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Aesthetics and Politics: Reflections on Love and the Origins of Fascism

ABSTRACT: *Arguing against the grain of conventional readings that Rosenzweig's philosophy is a-historical, I maintain instead that a more nuanced and faithful reading should take into account the underlying logical dynamics of his speech-act philosophy that become embodied through the role that love relationships – understood aesthetically on both individual and communal levels – are ways to 'redeem' history messianically, thereby redeeming or creating more just political communities. This happens at the level of an immanent, normative critique of the dominant authoritarian pressures to assimilate to existing social and political conditions. I connect that with a reading of Benjamin's philosophy, arguing that Rosenzweig's "messianic aesthetics" determinatively influenced Walter Benjamin's dialectics of ethical and political critique – which resulted in Benjamin's work becoming both revelatory and historically redemptive, that is, politically messianic.*

KEYWORDS: *Rosenzweig, Benjamin, messianic aesthetics, love, fascism, critique.*

“Love and the origins of fascism” – such a strange pairing of terms, but in reflecting upon that *towards which* those terms respectively refer, such a pairing challenges our habituated inclinations to simply and superficially reduce the terms to categorical antagonists in an ever-renewing, unending battle expressed through countless millennia in the forms and content of our poetry, our rules and regulations that govern commerce and social relations, and the national and international laws of our militarized States. It seems that we humans, as philosophers and artists, politicians and soldiers, slaves and dalits, women and men – all of us – have been seeking and continue to seek for the appropriate criteria for determining what is meaningful in our sensibly spiritual lives with each other and with this earth. With the following reflections, I hope to contribute some illuminating reflections on how the relationship of aesthetics and politics plays out in our efforts to determine those criteria. My reflections are informed by the relationships of ethics to aesthetics set in motion for us in the philosophies of Franz Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin.

At the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas asks his readers if we “are not duped by morality” and in doing so raises the question of the difference between morality and ethics, with the inherent demand that we make the

effort to distinguish that difference¹. The former, morality, refers to ideas that we have learned and hold about human behavior, through the epistemological and metaphysical language games that we play: rationalist forms of self-legislation or postulations of freedom; how to calculate the greatest happiness for the greatest number; or the cultivation of virtues and determinations of the mean between the extremes of deficiency and excess. Respectively, these are the well-known philosophical theories of normative ethics: deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. But instead of continuing in the language games of morality, Levinas posits the claim that ‘ethics is first philosophy’ and that the definitional tasks of logic and metaphysics take subsidiary roles to the interpretive and phenomenological descriptions of face-to-face encounters and inter-subjective relations. That entails a philosophy of *experience* that is relational and that begins by someone calling to another or by the other calling to me, which thereby establishes traditions and socio-cultural contexts and language. Those practices carry on that empirically unpredictable dynamic of call-and-response in environmental and material conditions established at some specific time and place, having developed contingently and temporally out of our historically fixed past and with reference to an unknown and uncertain future. Most importantly, the call and response arises from an event that occurs in a community that is prior to all and every form of cognition and recognition; indeed, ethics as an activity takes form in the relational uncertainties and determinations of love or fascism, forms of which have come to be known and studied in the disciplines we call aesthetics and politics.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, two German-Jewish philosophers had a great deal to say about the nature of artistic expression, and a good bit about the political. Rosenzweig (1886-1929) and Benjamin (1892-1940) were contemporaries and even though they never met each other they had a philosophical kinship in the way that their respective religious and theological sensibilities interfused their aesthetic and literary theories with political considerations. Both philosophers were educated in the classical German tradition that included rigorous studies in classical and modern languages, literary studies, and economic and political theory. Both independently developed theories of language that were very similar². But the

1 The importance of this observation made by Levinas in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* is to contest the skepticism of other philosophers who believe that genuine peace and the kind of ethics (or morality), which it takes to achieve that, are not possible in the world. The only kind of ‘peace’ that is possible is that which can be founded on the negotiated exchanges of politics and submission to the dictates of “Real-Politik”. See E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority* (1969), Engl. transl. by A. Lingis, Dordrecht-Boston, Kluwer, 1991, p. 21.

2 The phrase “Es gibt nur eine Sprache” (“There is only one language”) is a central theme for Franz Rosenzweig’s philosophy of language that is fundamental for understanding the speech-act logic in *The Star of Redemption*. See F. Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (1921), in idem, *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften II*, introduction by R. Mayer, Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1976; Engl. transl. by W. W. Hallo, *The Star of Redemption*, Notre Dame, Notre Dame Press, 1985. The phrase also serves as a guiding thread for his theory of translation that asserts that all human languages are translational movements on variations of the search for “messianic peace” or, as I argue below, “messianic aesthetics”. See also F. Rosenzweig, *Jehuda Halevi. Zwei-undneunzig Hymnen und Gedichte*, Berlin, Lambert Schneider, 1927, p. 155; Engl. transl. by T.

essential key to their kinship, however, was their existential condition of being Jewish which, in their case, meant that their works display a conscious awareness of the importance of being born into and having been influenced by a distinctive, culturally rich, and historically important religious community of people – in their case as Jews, a people who had developed their historical identity as exiles or strangers in strange lands. And as part of that identity, the historical *and* personal condition of exile that affected their ethical, political, and aesthetic sensibilities meant, for *both* Rosenzweig *and* Benjamin, that their aesthetic theories were charged with ethical forms of a responsibility that had significant consequences for how their political conditions affected their choices, personally and politically. This shows up in how Benjamin may have appropriated Rosenzweig’s highly complex aesthetics of the phenomenon of messianism – personally, historically, and politically. In what follows, I begin with the awareness of how messianism was not simply some arbitrary logical concept that was lying around, so speak, for these or others to pick up and stipulatively employ, but instead, should be understood as an historically embodied belief that has shaped minds and structured actions and communities in profound ways and continues to guide and inform the hopes and dreams of billions of humans as it has done for millennia³.

It was already the case that from the beginning of his studies as a student of philosophy and maturation into one of the twentieth century’s foremost critical thinkers, that Benjamin was self-consciously developing an ethically informed approach for his philosophy of art. Richard Wolin exhaustively spells this out in *Walter Benjamin. An Aesthetic of Redemption*, quoting Jürgen Habermas’s assessment of how Benjamin’s approach to art differed from that of Herbert Marcuse’s and Theodor Adorno’s⁴. Habermas separates the approaches by claiming that the latter two re-appropriated the Enlightenment agenda of liberating humans from the delusions of their ideologies, while Benjamin was committed to engaging in a redemptive critique. He notes that Benjamin’s criticism of art “aims, to be sure, at the ‘mortification of the works’; however, criticism [for Benjamin] effects a mortification of the work of art only in order to transpose it from the medium

Kovach, E. Jospe, and G. G. Schmidt, *Ninety-Two Poems and Hymns of Yehudah Halevi*, ed. by R. A. Cohen, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, pp. XLV-XLVI.

3 For a provocative interpretation of the intertwined history of the phenomenon of messianism, between Athens and Jerusalem, that affirms its ongoing contemporary relevance, especially from the perspective of the works of Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Emil Fackenheim, and Emmanuel Levinas, see M. Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004. While the secondary literature on messianism, especially with respect to Judaism and Christianity, is too extensive to even begin to list here, I would like to note that the concept of “messianism” plays a role in many other religions as well: Islam, Buddhism (Maitreya), Hinduism (Kalki), Zoroastrianism (Saoshyant), and in the Bahá’í (Bahá’u’lláh). Even more relevant for this thesis is my publication on Walter Benjamin’s messianism: see J. Simon, *Benjamin in Paris: Weak Messianism and Memories of the Oppressed*, in *Topographien der Erinnerung. Zu Walter Benjamins Passagen*, ed. by B. Witte, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2008, pp. 91-100.

4 See R. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin. An Aesthetic of Redemption*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 1994, p. 29.

of beauty to the medium of truth – and thereby to redeem it”⁵. Wolin asserts that what is at issue for Benjamin was nothing less than developing a *metaphysic of redemption* whereby the “mortification” of the work of art becomes a way of putting something ascetically to death through religious purification – whereby the attentive singling out of an art-work as an autonomous, independent entity is accomplished by the work of the philosophical critic and mediated in such a way – through critique – that its truth content ‘bursts forth’ from its contingently ‘dead’ historical-material conditions in order to reveal a kind of transcendent truth content and an ‘ideally’ redeemed life⁶.

The relevance of Wolin’s assessment has to do with that part of my thesis that depends on determining how Benjamin saw the role of the art critic as balancing the tension that holds between a serene and unattached aesthetic contemplation of great works of art – in the tradition of art for art’s sake – and the engaged socially concerned art that enters into the work of transforming the decadent and violently destructive socio-political modern age of technological reproducibility. On that point, Wolin notes that Benjamin was engaged in working on

[t]he distinction between “material content” and “truth content” [which] concerns the paradoxical fact that works of art are objects that originate in a determinate, fleeting moment of time but transcend that limited, historical point of origin in order to reveal something suprahistorical: an image of truth. The constantly fluctuating historical relation between these two moments accounts for the enigma of every work of art with which the critic always finds himself confronted initially: the *Schein des Scheinlosen*, the appearance of that which cannot appear, the emergence of something infinite, the truth, from something that is man-made and finite, a work of art⁷.

With respect to the work as a whole, Wolin situates Benjamin in the context of having been influenced by Ernst Bloch, György Lukács, and Bertolt Brecht – along with the usual friends, Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem – but with clear-sighted understanding that Benjamin’s unique roots sank deep into the fertile soil of his own, hard-won negation of Kant’s philosophical-epistemological project. On Benjamin’s reading, that philosophical project was a ‘watershed event’ that led to skeptically dividing humans up into isolated subjects and simultaneously institutionalized ‘science’ into distinct, isolated disciplines of knowledge – narrowing the scope of acceptable theoretical discourse with the deluded belief that all true knowledge is empirically measurable knowledge. The larger metaphysical or phenomenological or ‘life’ issue for Benjamin, and before him for Rosenzweig, is that

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Wolin develops the thesis of “mortification” even further in his chapter “The Path to *Trauerspiel*”, where he explicates Benjamin’s criticisms of Kant’s “Enlightenment biases [...] [that] [...] conspire to produce a concept of experience that remains hostage to the scientific prejudices of his age”. See *ibidem*, p. 34, and pp. 52 f. for references to how the goal of all art criticism is the mortification of the transitory, material content of works of art to enable them to “bask in the eternal light of truth”.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

such a reduction of reason to the role of handmaiden to the natural sciences and the resultant categorical ban on all utopian or idealist thinking, reduced ‘experience’ to the domain of narrowly – arguably myopically – determined axiomatic judgments of purely rational postulations, only verifiable in their respective, schematically configured knowledge cells. This is all well and good but mostly provocative. Which is why it also provides an entry point for my thesis about aesthetics and politics.

My thesis is motivated by my contention that Wolin left out one of the most important influences on Benjamin’s thought and work, namely, Benjamin’s reading of Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*. Wolin does include a significant reference to Rosenzweig in a footnote which indicates that in Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* work, the “idea of ‘speechlessness’ of the tragic hero once he has realized himself to be superior to the gods derives from Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*”⁸. However, while that is a significant concession, it does not go nearly far enough. I have been pointing towards the critical importance of aligning Benjamin’s and Rosenzweig’s work for many years, at least as far back as my article in “Philosophy Today”, *Benjamin’s Feast of Booths* from 2003, where I make the argument that “Rosenzweig embraces the life of a subversive messianic exile that enables the structures of distance that are needed for ethical critique of any political system, precisely because of the self-differentiation involved in creating and maintaining the integrity of a Jewish community”⁹. I go on to argue that Benjamin may well have modeled his *Convolute I* in the *Passagen-Werk* from being inspired by his reading of Rosenzweig¹⁰. Central to that thesis is the understanding of the centrality of the revelatory love relationship both in Rosenzweig’s masterpiece, *The Star of Redemption*, and for his general understanding of the ‘aesthetics’ of messianism and how that aesthetic differentially works in our modern human lives and relationships, as such.

More than ten years before I began thinking about their relationship, however, Stéphane Mosès drew our attention to the significance of Benjamin’s reading of Rosenzweig in his work, *The Angel of History*. Mosès makes the case that “Rosenzweig countered modern nationalism, which he interprets as a secularized form of messianism, with the concept of a *metahistory*, that is, a sacred time, cut off from the vicissitudes of political temporality, where the Jewish people would live its religious vocation”¹¹. Mosès also argues that Benjamin rethought Marxist themes and historical materialism in the light of Jewish messianism as he “once and for all rejects all notions of historical progress by countering it with the idea of

8 *Ibidem*, p. 283, note 55.

9 J. Simon, *Benjamin’s Feast of Booths*, in “Philosophy Today”, XLVII (2003), no. 3, pp. 258-265, here p. 259.

10 The *Passagen-Werk* refers to Benjamin’s massive, unfinished project on developing a philosophy of the city, based on his observations about Paris. See W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (1982), Engl. transl. by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, prepared on the basis of the German volume ed. by R. Tiedemann, Cambridge-London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002.

11 See S. Mosès, *The Angel of History. Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (1992), Engl. transl. by B. Harshav, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 14.

the sudden interruptions of history: breaks that are so many messianic instants”¹². In his analysis, Mosès lays out the terms for his thesis by drawing attention to the exchange of letters by Rosenzweig and Eugen Rosenstock which occurred along the lines of a discussion of the historical development of the Jewish and Christian peoples and the changes that occurred in modernity, specifically in how they contended with each other about what it means to be chosen, to be elected – to be ‘messianic’, as it were. As Mosès correctly noted, the historical reality that Rosenzweig identified to develop his part of the argument depended on his understanding of the “purely political vision [that] has governed the national consciousness of all European nations since 1789”¹³. That consciousness begins with revolutionary France coming to believe that it had a universal mission to spread the idea of freedom throughout the world and continued with Hegel systematically taking up Fichte’s belief that Germany was the new chosen people by showing that all great civilizations in the world had, in their particular times and places, their role to play in the universal mission to embody and progressively move forward the dialectical realization of the Absolute Spirit. In carrying on his critique of Hegel from *Hegel and the State* into *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig notes that universalizing messianism into a philosophy of the State by Hegel led to the proliferation of the competing sovereignties of the modern nation-states, based on the thinking that “all peoples are chosen peoples, and all modern wars are holy wars”¹⁴. Rosenzweig’s project in *The Star of Redemption*, as we have come to increasingly know its contours and complexities, was to provide an alternate version of world history, one that was redemption-oriented and that held on to the ideals of love-as-ethicality such that what it means to be responsible is to never completely merge with the societies in which one participates, but to maintain an ethical, exilic, and non-assimilative distance. Only in this way could the Jews, in their quintessential humanity, remain true to themselves and to each other. Rosenzweig identified this as a messianic nationalism with eschatological ideologies that would proliferate into various national models with universal pretensions¹⁵. The concomitant corollary to this, which Mosès alludes to, is that with such developments the element of critical, ethical distance would be suppressed in the emergence of the form of political fascism.

The best way to understand this, however, is to turn to the work of Benjamin who intentionally misreads Rosenzweig’s passages on love, the lover, and the beloved – and what it means to be chosen¹⁶. But before considering Benjamin’s

12 *Ibidem*.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 45.

14 *Ibidem*, p. 28. This is a theme that Rosenzweig was able to authoritatively develop because of his Hegel book. See: F. Rosenzweig, *Hegel und der Staat*, 2 vols., München-Berlin, R. Oldenbourg, 1920.

15 S. Mosès, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

16 As the core thesis for this paper, “Benjamin’s misreading of Rosenzweig” is spelled out in the following pages and most directly by page 144, with the declaration: “This is Benjamin’s modification of Rosenzweig’s ‘messianic aesthetics’” and in what follows in the next paragraph with respect to how Benjamin modifies Rosenzweig’s midrash on *Shir ha-Sharim*: “Benjamin

misreading, it is necessary to carefully consider those passages that constitute the heartpiece of *The Star of Redemption* in Book 2 of Part II and how Rosenzweig's philosophy of art can be interpreted as expressing human relationships that are ethically inflected. To do that effectively enough to be able to grasp Benjamin's misreading, however, we would need to understand Rosenzweig's theory of art and aesthetics in such a way that we could likewise grasp the role that ethicality plays in his work. That is the work that I did in my book, *Art and Responsibility. A Phenomenology of the Diverging Paths of Rosenzweig and Heidegger*¹⁷. Recounting the thesis and arguments I make there is too much to recapitulate here but constitute the grounds for my contentions in the thesis that I am proposing here. Instead of that detailed argument, in what follows, I briefly interpret several aspects of Benjamin's indebtedness to Rosenzweig's aesthetics which provided material for his own, original analysis of the aestheticizing of politics in the early twentieth century.

Significantly, one of the defining influences on the development of Benjamin's approach to understanding the relationship of politics and aesthetics came from his encounter with Rosenzweig's philosophy; specifically, his reading of the first two parts of *The Star of Redemption*. As I noted above, it was already the case before Benjamin came to *The Star* that he had the sense that his distinctive contribution to our human development and relations would be as a literary critic, in the grandest sense of what that vocation entails. But that calling changed, not only under the influence of Bloch, Brecht, and Lukács, but of his love relationship with Asja Lācis¹⁸ and his reading of Rosenzweig. What may have emerged from his reading was his intuition of the way in which Rosenzweig develops the concept of a "messianic aesthetics" throughout the course of his book and the way in which that concept constitutes the ethical heart of Rosenzweig's own ethically informed philosophy of art¹⁹. In what follows, I provide a brief overview of that concept and then a few ideas about what that may have meant for Benjamin.

In Part I of *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig develops the foundations for what he would later characterize as his "New Thinking", namely, a way of thinking that challenges traditional forms of 'totalizing' thinking that he identified with philosophical idealism, from "Iona to Jena" – from Plato's idealist philosophy through Hegel's idealist philosophy. From Rosenzweig's perspective, the ways in which humans are philosophically and culturally taught to think about their relationship with the world and other humans in developing human communities

responds midrashically in taking up Rosenzweig's handling of the biblical passages of what it means to be chosen in love".

17 See J. Simon, *Art and Responsibility. A Phenomenology of the Diverging Paths of Rosenzweig and Heidegger*, New York-London, Continuum, 2011.

18 See W. Benjamin, *One-Way Street* (1928), Engl. transl. by E. Jephcott, ed. by M. W. Jennings, preface by G. Marcus, Cambridge-London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016.

19 For a more detailed elaboration of the concept of "messianic aesthetics", see my article *Rosenzweig's Messianic Aesthetics*, in *Franz Rosenzweigs "neues Denken"*. *Internationaler Kongress Kassel 2004*, ed. by W. Schmied-Kowarzik, 2 vols., Freiburg-München, Karl Alber, 2006, vol. 1, pp. 407-417.

came about, principally, through combining and interweaving cultural and linguistic traditions that have historically resulted in the formation of distinct types of ethical, and thus political communities. The task of the artist in such a world has been a very important one because, for Rosenzweig, artists are essential in human communities for how they provide diverse ways for other humans to transform themselves, their experiences, and their relationships, through the particular ways that they both ‘critically’ and ‘lovingly’ engage with their respective socio-political and earthly environments. This is especially the case with poetry and the spoken and performative arts, but not exclusively, since Rosenzweig also considers the religious rituals of liturgy and various kinds of architecture associated with religious communities – such as churches – as kinds of art forms. Rosenzweig based his philosophy of art on how he thought of the role of the artist as one that affirms the fragmented and particularistic nature of human experience, especially in the development of authentic and transformative forms of love relationships. It is, thereby, also a relationship of responsibility.

Rosenzweig develops his “messianic aesthetics” through synthesizing several levels of philosophical interpretations and analyses – existentially, metaphysically, epistemologically, and most importantly ethically and aesthetically. The consequences for political critique are not directly addressed because his approach, like Benjamin’s, cultivates indirection and thus establishes the horizons for effectively criticizing political totalitarianism and fascism. For Rosenzweig, this is done through the theological lens of messianism primarily because the monotheistic religious traditions upon which he focuses – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – promote messianic ways of thinking through aesthetically informing various ways of developing and promoting community relations. This can be seen in how such traditions have historically developed, that is: through their relatively similar forms of foundational scriptures; through distinct expressions of poetry, narrative and hermeneutic practices; through architecture – synagogues, churches, and mosques; and through liturgical rituals. More specifically for Rosenzweig, the particularity of the historical development of religious communities can be further differentiated by the ways in which those communities respectively have adopted different forms of messianic aesthetics. What I mean by that is that Judaism, for example, has developed a distinct form of a messianic aesthetic that has determined the shape and practices of that community as an exilic, non-assimilative community in changing political contexts over more than two thousand years. As Mosès points out in his analysis of the Rosenzweig-Rosenstock exchange, those notions of Jewish and Christian assimilation or non-assimilation to the political world order critically determined Rosenzweig’s New Thinking. For me, that New Thinking can be otherwise characterized as an expression of his messianic aesthetics.

We can see how that works by turning to *The Star of Redemption*. In Part II of the book, Rosenzweig fleshes out a formal aesthetic theory that he outlined in Part I by elaborating how that aesthetic theory concretely functions with the *midrash* (a Jewish form of interpretation) that he presents on the pagan love song, *Shir ha-Sharim*, the *Song of Songs* – which serves as the heartpiece for both his book and – for Rosenzweig – for the Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*. Rosenzweig uses a midrash

of the *Song of Songs* in order to provide a concrete application of how the art form of poetry can be used to express the dynamics and particular material conditions of human love relationships. Moreover, he does so to exemplify ethical considerations, namely, how a work of art can be used to preserve and promote responsible activity of humans towards each other. In so far as someone participates in such forms of authentic artistic expression – forms of authentic, dialogically responsive love – she is able not only to grow in her own abilities to be more ethically and aesthetically responsive to the world within which we live, but she is also able to engage with others (beyond her lover) in more responsive and responsible ways by not only respecting their differences but in loving them because of the attraction of those differences. In fact, Rosenzweig felt so strongly about this that he said: “In order for a human to become most fully human, he has to write [and share] a poem of love at least one time in his life”. When art happens, especially poetry, we become aware of and involved in the unpredictable and revelatory joys of love relations, of being chosen and of choosing another with whom to be happy and healthy together.

The paper that I published ten years ago at the “founding” Congress of the Internationale Rosenzweig-Gesellschaft e.V. in Kassel, Germany, is entitled *Rosenzweig’s Messianic Aesthetics*. At the time, I used ideas from Benjamin’s philosophy to help make sense of the messianic ‘function’ in Rosenzweig’s aesthetic theory. Also at the time, I focused on the speech-act phenomena laid out by Rosenzweig in his discussion of love relationships as revelatory and the source of responsibility in Part II of *The Star of Redemption*. In that regard, I want to briefly reconsider that earlier work and revisit some of what I said then because while I think that my interpretations of Rosenzweig were spot-on, I believe I did a disservice to Benjamin. In looking back, I will then be looking forward because one of those new horizons that has opened with the most recent work dealing with Rosenzweig’s philosophy is the way in which his philosophy can be effectively applied. In my previous interpretation, as I used my understanding of Benjamin to help interpret Rosenzweig then, Rosenzweig’s work is now beginning to be conjoined with that of others, helping to further develop a body of research inspired by the seminal originality of Rosenzweig’s work. That, after all, is also the essential function of midrash and that little word *and*.

The passage in question comes after my analysis of how Rosenzweig differentiates the two forms of “content” – *Gehalt* and *Inhalt* – in his three-part elaboration of his aesthetic theory in *The Star of Redemption* – outer form, inner form, and the Beautiful – and how that relates to what he presents about the phenomenon of love and the theological/aesthetic concept of “revelation” in Part II, Book 2. This is that passage²⁰:

In Rosenzweig’s formal aesthetic categories, the concept of revelation (*Offenbarung*) has less to do with grounding or explaining the elements as ‘stuff’ than with typifying how humans-as-elements relate. In other words, Rosenzweig’s choice, like Levinas’ after him, is to prioritize ethics over ontology, which means that in his aesthetics he

20 *Ibidem*, pp. 415 f.

establishes the grounds of an epistemology that is derived from an already established ethical relationship [...]. Indeed, the aesthetic categories themselves, as revelatory-relational concepts, have to do not with breadth of “content”, defined as *Inhalt*, which would have to do with creation, but rather with the evaluative intensity of content defined as *Gebalt*²¹. While *Inhalt* connotes that which is contained in something else, as liquid is contained in a vessel, *Gebalt* connotes that which is earned, experienced, and held – and entails a temporal association. Hence, to denote such evaluative-intensive kinds of “content”, Rosenzweig refers to revelation as a temporal/aesthetic process of sensual en-souling²². Unlike the process of creation, the revelatory process of ensouling is depicted not as a “setting-free-from” but, rather, as that which takes the form of a wrestling-out-of the pre-aesthetic wholeness.

And the relevant passage about Benjamin is in the following paragraph²³:

any lover who turns out of and away from her or himself and attends to the other prioritizes that other, thus ‘ensouling’ the other with an intensity of value, of ‘holding’ or ‘embracing’ the other in consideration – along the lines of a Benjaminian auratic relationship. But for Rosenzweig, this is not merely a subject-object, dialectical process with a happy and mutually beneficial ‘return’ function; rather, it is one in which both subjects (lover and beloved) stand in immediate relation to the whole of their cohering relationship, just differently, and alternating the embracing and thus enlivening acts for and with each other²⁴. What was previously mere *stuff* or *content* as *Inhalt* becomes, through the embrace of each one of the other, ensouled content with particular value as *Gebalt*. The revelatory process is a way of talking about how those involved in relating to one another from their respectively isolated and relatively differentiated status as individually created object-things experience irruption and undergo conversion into a differentiating process of particular subjects endowed with value – so endowed because each is loved/named/identified in and for her/himself – uniquely and historically attended to, that is, messianically chosen²⁵.

The key lines are the movement from conceptual vision to embodied wholeness that only can come about through being engaged in the ‘ensouling’ of a love relationship. In making sense of this “messianic aesthetic” of love for Rosenzweig, my insight at the time was to use Benjamin’s more famous presentation of the aesthetic

21 F. Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, cit., p. 213. The entire quote is: “des Ganzen auf den zu ver-dichtenden seelischen Gehalt”. *Inhalt* connotes that which is contained in something else, as liquid is contained in a vessel, for example. Whereas, *Gebalt* connotes that which is earned, experienced, and held.

22 *Ibidem*, pp. 213 ff., for further elaboration on how *Inhalt* is distinguished from *Gebalt*. At the end, Rosenzweig depicts the star of redemption whose “content of Judaism” (*Gebalt des Judentums*) flames forth with the truth of the oneness of God. See *ibidem*, p. 457.

23 J. Simon, *Rosenzweig’s Messianic Aesthetics*, cit., pp. 416 f.

24 As an aside, note the respective emergence of the “Yes” and “No” from the nothing in the section on metaphysics in Book 1, Part I of *The Star of Redemption* for Rosenzweig’s presentation of an analysis of the logic of “wrestled out conceptual meaning”. This is a *re-soundence* of that process on another, more complex, level. In terms of chaos theory, the application can be compared to that of a scaling of structures of similarity. The success of Rosenzweig’s project depends in no small measure on the way these anti-dialectical structures permeate, that is, scale through his text.

25 Through listening to and responding to the other’s story.

concept of “aura” as a way to unpack, as it were, Rosenzweig’s presentation of the phenomenon of love. However, in these past several years in working more closely with Benjamin’s work, I have come to better understand what I take to be his deep indebtedness to what he learned from reading Rosenzweig as informing his own understanding of the experience of aura in the aesthetically expressive acts of art and the phenomenon of experiencing the ‘aura’ of another person, a work of art, or simply any ‘thing’ whatsoever.

This way of relating the phenomena of art and the ethics of responsibility was most likely integrated into Benjamin’s way of thinking after he read Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption* in the late 1920s. For Benjamin, however, the responsibility of an artist and of the art critic extends to their respective awareness of the ways in which art is employed to address the present condition of capitalism and the exploitation and suffering of the masses. In his most anthologized essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility*, Benjamin wrote that it is possible to formulate “theses about the developmental tendencies of art under present conditions of production” but that these theses (on art) would “brush aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery” and introduce new ones “useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art”²⁶. Where Rosenzweig developed his aesthetic theory on art through linking it to dialogical modes of creativity and ethical responsibility, Benjamin challenged authoritarian forms of political habit and traditions, especially in how those developed into monological forms of totalitarian fascism in Germany and throughout Europe. Underlying Benjamin’s critique is Rosenzweig’s insight about love and creativity. *And*, correlatively, Benjamin’s challenge could easily be understood as the extension of Rosenzweig’s modern, nationalist secular messianism.

From Rosenzweig, however, it seems to me that Benjamin also adopted the notion that art should promote a personal way of ‘aesthetically’ living in one’s present with loving attention and actively engaging one’s memory, both voluntary and involuntary forms. For both Rosenzweig and Benjamin, both artist and she who is engaged in experiencing art attend to the relationship of particular to whole, of the relationship of individual in the context of the whole work and of its social expression, and thus preserve the participatory aesthetic activity of humans in how we have trained ourselves to manipulate or to be manipulated, to consciously adopt or unconsciously apply ideas to the point of abstraction that can result in indifference. Instead, Benjamin uses the art of montage because of the way *that* particular art-form retains a more authentic way that humans relate to each other in our daily, fragmented and relative ways. Instead of reproducing ‘correct’ forms of regulated behavior, montage can be found in fragmented forms of narrative, gatherings of related-but-distinct quotations, and in radically

26 W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (1936), Engl. transl. by E. Jephcott and H. Zohn, in idem, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935-1938, ed. by H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings, Cambridge-London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 101-133, here p. 101.

particular expressions of individual experiences. In fact, Benjamin's short text, *One-Way Street*, is his successful depicting of literary montage.

For Benjamin, but also for Rosenzweig, this relates to the aesthetics of German idealism, especially Kant's, where participatory art promotes responsibility and which is supposed to then 'heal' the problems of the non-aesthetic realm. For Kant, that meant learning about what is beautiful and sublime which leads individual, rational agents to form a *communis sensus* guided by their common understanding of the duty of a universally legislating moral imperative. With that in mind, namely, the teaching of art as *Bildung* (an education in culture), someone like the neo-Kantian Friedrich Schiller could argue that being educated in art enables us to better seek to create a higher realm of ideas/experience and thus to come to a more whole, or 'total' experience.

However, Benjamin's critique is that such a 'wholeness' in art can only be provisional and thus has to be presented in more fragmented ways – via montage – in order to retain an openness to the uniqueness of human expression and individuality. Thus, 'authentic' forms of art should present experiences *indirectly* and thereby as resistance to or negation of a totalizing, fascist political world. What this means, is that one of the functions of 'good' or authentic art is to create shock and renewal in such a way that a process of judging of the world begins to occur. In such a judging, things get destroyed – mortified, as Habermas put it – but because the things themselves are signifiers, or metaphors, or allegories, they refer to something else and thus preserve, as it were, a more authentic 'higher' or sanctified realm of totality. This is Benjamin's modification of Rosenzweig's "messianic aesthetics", which takes the dialectical form of destroying the political aesthetics of a profane world of 'symbols' that can be mimetically reproduced and thus easily represented to manipulate the consciousness of the masses – thus mobilizing them for violent purposes. Benjamin's aesthetics are dialectical because, as dialectical judgments of art, they occur *in part* and thus *indirectly* entail a minimal conscious awareness of and engagement with one's socio-political world through negation – thus allowing for the preservation of and provision for a higher 'messianic' or sanctified life of truly auratic experiences of genuine human expression. Indeed, if I am interpreting Benjamin's dialectical aesthetics 'correctly,' such judgments lead us towards actually transforming our social relations, which is the essence of a 'genuinely loving' messianic aesthetic and not the fascist form of a messianic aesthetic.

This means returning to consider in what ways Benjamin intentionally misreads Rosenzweig's midrash on the *Song of Songs*, which is the core expression of Rosenzweig's messianic aesthetics. Benjamin responds midrashically in taking up Rosenzweig's handling of the biblical passages of what it means to be chosen in love, that is, chosen in a play of both responsibility and sexually embodied attraction for each other. Rosenzweig refers to his aesthetic as an expression of the *sinnlich/übersinnlich* nature of our human relations and as part of his absolute empiricism and thus more than analogy. It is in such a context, that Rosenzweig's passages on the *Song of Songs* should be read, as midrash on the biblical affirmation of the sanctity, the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of love – of love that contends with and conquers death through its power of transforming social relations. On

the one hand, there are the simple affirmations of each other, as others, that are expressed from lover to beloved and beloved to lover that happen in acts of loving. These acts are transposed through artistic and philosophical expressions and in communal narratives, in strange lands and at different moments of the day and in ritual and non-ritual ways, open to welcoming strangers in genuine acts of love of family and of one's unexpected and even perhaps unwelcome neighbors. But that is just it. How does one affirm love of one's neighbor in one breath but in the next judge that their actions are such that I should resist them, that I should maintain critical distance? And that my aesthetic expressions in and of themselves should also voice this negation and resistance? Benjamin felt compelled to preserve and yet to negate and in his case, cultivates aesthetic expressions and forms of art that allow for the preservation of the auratic element of love – the experience of gazing at someone or something and experiencing the joy of their returning my gaze also in loving attention and care – precisely in the absence that is created in genuine critique and engagement with that in the other that causes pain and suffering and which does not support happy and healthy and authentic communal relations that affirm the least amongst us.