view, since his definition leaves room for interpretation: an "eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of messianic nature" (*SW 3*: 306). Birth and death are incontrovertible, absolute, and immutable for all worldly beings; however, the transience of nature is balanced by a *restitutio in integrum*, a mystical recognition of the immortality of the spiritual. For Benjamin, this realization not only represents a confluence of the profane and the messianic at the end of temporality but also supreme happiness. In keeping with his dialectics, the entropy that appears to be the fate of global politics today is messianic in nature, since, after all has been said and done, the logical succession of time has been lost and the continuum of history overturned.

Ultimately, it would be useful to approach the confrontation between politics and temporality from another point of view to recognize the significance of Benjamin's concept of history. In *Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian*, he liberates the forces in historicism's "once upon a time" by defining the point at which historical materialism transcends Hegelian historicism. The task of the historical materialist is to advocate an immediate experience with history, one that is original for every present directed toward an awareness of the present and that disrupts the continuum of the temporal order. Benjamin likens exploding the continuum

of history to imploding the laws of chronology and linearity, the staples of idealistic notions of time. However, all that remains after temporal conventions have been renounced is an inchoate mass of fragments, and fragmentation is one of the principles underlying Benjamin's messianic thought, grounded in the belief that every moment of the past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. Once again, this is a *restitutio in integrum*.

Whether understood in terms of Judeo-Christian mysticism or as *Glück*, the highest form of contentment in an otherwise profane and catastrophic world, Benjamin's messianic thought presages the point at which theology and politics are indelibly intertwined. Essentially, his concept of the messianic abides by a triadic scheme of paradise, fall, and redemption. Set against the determinism prevalent in idealist philosophies of history and historicism's allegiance to progress, Benjamin's model shuns teleological principles. More precisely, it alludes to discontinuities that suspend the linearity of chronology, exposing ruptured and revelatory reminiscences of the past. Rather than configuring a temporal continuum with an eschatological dynamic, Benjamin brings "splinters" (*SW 4*: 397) and "sparks" (*SW 4*: 391) to light that suspend "homogenous empty time" (*SW 4*: 261) and prefigure a promise of redemption.

The same holds true for the weak messianism in Benjamin's theses *On the Concept of History*. Here, messianism evinces the notion of a nonviolent form of cultural memory, since "the historical materialist can take only a highly critical view of the inventory of spoils displayed by the victors before the vanquished. This inventory is called culture" (*SW 4*: 406). Not only is Benjamin concerned with the dialectical imagery fundamental to the historical materialism in the *Arcades Project*, but he also attempts to fortify the groundwork for messianic forces that offset the injustices wrought by centuries of cultural exploitation. To this end, he maintains that political and historical catastrophes are the result of a state of emergency in the sociocultural domain, an idea that has subsequently become one of Giorgio Agamben's conceptual trademarks. While Benjamin's pessimism discloses urban space and modernity as a theater for human forgetfulness and cultural manipulation, these become indicative of human fate in general and delusions about what might be the best of all possible worlds. However, it would discredit his thinking, if no credence were given to the messianic forces that memory projects into the past to redeem the future in the "now of a particular recognizability" (*Arcades Project* 493; hereinafter cited as *AP*). Benjamin's hypothesis upholds "the world of universal and integral actuality. Only in the messianic realm does a universal history exist. Not as written history, but as festively enacted history" (*SW 4*: 405). Neither celebratory nor unsung, the language of universal history is prose. Since prose is a medium that is still accessible to modern individuals, it is also instrumental in revealing the spectrum of universal historical types, overthrowing

the shackles of inscription, whereas poetry, as Benjamin contends in his study of Baudelaire, dispenses with its communicative clarity in modernity.

Discontinuity and the dichotomy between profane power and divine justice form the point of departure for considering the messianic subtexts in one of Kafka's most important stories, "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk," the author's final publication before his death in June 1924. In a similar vein, reference will also be made to "The Great Wall of China," a fragment that Max Brod, Kafka's friend and the administrator of the poet's estate, published posthumously in 1931. Both works evidence eschatological configurations that contemplate the fate of language in modernity, "little signs, portents, and symptoms of the displacements that the writer feels approaching in every aspect of life without being able to adjust to the new situation" (SW 2.2: 496). Inspired by a fissure in time and tradition, they portend a rupture in the sovereignty of laws based on mythical authority rather than focusing on the emergence of profane law and a final victory over mystical experience.

In what has become a widely cited letter to Gershom Scholem in 1938, Benjamin likens Kafka's works to an ellipse, "its widely spaced focal points are defined, on the one hand, by mystical experience (which is, above all, the experience of tradition) and, on the other hand, the experience of the modern city-dweller" (SW 3: 325). The historical layers within the ellipse disclose the vulnerability of metropolitan life, an experience Kafka infused into his descriptions of New York in his first novel, *Amerika*. In that work the author contrasts ephemeral revelations of what might be a messianic and exceptional form of existence, such as the Nature Theater of Oklahoma, with traditional perceptions of social, cultural, legal, and collective oppression. Benjamin's contention is that Kafka lived in a complementary world. From his peripheral vantage point, the author struck a pose as disquieting as that of the renowned angel of history, peering out over the downfall of the modern individual as war and civil anarchy crippled European intellectual traditions and the essence of art was compromised to guarantee its infinite reproducibility for a mass audience. Indicative of the debris natural or man-made catastrophes leave behind, Kafka's texts aspire to index the signs of an era that, as Benjamin is careful to point out, has lost all consistency of truth or wisdom. In keeping with this objective, Kafka's parables blend the imagistic with the scriptural; they sacrifice immutable truths to elevate transmissibility to the level of commentary. The permutations of interpretations or the Haggadic element Benjamin discerns in Kafka's works is perhaps nowhere more palpable than in Josef K.'s debate with the clergyman about the meaning of the parable *Before the Law* near the end of *The Trial*. Here, Kafka seems to sacrifice the law of modern hermeneutics, returning to a Jewish form of exegesis, in which multifaceted interpretations stand side by side and still maintain their prismatic

integrity. Truth, in and of itself a figure of messianic revelation, is nestled in the space between the commentaries and can no longer be ascertained from the logic of the narrative.

Finally, divine justice and profane power constitute Agamben's contributions to the issue, particularly his theories of exception and suspension of law as well as his discussion of the liminal space presaging messianic time in *The Time That Remains*, his highly compelling exegesis of Paul's letter to the Romans. In *State of Exception*, Agamben couches the two aspects of Kafka's works he deems most indispensable in terms that echo Benjamin's assessment of the author: a critical diagnosis of the bleak state of the world is balanced by hidden sparks of what appears to be a messianic reversal of these conditions. Although Agamben's fondness for liminal figures, suspensions, inversions, and zones of indistinction goes beyond the secular and political to become religious and cultural, these interstices ultimately associate the social and ethical core of Western societies adhering to secular precepts with theological approaches to messianic time, space, and revelation. "From a political-juridical perspective," as Agamben acknowledges in *Homo Sacer*, "messianism is therefore a theory of the state of exception—except for the fact that in messianism there is no authority in force to proclaim the state of exception; instead there is the Messiah to subvert its power" (57–58). Fundamentally, Agamben's project is indebted to the genealogy of mythical and divine law that Benjamin limned in his 1921 essay *On the Critique of Violence* (SW 1: 236–52). More than a decade after completing that seminal essay, Benjamin reiterated his conjectures in the first section of his Kafka study, *Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death* (SW 2.2: 794–818). Beyond questions involving the dialectics confronting bare life, norm and exception, stability and revolution, legal jurisdiction and messianic fulfillment, the juncture of divine justice and profane law finds itself encapsulated in Benjamin's inquiries into the nature of language. Accordingly, it would be useful to revisit Benjamin's theories of language in his early essays and in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, comparing these texts to his readings of Kafka.

LANGUAGE, CULTURAL MEMORY, AND MESSIANIC TRUTH

For Benjamin, German tragic drama marks the point at which a deviation from religious discourse and divine symbols takes place, especially since these transformations occur on a cultural level and initiate a historical consciousness grounded in secular forms of signification. As a result, his dialectical approach to language in the *Origin of German Tragic Drama* merges allegories with the creative intentions of a genius that recognizes the extent to which the authority of the divine has been lost. Although this realization can be attributed to a weakening of religious dogma at the outset of the Baroque era, the historicity that realigns

the relationship between images and cultural markers is distinctive for Benjamin's perception of language as allegory, and by all accounts, temporality forms a basis for the dialectical image sketched out in *Convolute N* of the *Arcades Project*.

Similar concerns can also be distinguished in his early essays on language, which bear witness to a "semiotic messianism" as well as a desire to blend philosophical premises with theological precepts. Benjamin's thinking hinges on the function of language as a medium for communicating intellectual growth and spiritual values. Referencing Kantian notions, his early theories view language and linguistic systems as the primary medium for distinguishing the fundamentals of divine reason in the most prominent traditions of cultural remembrance. Even though the language of human beings distances itself from its divine origin, the legacy of that origin tends to permeate all other categories, including philosophical logic and scientific advancement. When Benjamin determines that the world spirit is a linguistic essence and the medium of all worldly substance, then the wealth of the world spirit finds itself embodied in human beings' innate talent for generating words, as a medium of transmissibility that does not extend beyond that essential purpose. By giving objects names, humans exercise their divine mission to transform the language of the physical and the metaphysical into systems of thoughts. Without doubt, humans are ensnared in operative modes that transform language into an ontological network. While human terms may ultimately be located on a level secondary to that of the world spirit, their effectiveness and purpose are drawn from the incorruptibility of the primary essence. The language of animals and inanimate objects, by comparison, is derivative of both the divine and the human conduits of communication. Perceived in its entirety, this semiotic web is tantamount to a series of rings that are more or less dense in correlation to their proximity to the purest manifestation of God's word.

Benjamin's contention is that language, both as a communicative medium and as a form of being, should sustain a unity of identity that encompasses a single substance. Nevertheless, the reflexivity implied by the densities of the sign systems, their ability to mirror images, has an important implication. Because the signs are derivatives of pure language, they are no longer dependent on cultural conventions and require countless permutations of commentary and translation. "Translation," as Benjamin asserts, "attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language (with the exception of the word God) can be considered a translation of all the others. [. . .] Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations" (*SW I*: 69). If we consider the consequences of his assertion, then we can also presume that language is closely intertwined with profane orders, although their communicative potency resides in a divine integrity. Once again, we are confronted with the divine quality underlying profane systems of signification, which for all intents and purposes are

messianic in character, or with a *restitutio in integrum* inspired by a resurgence of the messianic as the purest signification of the word of God and the true essence of human beings' divine purpose as a purveyor of media.

One can only admire how consistent Benjamin's intellectual development from 1916 to the mid 1930s was, seeing as there is a direct correlation between his theoretical positions on languages as well as the theory of translation on the one hand and his concept of similarity on the other. Although couched in secular terms, these later positions hark back to the theosophic positions that Benjamin propagated in his early years. Above all, his concept of similarity rests on noticeable changes to the corpus of language in the wake of distortions instigated by historical crises and cultural decline. The emphasis here is on *noticeable*, since these changes are only distinguishable against the backdrop of the memory of an origin submerged beneath a series of transformations. "Language then becomes the highest application of the mimetic faculty [. . .] in other words it is to script and language that clairvoyance, over the course of history, has yielded its old powers" (*SW* 2.2: 697). For Benjamin, clairvoyance proves to be as abstract as it is divinatory. In his later theories, the leading archival medium is written language, which, as he conjectures, epitomizes the canon of a historically coded mimesis of nature. It follows, then, that mimesis is the talent of humans to discern real and ideal similarities in the plurality of signs extant in the micro- and macro-cosmos. As a medium of cultural invention, this mimetic talent detects and codifies the many similarities and dissimilarities embedded in the circulation of signs. In essence, similarity becomes the agent of human beings' faculty to remember an origin as well as to acknowledge the messianic, suggesting that the integrity of the signs is dependent on their being mimetically tied to the divine source of all articulated language.

In a similar vein, Benjamin's assessment of Kafka's works is also aligned to the idea of memory when he writes, "For the clearest deformation that is characteristic of Kafka's world has its roots in the fact that what is great, new, and liberating here manifests itself as atonement, in cases where the past has not seen through itself, confessed, and been finished with" (*SW* 2.2: 498). This presupposes that Kafka's works are manifestations of the guilt conjured up by not atoning for the transgressions of the past, even if these are perceptible to everyone. His writing, as Benjamin contends, is full of configurations of recollecting the forgotten, of silent pleas to recall weaknesses and deficiencies. This might be the significance of the imperial message, the emperor's legacy, which the demiurge dictates to his designated messenger from his deathbed in Kafka's "Imperial Message." An indefatigable man, the messenger never manages to penetrate the walls of the palace, so that the recipient is left sitting at the window dreaming of the day when the message from the dying reaches the one to whom it is addressed.

Benjamin conjectures that the person who should receive the message is the author himself, who is waiting for messianic inspiration and the revelation that it contains. However, the task of interpreting a writer such as Kafka from the center of his image world, as Benjamin suggests, impels us to recognize the reverse situation, when the surveyor K. is lying on his deathbed, exhausted by his struggles with the Castle officials. Then, at long last, the messenger arrives from the fortress, bringing the decisive piece of news: K. has no legal entitlement to live in the village, but because of mitigating factors he would be allowed to stay and work there. At this point, K.'s life is slowly ebbing away, so that remaining in the village and dying are one and the same. In the one instance we have the imperial message as an incitement to dream, a sure sign that the writer is at work, awaiting the message from the emperor, a half god. In the other, we are confronted with a message delivered long after its authority as a speech act has lost its force. Although one message comes from the dying, the other is revealed to the dying; in the end, both abrogate the logic of language as profane power and show that Kafka's salvation can only be found in renunciation, the revelation that the ruptured space between forgetting and remembering is grace. Likewise, Benjamin's later theories on language speak of mirrors, in which the semiotic discrepancies between the real and the ideal make themselves manifest. These are states of exception in which the laws governing language and messianism share a common purpose.

In an essay on Kafka's *The Castle*, the author and literary scholar W. G. Sebald claims that Kafka's K. is a messianic figure. Basing his argument on the author's attempts to learn Hebrew, Sebald shows that the Hebraic terms for *surveyor* and for *the anointed one* differ by one silent vowel (93). Sebald sees evidence for a messianic interpretation of Kafka's final novel, itself a fragment, since K. sheds light on the power struggle in the village at the foot of the massive stronghold, a bastion of profane power. Succumbing to the inevitable, K. is portrayed as an angelic or messianic figure, albeit one that is not part of a metaphysical system but an ontological one. His theological symbolism takes on an allegorical mode, in which profane laws are encapsulated within divine justice. While the justice he signifies may be revelatory, it can never specify. With respect to the messianic properties that are inherent to Kafka's works, Benjamin observes, "The fact that the Law never finds expression as such—this and nothing else is the gracious dispensation of the fragment" (*SW* 2.2: 497).

"JOSEPHINE, THE SINGER, OR THE MOUSE FOLK"

A masterpiece of German prose, Kafka's final story appeared in print two months prior to the author's death in June 1924. It is a text devoted to the power

of song, substantiating the charisma of the voice and oral expression as a cultural and mnemonic medium in the literature of the early twentieth century. On the one hand, Kafka determines that the singer and her elusive art represent an ideal of creaturely alliance, since her performances conjure up a moment of peace and harmony in the desultory lives of the mouse folk. On the other hand, the narrator deconstructs the beauty of her performances. Implicitly, he grounds his arguments on the cultural significance that sound has in Western intellectual history, from the bewitching song of the sirens and the Orpheus myth to the significance accorded to spoken utterance in Plato's *Phaidros* and Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. At once aural and visual, Josephine's art transcends pure vocal prowess to take on ritual qualities. Evoking something primal, her vocalism defies description and her vocal prowess challenges absolute, immutable truths. As a result, the conundrum of forgotten origins and lost truths appears in terms that cast doubt on Josephine's charisma for her unmusical collective. The narrator explains,

I have often thought about what this music of hers really means. For we are quite unmusical; how is it that we understand Josephine's singing or, since Josephine denies that, at least think we can understand it. The simplest answer would be that the beauty of her singing is so great that even the most insensitive cannot be deaf to it, but this answer is not satisfactory. (*Complete Stories* 360)

Because of the discrepancy between her vocal finesse and the piping sounds Josephine produces, little more than the chirping of mice as they go about their daily tasks, there seems to be a cultural and medial rupture here that stems from a loss of origin. In essence, the signs within these artifacts have been translated into the collective unconscious of an uninformed folk. "Although we are unmusical we have a tradition of singing; in the old days our people did sing; this is mentioned in legends and some songs have actually survived, which, it is true, no one can sing now" (361). Is Josephine singing at all, the narrator queries? Only when alluding to primordial forms of music, predating the chronic of the mice, intuitively felt, but remote and intangible, is the narrator able to fathom the secret of Josephine's art. The reiteration of something that has been subsumed into the inchoateness of the collective archive, the fragility of her voice, and her stage presence represent the messianic in Kafka's work. Promising a solemn moment of peace and integrity, a *restitutio in integrum*, as well as childlike innocence in a world full of natural enemies and acute dangers, Josephine's art is expected to redeem the mice; and if her art does not exorcise the evil that besets them, it accords the collective the strength to bear its own iniquity.

It is as if [the delicate creature] has concentrated all her strength on her song, as if from everything in her that does not directly subserve her singing all strength has been withdrawn, almost all power of life, as if she were laid bare, abandoned, committed merely to the care of good angels, as if while she is wholly withdrawn and living only in her song a cold breath blowing upon her might kill her. (363)

Like the “Imperial Message” or the message that reaches K. only after it is too late, Josephine’s song situates itself in an interstice between life and death, between now and some lost origin, between sending musical signs and receiving them. Without a doubt this is a messianic moment in Kafka, one that is akin to Benjamin’s notion of weak messianism, which figures as a splinter of messianic time in which the past has become momentarily citable for a redeemed folk, as Benjamin writes in his third thesis *On the Concept of History* (SW 4).

The power of her song is lost, however, when Josephine’s gifts wane. Her vocal prowess evaporates, and the singer disappears, putting an end to the influence she has gained over people’s hearts. “She hides herself and does not sing, but our people, quietly, without visible disappointment, a self-confident mass in perfect equilibrium, so constituted, even though appearances are misleading, that they can only bestow gifts and not receive them, even from Josephine, our people continue on their way” (376). Here, Kafka’s hints of the messianic are as tenuous as Benjamin’s weak messianism, coming as they do at the end of temporality and given the fact that the gatherings of the mice folk take place in utter silence after Josephine vanishes. Their silence suggests, of course, that innumerable instances of the past have been lost from cultural memory. Consistent with the world spirit in Hegelian metaphysics, the mice move on without commemorating Josephine’s value for the collective as a cult figure or her contributions to its mnemonic archive. Even more striking is that even during her heyday she seems to be nothing more than a medium of remembrance. Like Benjamin’s artists—Charles Baudelaire and Marcel Proust come to mind—she, too, delves into the archives of the past and projects long-forgotten artifacts into the now of a particular recognizability. Josephine’s song redeems fragments of primal language that flame up and subside just as quickly as they appear, meaning that her vocalism is both messianic and phantasmagorical in nature. Evoking instants of redemption that are also the moments of greatest danger for the mice, her art can ultimately be likened to one of Benjamin’s dialectical images. Genuine thought images, as Benjamin instructs us, are dialectical images, and they can be encountered in the spheres of language and linguistics. There, they confirm the authenticity of a messianic idea of prose. Paradoxically, at the end of temporality the narrator has Josephine advance from the perpetuity of cultural remembrance into the oblivion of heroic redemption.

Josephine, redeemed from her earthly sorrows which to her thinking lay in wait for all chosen spirits, will happily lose herself in the numberless throng of the heroes of our people, and soon, since we are no historians, will rise to the heights of redemption and be forgotten like all her brothers. (376)

The loss of her song suggests that any sense of cultural tradition has been discredited by a uniform, mechanical, and timeless collective order. The singer is perhaps the last to point to the rupture between the signified and the signifier, the cultural transition marked by the presence and authenticity of song, on the one hand, and the logical signifier in a cognitive and functional society on the other. At the close of Kafka's final text a space of time is conjured up, an interstice that is the interval between the loss of song as a messianic splinter and the end of temporality per se. This, too, is Kafka's and Benjamin's messianic legacy, when profane temporality has been lost, rupturing the continuum of history, and the redemption of universal history is yet to be revealed. In Kafka's "Josephine," the concept of universal history, as Benjamin defines it, is messianic, since in its image, expression, intention, and performance, messages sent and those still in transit have been subsumed into the divine justice of cultural memory.

"THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA"

Bernd Witte has argued convincingly that Kafka's disappointment with the Eastern Jewry he so deeply admired and his realization that Zionism posed a number of challenges form the background for "The Great Wall of China," a fragment that appeared posthumously in 1931 (Witte 197-99). Erected to protect the Chinese people from the nomadic tribes in the north, the wall serves political goals on the domestic front, becoming a symbol for national and cultural identity when the narrator tells of "two great armies of labor, the eastern and the western" (Kafka 235) that are engaged in constructing a barricade to ward off a common enemy. Following the principle of piecemeal construction, two crews of approximately twenty workers each build a length of five hundred meters from opposite ends. The crews congregate after completing a segment of the wall, and jubilant celebrations mark the conclusion of the stretch. However, the completed segment is not followed by another one that is contiguous; rather, the crews are moved to remote areas to begin yet another isolated stretch. Witte points out that this situation is allegoric for the random synthesis of Western and Eastern Jewry, which the Zionists proposed to protect the Jewish people from Christian domination. Seen from a sociopolitical perspective, Kafka's fragment is an allegory for the fears of the Jews in the East and West, who were emboldened to take action by Zionist politicians.

Fundamentally, the text is not only a reminder of the haphazard attempts to unite Jewish enclaves across the globe, but it also dwells on the profane power and the divine justice of a diasporic existence. The narrator's tone becomes caustic at times, especially when he asserts that the wall is "scarcely inferior to the construction of the Tower of Babel, although as regards divine approval, at least according to human reckoning, strongly at variance with that work" (238). His references to the hubris at Babel are founded on the tower's faulty foundation, causing it to collapse and initiate the dispersion of human language. The suggestion is that the great wall might succeed where the tower of Babel failed if weaknesses, ultimately weaknesses of faith, could be avoided. And yet, the indiscriminate building strategy indicates that the wall does not unite the Chinese people, in their hearts disbelievers, but the opposite; it has them spread out to remote regions of the empire, where each individual mason celebrates his own personal craft. The call to unity—"shoulder to shoulder, a ring of brothers" (238)—does not ring true here. Superimposing historical and existing realities, Chinese pasts, and Jewish presents, Kafka's parable condemns the language of the Zionists and mourns the state of European affairs in 1917.

Essentially, the wall is the decree of a high command that remains imperceptible to the collective eye. Not only does the source of its power remain elusive, but its plans to construct the wall are also suffused with an indistinct, divine aura: "And through the window of the offices of the high command the reflected splendors of divine worlds fell on the hands of the leaders as they traced their plans" (240). In connection with the many questions about true faith and secular objectives, inner strength and exterior security, as well as individual and collective memory that the fragment raises, the reference to divine empowerment is ambiguous. The text aspires to think beyond the question of a Jewish collective, one that predates Western civilization, making it an allegory for the many flaws besetting modernity at the onset of the twentieth century. Given that the intellectual legacy of eighteenth-century Enlightenment also led to the logic of global warfare in modern times, Kafka proposes that humanity invests its energies in senseless activities, promoted by indecisive and covert political leaders. Ultimately, as with Kafka's "Imperial Message," the truth cannot be delivered to "the humble subject, the insignificant shadow cowering in the remotest distance before the imperial sun" (4), because it is "a message from a dead man" (5). Like Josephine's enigmatic vocal genius, Kafka's and Benjamin's messages have been transformed into profane illumination.

Profane illumination, the objective Benjamin ascribed to the writing of the surrealists in the 1920s, mirrors what he discovers in Kafka's texts. At once profane and sacred, the author's world echoes the unholy turmoil of the primeval, since its technological advancements obstruct an origin that has been lost. Benjamin

searches for the flashlike constellation between the present moment and the smallest fragments from the past that are torn out of their original contexts. These, then, represent the hidden manifestation of divine justice within the profane power of a modern society. Though distancing himself from overt theological interpretations of Kafka's works, Benjamin locates the Prague storyteller's work in the context of traditional Jewish discourse and insists that "Kafka's genius lay in the fact that he tried something altogether new: he gave up truth so that he could hold on to its transmissibility, the haggadic element" (SW 3: 326). Here, literature assumes the commentary status usually accorded to holy texts, implying that Kafka's parables reveal something fundamental about cultural memory and that this perception can also be equated to the profane illumination of the fragment. In turn, fragments target the rupture, in which divine justice cuts through profane power, exploding the continuum of time and revealing the divine message within language as such and the language of man. Benjamin explained the legitimacy of Kafka's texts in a radio broadcast aired seven years after the author's death: "Like the haggadic parts of the Talmud, these books, too, are stories; they are a Haggadah that constantly pauses, luxuriating in the most detailed descriptions, in the simultaneous hope and fear that it might encounter the halachic order, the doctrine itself, en route" (SW 2.2: 496). For Benjamin and Kafka, the space in which content and form, secular stories and sacred dogma, converge is the revelation of messianic truths in modernity.

As a final point, Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony" features a brutal instrument of execution that inscribes written penalties onto the body of the condemned, drawing attention to the relationship between messianic language and profane law and the point at which that correlation becomes a matter of life and death. However, in positing an absolute homology between law and language, Agamben's exegesis of the story goes one step further than previous interpretations of the text: "A singular light is thrown on Kafka's tale of the Penal Colony when one realizes that the machine of torture . . . is in fact language." Included in an anthology of dense thought-images entitled *Idea of Prose*, Agamben's assertion that "the machine is primarily an instrument of justice and punishment" and that "on earth and for men, language is also such an instrument" (115) reaffirms Benjamin's theory of language. In his approach, the arbitrariness of the signs is tantamount to the loss of a pure Adamic language, arising from humans' relegation from paradise and their fall into sin. This loss can be associated with the emergence of modern cultures of memory that bear witness to the invisible scar of human beings' inner dependency, their need to forget in order to remember. Agamben interprets the destruction of the torture machine at the end of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" in the light of a messianic redemption from language and law, from divine justice and profane power. Only the coming of the messianic fragment can redeem cultural

memory by delivering the language of humans, their most valuable treasure and greatest hope, from its transgressions, restoring a pure memory imbued with the origin of the word; this redemption represents nothing more and nothing less than a *restitutio in integrum*.

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