Ernst Bloch's Messianism

The Inheritance of a Theological Trope and its Political-Philosophical Significance

By

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A Thesis Submitted to the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies

School of Advanced Study, University of London

In Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

July 2023

I hereby declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or processional qualification. Parts of this work have been published in:
Filauri, Federico. 'The Mystery of Return: Agamben and Bloch on St. Paul's Parousia and Messianic Temporality'. *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 35, no. 1 (15 March 2020): 121–47.
And in:
Filauri, Federico. 'Ernst Bloch's Messianic Theocracy'. In *Apokalypse, Messianismus, Hoffnung. Jahrbuch der Ernst-Bloch-Gesellschaft 2020/21*, edited by Francesca Vidal, 67–95. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2021.

Abstract

The thesis consists in a historical-philosophical study of German-Jewish thought of the Twentieth Century, with an emphasis on theological-political aspects, aiming to contribute to the understanding of the religious background within which Ernst Bloch acquired and reformulated messianic tropes by analysing their multiple shades of meaning. The thesis starts with a brief survey of past and current scholarship on Bloch's messianism, underlining the shortcomings of available interpretations. The thesis then reconstructs the complexities of the meaning of 'messianism' by tracing a social history of the term, from its emergence in German Romanticism, to Polish Romantic Messianism, liberal Judaism and its counterpoint in the radicalisation of the Jewish messianic idea at the beginning of the 20th century, discussing Bloch and his contemporaries. From there, the thesis focuses on Bloch only, analysing the various sources of his philosophy of religion, showing how Jewish, Christian and Gnostic mythologems are selected and used. This leads to the discussion of some theoretical aspects of Bloch's philosophy. In so far as mythologems are politically charged, inherited and tap into the principle of hope, the thesis needs to clarify Bloch's broader concept of the 'political', the process of inheritance and the notion of 'principle'. These discussions allow to move on to the re-appraisal of Bloch's messianism. The thesis demonstrates the role and value of the various mythologems in composing an original appropriation of the messianic trope. The thesis shows how Judeo-Christian mythologems, tinged with Gnostic overtones and twisted by Bloch's atheism, address the problems of the fundaments of political actions and allow to envisage the ultimate political goal in the form of a *sui generis* theocracy. Lastly, the thesis discusses the contribution of Bloch's philosophy to current debates in political theology, distinguishing between strong and weak messianism, this latter further divided into positive and negative weak messianism.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude for the guidance, advice and support that my principal supervisor, Prof. Johan Siebers, has constantly provided me with during my doctoral work.

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Introduction

1. The ‘Messianic Now’

The belief in the gradual waning of religion and in the progressive erosion of its authority in concomitance with the establishment of rationalistic and scientific worldviews has been long disproved in the social and human sciences. The realisation that there is no decline in religion and that, on the contrary, we live in ‘post-secular societies,’[1] raised more and deeper questions as to why and how religion matters, rather than solving these puzzles. This explains the resurgence of interest in political theology that has marked the last two decades at least, sparking a debate that is still alive and vibrant.[2] While the “new atheists” perceive the whole of political theology as a threat, especially since the early 2000s terror attacks in the west,[3] others approach it as a way to focus on the core notions of political thought, exploring the tangle of metaphysical and social concepts.

Within the interweaving of the political and the religious, a prominent position is occupied by the messianic, in which expectations of social renewal appear inseparable from a specific understanding of redemption or salvation. The renewal of interest in messianism, although comprised in the broader debate on political theology, has more often than not been associated with what could be broadly described as left-leaning political philosophies and social theories. While the reconstruction or distillation of a set of emancipatory doctrines encompassed by the term ‘messianism’ is a legitimate intellectual enterprise, efforts in this direction hardly reached conclusive arguments as of the nature – if there is a ‘nature’ at all – of this theological trope. We should add that the contemporary penchant for the messianic is very often overtly disassociated from the Jewish context in which the notion finds its origins, thus considerably broadening the scope of these discussions. Therefore, one might ask, as the editors of the *Journal of Cultural Research* did more than a decade ago: “What is the messianic? Where does it come from? And why speak of the messianic *now*?”[4] Today, problems arisen from tentative answers to these queries are all but settled, for reasons not entirely depending on analytical limitations or theoretical fallacies. It is true that scholars often stumble on the vagueness and vastness of the notion itself, since being “a foundational trope which permeates the thought,

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[1] Habermas, ‘Notes on Post-Secular Society’.
[2] As an example, see the noteworthy collection Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*.
[3] Cavanaugh, ‘Political Theology as Threat’.
[4] Bradley and Fletcher, *The Messianic Now*, 3.

faith, morality, aesthetics and authority of Western civilisation, the messianic is everywhere and nowhere."[5] An even harder difficulty, however, is posed by the fact that discussions on political theology – and those about messianism are no exception – interrogate the concepts that lie at the very core of the modern construction of political science, questioning the notions of sovereignty and representation as well as the confines of the jurisdiction of a political theory. Much is at stake when such pivotal concepts are under discussion: as the basic tenets of western democracies teeter under the unrelenting theologico-political analysis, as diverse and conflicting alternatives appear to surface as the staggering panorama of a post-capitalist society freed from state- and market-constrains on the one end, and the unsettling prospect of new despotic powers on the other. These poles describe a considerably vaster spectrum that the one presented by theories founded on the rule of law, whose foundations are eroded by abrasive critiques. Dangers of autocratic formations are counterbalanced by a revival of utopian thought, whereby the messianic imaginary continues to play a crucial role. The vantage point of such discussions is therefore briefly stated: "the messianic now might actually be something that enables us to think, write and perhaps even judge our 'now' otherwise."[6] Contemporary messianism, however, with its utopian élan towards an altogether different social reality, not only offers the occasion to subject the status quo to critical analysis, but can also have a bearing on the strategies to rethink the political *tout court*.

To investigate if and how such an endeavour bears fruit, this thesis deals with the practical philosophy of Ernst Bloch, an indisputable protagonist of the 20th century appropriations of the messianic trope. This thesis presents a historical-philosophical study of Bloch's thought, advancing a reassessment of his peculiar treatment of messianic themes. A socio-historical investigation on the usage of the term 'messianism' precedes and leads to the discussion of Bloch's philosophy, which in turn ushers in some critical remarks on the most recent appropriations of the messianic. The thesis intends to establish a better ground for the understanding of the features and the role of Bloch's modern recasting of the messianic trope; secondarily, it aims to suggest how modern accounts of the messianic may lead to rethink the nature of the political space through the subversion of some paramount western theoretical constructs.

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[5] Jacobson, 'Locating the Messianic', 207.

[6] Bradley and Fletcher, *The Messianic Now*, 3.

2. A Misconception in the Understanding of Bloch's Messianism

Of the many strains interwoven in contemporary messianic thought, most are marked with a pessimistic, if not altogether nihilist, overtone.[7] Far from being a misappropriation of messianic doctrines, this tendency reflects the apocalyptic aspect that much religious speculation has associated with the messianic theme. That being said, contemporary messianism appears to be somewhat neglectful of the other colouring of ancient theological doctrines, namely the distinctive utopian overtones also featured in said doctrines.[8] This forgetfulness is not the effect of mere chance. If on the one hand it is surely linked with the general modern suspicion towards utopian thought,[9] historical-philosophical developments also played a decisive role. I am referring to the work and legacy of the uncontested authority of Messianism and Kabbalah in the 20th century, Gershom Scholem.[10] His scholarship was so extensively influential to overshadow other possible readings of the messianic in the second half of the century, not to mention the fact that he singlehandedly founded an entirely new discipline, opening the ground for historiographical research on the Kabbalah. To his influence another element should be factored in: the flourishing of studies dealing with the philosophy of Walter Benjamin. This latter received an initial appreciation inside aesthetics and literary theory circles, but from the 1970s onwards – following the German complete edition of his works and later on the appearance of English translated anthologies – his work has been the centre of interest for the study of the German-Jewish intelligentsia of the first half of the 20th century.[11] When it came to discuss the nature of the messianic in the German-Jewish milieu, then, the categorical apparatus constructed by Benjamin the philosopher and Scholem the historian of religion was the primary reference for modern scholars. It is therefore not surprising that Bloch's messianism, emerging from the same environment and sharing many features, came to be mostly interpreted through the lenses of Scholem's account of the messianic idea.

Scholem's main merit consists in his resolute commitment to the unearthing of the Jewish kabbalistic tradition, whose eccentric and sometimes heretic doctrines he meticulously reconstructed, restoring their dignity after a century-long disdain that rabbinical teaching had cast upon them. This painstaking work informed much if his understating of the messianic idea. In a seminal work, he emphasised the apocalyptic and catastrophic aspects of messianism, and

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[7] The work of Agamben, Badiou, Negri-Hardt, Žižek, to name a few, can be grouped together here.
[8] The work of Gardiner could count as an exception: Gardiner, *Weak Messianism*.
[9] This aversion towards the "social engineering" mentality of utopianism and its inevitable coercive violence is perhaps best represented by Karl Popper: Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.
[10] Rabinbach, 'Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse', 81, note.
[11] Cf. Osborne and Charles, 'Walter Benjamin'.

underscored the difference between the Christian concept of redemption and the Jewish one, the latter being typified by a public manifestation on the stage of history, involving a collective transformation.[12] Other accounts of the messianic idea are dismissed as a dilution or an altogether corruption of this central characterisation of the messianic – offspring of a rationalisation, internalisation or spiritualisation of the idea. Reverberations of this presentation of the messianic are to be found in Benjamin's texts, whose religious references are strongly indebted to Scholem's scholarship, shared in long conversations between the two friends.

Bloch's re-working of religious themes presents many resemblances with Benjamin's, particularly in their original blending of Marxism and messianism, a similarity that led many interpreters to pair them up and conflate their respective stance towards the messianic trope. This pattern has been ascribed to "Modern Jewish Messianism", a peculiar *ethos* which emerged in the wake of WWI among a series of German Jewish intellectuals.[13] This attitude is in fact distinguished by utopian and restorative impulses, intertwined with apocalyptic aspects and thus leading to a proleptic narrative wherein doom and hope are interwoven. When not paired up with Benjamin, Bloch is associated with Lukács and labelled as one of the "religious-Atheist and Libertarian Assimilated Jews,"[14] his thought being located inside the tangle of that "structural homology" which existed between the Jewish messianic tradition and libertarian revolutionary utopias.[15]. More generally, his mixture of religious and political elements has been described as "theological Marxism,"[16] or understood and praised as a "dialectical secularization."[17] Recently, more extensive and accurate studies have focused their attention on Bloch's messianism,[18] but despite their remarkable description of the intellectual context wherefrom Bloch's philosophy emerged, they fall short of addressing some peculiar features of his messianism to which too little attention has been paid. Indeed, Bloch's philosophy has been nourished by the spirit of his generation, but it would be reductive to simply equate his peculiar appropriation of the messianic to the operation Benjamin and Scholem realised, or to present it as a mere variant of religious Marxism. There are four main points of friction between Bloch's appropriation of the messianic trope and the Scholemian understanding to which critics have become accustomed. 1. The hopeful characterization of Bloch's utopian philosophy,

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[12] Scholem, 'Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism'.
[13] Rabinbach, 'Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse'.
[14] Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 127.
[15] Löwy, 14–27.
[16] Mendes-Flohr, 'To Brush History against the Grain', 640.
[17] Goldstein, 'Messianism and Marxism'.
[18] Dubbels, *Figuren des Messianischen*; Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries*.

together with the positive ending of the historical process in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, collide with the Scholemian insistent stress on the catastrophic element of messianism. 2. The collective nature of the messianic idea in Scholem's representation, if appropriate for the understanding of the Blochian collective subject, does not match the insistence on the individual that one can evince from the pages of *Geist der Utopie*. 3. In the same work, the demands for authenticity and moral integrity are suffused with spirituality and often related to inner experience; this emphasis on interiority makes it difficult to entirely subsume the Blochian claims under Scholem's messianic idea, which always requests historical, worldly expression. 4. Lastly, the conspicuous presence of Gnostic and Christian elements in Bloch's construction of the messianic cannot be dismissed as marginalia.

If Scholem's account were the only possible understanding of the authentic messianic idea, and other variants would represent but a diluted or corrupted form of it, in light of the last four points I recalled, one might even raise the question whether Bloch was a messianic thinker at all. Before one can reach a conclusive argument on this point, however, one thing at least must be maintained: Bloch's multi-faceted messianism is not reducible to Scholem's account of the messianic idea. This consideration leads to the following questions:

I. Given the partial inadequacy of Scholem's account of messianism to understand Bloch's own, how could we better assess Bloch's appropriation of the messianic? How could we describe the nature, the emergence and the rising significance of messianism?

II. What are the actual sources Bloch draws his conception from?

III. What is the exact role of messianism in Bloch's writings? What does his re-working of messianic elements yield from the point of view of his political philosophy?

IV. As Bloch and other thinkers tried to readjust the messianic trope setting it into a western philosophical frame, what did this encounter engender? What does Bloch's legacy mean for the 'messianic now'?

To answer those questions, one needs a viable definition of messianism against which to examine Bloch's appropriation. However, scholars do not seem to find a shared agreement on the subject.

3. The Bewildering Task of Defining Messianism

Messianism derives from the Hebrew word *māšīaḥ* (מָשִׁיחַ), meaning "anointed," referring to the ancient Sinaitic custom of consecrating a king through a ritual of anointment,[19] a ritual later extended to the priest, as a means of sanctification. While in ancient Israel the term was used to denote an actual king, later on it came to be associated to a future king, expected to restore the Kingdom of Israel, until this assumed the contours of a prophesied future eschatological figure, a redeemer to appear at the end of times.[20] This much is what is generally agreed upon, and admittedly is very little, offering too vague a definition of it. With time, messianic lore underwent a series of additions, twists, re-readings and interpretations, such that different and contrasting opinions emerged with regards to a number of issues. Is the messiah an ordinary man, a godly presence on earth, or should it be understood figuratively? When exactly would the messianic times arrive? Does this advent bring about a radical change or only small adjustments are to be expected? Is messianism a divine prerogative or humans also play a part in it? Is redemption a historical and political event or a spiritual evolution taking place in human's soul? Is messianism Judaism's damnation or its foremost achievement?

In the words of Jewish historian Heinrich Graez, messianism is both "Pandora's box and the elixir of life,"[21] presenting a multifaceted and intertangled series of contradictory theses that could count as the prime fruit of Jewish speculation as well as the indictment for Jewish troubled history. To make some order inside the complexity of the subject, scholars have addressed it through a variety of disciplinary approaches, each of which, arguably, presents its own limitations. Historical research of the messianic movements, albeit relying on factual evidence, must assume a definition of messianism *ex ante* to sift the material to undergo analysis. A history of messianic doctrines poses similar problems as an understanding of what counts as messianism proper is a necessary starting point. Philological analysis of Biblical and Talmudic texts could eschew controversies related to a priori assumptions, but another difficulty emerges: the word *māšīaḥ* presents the philologist with a befuddling polysemy, rendering impossible to narrow down its meaning to an unambiguous definition. These difficulties led modern scholars of messianism to abandon endeavours towards a monolithic

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[19] Milgrom, 'Anointing'; Robertson Smith related this with the ancient Canaanite custom of smearing the fat of the slaughtered sacrificial animal on the temple's altar, the fat being reckoned as a powerful charm, second only to blood as the vehicle of life. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, 233, 383; Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, 122 notes that the custom was also present in Egypt, where it was also used to solemnize formally an elevation in legal status (cf. Letter EA 51).

[20] Ringgren, 'Messianism'; Werblowsky, 'Jewish Messianism'.

[21] Graetz, *The Structure of Jewish History*, and Other Essays, 151–52.

definition and to rather propose interpretive schemes that would account for the inner contradictions in the concept's usage.

A cursory overview of the main tensions at work within the concept might elucidate the set of problems that an inquiry into the meaning of messianism opens up. As it will become clear in the first chapter, Joseph Klausner proposed a distinction between "the vague *Messianic expectation* and the more explicit *belief in the Messiah,*"[22] the first being a strong hope for political and moral renewal, and the second a hope for a personal redeemer. Thus, he was able to disassociate the messianic idea from its embodiment personal figure. The distilled idea itself, an "ideal of unceasing progress, of continuing spiritual increase,"[23] was later on challenged by Scholem, who advanced the catastrophic account quoted above.

Another problem is posed by the question of the internalisation of messianism. Taubes, against Scholem, claimed that the inward turn of the messianic impulse after the failure of its historical realization is not only legitimate, but also a proof of the authenticity of the messianic demand. In his view, the only adequate response of a failed prophecy is its transformation from a political to "an event of the spiritual realm."[24] Scholem, on his side, had affirmed that properly intended, messianism is public in nature. Another consequence of the Taubesian critique is that messianism could be conceived as pertaining to the individual, not necessarily involving the life of the entire community.

Another tension has to do with the actual exceptional character of the Messiah. The advent of the Messiah, authentic or not, would at any rate be a rather disruptive event, questioning to some extent the life of the Jewish community. To cope with this issue, Seeskin argues, rabbinical Judaism has adopted two opposing strategies. On the one hand, the inflation of the messianic cause: "raising the bar of acceptance so high that that for all intents and purposes, it can never be crossed. […] To think that we can force God's hand is presumptuous."[25] This would make almost impossible to claim the messianic title. On the other hand, "deflation is the opposite: Lower the bar of acceptance so that so that the expectations people have for the Messiah will be lowered as well."[26]

Regardless of the magnitude of the disruption involved, who actually brings about the messianic event? The question regards the 'efficient cause' of messianism, and again another

[22] Klausner, The Messianic Idea in Israel from Its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah, 9.
[23] Klausner, 71.
[24] Taubes, 'The Price of Messianism / מחיר המשיחיות'.
[25] Seeskin, Jewish Messianic Thoughts in an Age of Despair, 19–20.
[26] Seeskin, 20.

opposition is in place. Jacobson talks about intrinsic and extrinsic qualities of messianism. In his own words: "by extrinsic, I mean those who see the messianic as being uncontrollable, sudden […] The Messiah in this model emerges from an otherworldly sphere, a realm in which the protagonists in history have no recourse."[27] Opposite to this, in intrinsic messianism entails a "participatory consummation of the messianic age […] one in which the collective plays a very active role in its own redemption. […] through worldly activity."[28]

Lastly, scholars have questioned the legitimacy of treating messianic lore as a unitary entity. More prominently, Idel opposed Scholem's unilateral construction of the messianic ideal – labelling it *monolithic* –, thus making space for a variety of possible conceptions under the wider construct of a *constellation* of messianic ideas.[29] Expounding messianic doctrines through a series of models, Idel was able to restore dignity to individual and spiritual aspects of messianism.

From this quick (and by no means exhaustive) survey of the main contradictory tensions animating the messianic, one can draw two insights. First, the prominence of Scholem's scholarship is so evident that much of the literature has been written either to buttress or to counter its theses on the subject. Regardless of the single positions he expressed, Scholem's intellectual stature was such that it was impossible not to engage with his studies. Second, the puzzling variety of messianic theses, many of which in overt contradiction with each other, and nonetheless comprised in Jewish cultural heritage, would make any attempt to devise a normative, objective account of messianism an impossible task. Parenthetically, it should be noted that disputes among modern scholars of messianism often reflect a plurality of opinions that was already divisive for the *Tannaim* and the *Amoraim* as recorded in Talmudic writings and will afterwards be taken up again in kabbalistic texts. For these reasons, in the thesis I will tackle the issue differently, avoiding a priori assumption as much as possible and proceeding inductively; at the same time, I will refrain from a discussion on ancient sources and focus instead on modern debates, given their relevance for Bloch's messianism. Furthermore, I will not attempt to conjecturally reconstruct the principal precursors to Bloch's account of messianism, placing the latter within a wider set of philosophical systems, analogous or relatable to the Blochian one. While such a reconstruction might have the advantage of presenting Bloch's appropriation in juxtaposition with the work of similarly attuned thinkers – thus offering a 'centripetal' description of the messianic trope –, I deem it more useful to

[27] Jacobson, 'Locating the Messianic', 215.
[28] Jacobson, 216.
[29] Idel, Messianic Mystics, 52–56.

expand on the possible divergent lines of appropriation – in this sense, privileging a 'centrifugal' description – to showcase the various possibilities of such an appropriation. In showing disparate contexts and different goals, the second approach better highlights the performative value of the messianic trope.

I will therefore proceed with a social history of the lemma 'messianism', discussing its emergence in the modern European context. The understanding of the usage of this term will in fact provide important insights about the reasons that made it a much-disputed term and thus contribute to the clarification of the role of messianic elements in Bloch's philosophy.

4. Plan of the Thesis

The thesis is organised as follows:

The first chapter deals with the social history of the term 'messianism', inspecting its emergence and employment in different contexts. The chapter traces an itinerary crossing four main blocks: German early Romanticism, Polish national Romanticism, Jewish assimilation, and 20th century German-Jewish *milieu*. Correspondingly, the surfacing of the term, the standing out of it, its idealization and radicalisation are shown in relation to the social and political adversities within which they took place, thus bringing to light the polemical, instrumental and performative values of the term 'messianism'.

The second chapter disentangles the single messianic elements found in Bloch's work and tracks down their origin and meaning, with a focus on his early published works. The chapter identifies and distinguishes Jewish, Christian and Gnostic elements in Bloch's appropriation of the messianic trope and, where it is possible, indicates the source Bloch used.

The third chapter explores Bloch's practical philosophy through with three primary concepts, essential to an understanding of his messianic operation. The chapter deals with the concept of the 'political', distinguishing it from the totalitarian and the liberal treatment and describing its pre-political and meta-political margins. A discussion of the operation of inheritance follows, explaining the two moments of separation and re-composition, and distinguishing it from secularisation. The chapter concludes with a clarification of the notion of 'principle' as the outcome of the process of inheritance and the core of Bloch's theoretical system.

The fourth chapter advances a re-assessment of Bloch's messianism built on previous consideration. Bloch's atheist-Gnostic messianism will be related to the pre-conditions of political activity, showing how Bloch's inherited messianism serves the purpose of construing a pre-political thrust. Assmann's, Taubes's and Georgi's accounts of theocracy will be used to

show how messianic mythologems contribute to the utopian imaginary of the historical and of the meta-political aim.

The fifth chapter deals with the set of problems pertaining of modern appropriation of the messianic trope, or the 'messianic now.' The first part of the chapter is chiefly analytical: it distinguishes between a positive and a negative political theology, between strong and weak messianism, and differentiates different strains of weak messianism. The chapter goes on with a presentation of Badiou's and Agamben's subtractive messianism, discussing their transcendental character and highlighting its philosophical-political shortcomings. Last, the chapter suggests how to possibly overcome these limits through a different appropriation of the messianic trope, in light of Bloch's lesson. An alternative value of the political transcendental may lead on the one hand to a mediation and an engagement with socio-political reality, and on the other to rethink the contours of the political tout court.

Chapter I. Social History of the Term ‘Messianism’

An investigation into the role and features of the messianic in Bloch’s philosophy requires the establishment of some qualification of the term ‘messianism’ that goes beyond the basic (and too vague) universally accepted meaning, reducing ungrounded assumptions and refraining from providing a standardized definition as much as possible. To achieve this, I will proceed inductively, through a social history of the term in the European context, leading up to Bloch’s generation. Providing a provisional but solid exposition of the acquired semantic values of the term ‘messianism’ will be sufficient to proceed to an examination of the Blochian texts where this concept plays a pivotal role.

A selection has been made of the vast material that could have potentially been used to reconstruct the meaning of the concept. The periods and the authors appearing in this chapter have been chosen for their significance in relation to the *Stimmung* in which Bloch – together with other German-Jewish thinkers – developed his messianic account from the late 1900s to the mid-1920s.

Four crucial points, four main steps in the development of the concept of ‘messianism’ and its gaining relevance in the European culture have thus been isolated. 1. The German *Frühromantik* (1790s – 1800s); 2. Polish National Messianism (1820s – 1840s); 3. The forging of the ‘Messianic Idea’ (1880s-1910s); 4. The 20th century German-Jewish *milieu* (1900s-1920s). In the first section it will become clear how and when exactly the abstract term ‘*Messianismus’* and its relative adjective ‘*messianisch’* surfaced for the first time. These terms – then neologisms – occupied a marginal position within the broader production of their authors, but their appearance in correspondence with the peak of the *Frühromantik* shows nonetheless messianism’s relation to Romantic motifs. The difficult circumstances of German intellectuals at the turn of the 19th century account for some theoretical and political speculations that can be placed at the intersection of romanticism and messianism. In the second section, this connection of romanticism and messianism will be found again within the philosophical and political writings of the Polish intelligentsia in exile in France. Social and economic distress, a backward-looking petty gentry, and political harshness form the background of the first conscious use of ‘messianism’ as a key concept: its baptism at the altar of the European culture was marked by its links with nationalism and restorative motives. The third section will deal with the idealization of the term by Jewish authors writing between assimilation and Zionism. From an environment where the integration of the Jewish population often proved to be troublesome, observant Jewish intellectuals devised a new form to interpret

messianism under the broader frame of a merging of Jewish and European culture. Surprisingly, such a conceptualization served the quasi-opposite political goals of both revisionist Zionism and universalist democratic socialism. The fourth section, finally, shows how the revival of Jewish mysticism and the politicisation of the German-Jewish intelligentsia in the first three decades of the 20th century determined a radicalisation of the messianic idea, characterising Bloch's intellectual environment.

It should be noted that although these four moments are presented here as if a diachronic development of the term has affected its meaning and changed it in linear fashion, I will not attempt to infer any seriatim evolution. I will rather attempt to extrapolate some general features of it, regardless of the semantics it acquired at different points in place or time. A series of shades of meaning have been sedimented over the word 'messiah' and 'messianism' over the centuries. Showing how the term has been used in different contexts will help highlighting its polemical verve, which is sparked from case to case by a different situation and with different aims. While the concept's polemical value was evident on the battlefield of ideas, it also reflected these thinkers' striving for better personal material conditions. It emerged out of serious straits, but in manifesting discontentment, it served as the resort to picture a different landscape and to set it as a goal. The imaginary related to 'messianism' was decisive in setting the political and social aims these intellectuals wished to accomplish. Sometimes a mere instrument for escapism, when the material conditions did not allow to hope for concrete change, others an instrument to disrupt the present configuration of things, 'messianism' – I will argue – always had a performative function. Acknowledging this trait is imperative if we are to understand the – equally performative – role Bloch assigned to it.

Many other steps could have been part of this path towards the understanding of the term 'messianism,' among which at least two are worth mentioning. Firstly, the early writings of Christian and Jewish scholars, such as Castelli,[1] Wünsche,[2] Graez,[3] started defining this concept from a historical and religious standpoint. Their results, however, for the most part remained confined within the boundaries of their discipline and did not have a significant impact on the fermenting philosophical re-elaboration of the concept in the early 20th century, which is the main focus of this thesis. Secondly, social thinkers and utopians listed in Joseph Talmon's[4] work under the label of 'Political Messianism,' although relevant for the massive

[1] Castelli, Il Messia secondo gli Ebrei.
[2] Wünsche, Die Leiden Des Messias.
[3] Graetz, Geschichte Der Juden.
[4] Talmon, Political Messianism.

influence they had and still have today, showed a rather extrinsic relation with messianism and their connection with messianism is therefore too vague or indefinite. Social utopians like Saint-Simon and Fourier, Marx himself, nationalists such as Michelet and Mazzini, liberal thinkers such as Humboldt and Constant all present a rather vague tinge of messianic motives imbued in their writings, but this link appears to be too loose to include them in the current chapter. The only exception to this is represented by Mickiewicz, who elected messianism as the main topic of two of his Paris lectures, as we will see in the next pages.

It must also be mentioned that, as it will be clarified in the next chapter, Bloch's messianically infused philosophy of history presents some resemblances to some religious historiosophies as presented by Russian and east-European authors in the 19th and early 20th century. The term 'historiosophy' refers to "a type of philosophy of history, which has a providential religious character, that is, it presupposes the existence of a transcendental ultimate goal of history, which is the meaning of world history."[5] The term was first introduced by August Cieszkowski in his 1838 doctoral thesis,[6] where he drew from such religious thinkers as Joachim of Fiore to develop a tripartite account of history, adopting Hegelian categories but moving away from the latter's rationalist account of the laws of history to embrace a vision of history guided by a religious ideal acting as an orienting goal.[7]

A series of other authors might be pulled together around Cieszkowski's notion of 'historiosophy' due to the more or less nuanced similarities in their disposition towards the understanding of the historical development. For instance, Jewish Haskalah historian Nachman Krochmal (1785-1840), in his 1851 *Guide for the Perplexed of Our Time*, described the development of the historical process in three main moments that articulate Jewish history: the first period ends with the death of Gedaliah after the destruction of the Temple; the second with the death of Bar Kokhba (around 135); the third with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain (1492).[8] Despite the tripartite account of history that place him in the wider tradition of historiosophies, it must be noted that Krochmal does not take into account the modern period in which he himself lived; besides, his affiliation with the Haskalah makes him more a precursor of liberal Jews such as Cohen than of radicals like Bloch.

[5] Kudrya, 'Historiosophy', 46.
[6] *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie*.
[7] Jakubowski, 'The Meaning of History in August Cieszkowski'. I will consider the relevance of Joachim's doctrines for Bloch in the next chapter.
[8] For a detailed account, cf. Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 113–44.

Further down in this chapter, I will deal with the treatment of the messianic theme by Polish poet Mickiewicz, who was in turn deeply influenced by the mystic Towiański, whose doctrines display some resemblances to certain elements of Bloch's philosophy. Despite attaching a special significance to the mission of individual nations – including the French, the Polish and the Jewish ones – he distanced himself from straightforwardly nationalistic narratives (in contrast to Mickiewicz himself, for instance), adopted the role of messenger of an incoming apocalypse[9] and presented a teleological doctrine of history "drawing conclusions regarding causes from consequences."[10] In this capacity, he admonished his followers to imitate Christ and recognise one's neighbour even in political enemies, an attitude which exposed him to accusations of espionage and lack of patriotism, and eventually led Mickiewicz to separate from him in 1846. Towiański's teleological doctrines, the perfectionism they envisaged, his distance form nationalisms and his insistence on the role of the Jews place his thought closer to Bloch's messianic account than Mickiewicz's messianic reflections, but the gap remains quite remarkable, given Bloch's materialism and his rejection of linear teleology.

Some scholars have also pointed to the similarities between Bloch's encyclopaedic system and the doctrines of Russian cosmic messianists, whereby the 'universalist' idea of redemption through suffering is reflected in the popular myth of Holy Rus.[11] Thus, Bielik-Robson has highlighted how these religious thinkers advanced a view that entailed a 'spiritualisation of matter' at the end of the historical process in a way not too dissimilar to Bloch's Marxist notion of the 'humanisation of nature'.[12] While the parallel with Vasily Rozanov (1856 – 1919) advanced by Oklot seems too far-fetched,[13] especially in light of the opposite political views of the authors, Wayne Hudson has stressed the similarities of Vladimir Solovyev's and Nikolay Berdyaev's systems to the Blochian 'open system of metaphysics'. Hudson in fact highlights the parallels between the "cosmogenesis open philosophy", characteristic of Russian thinkers, and Bloch's "process philosophy."[14] He goes on to list the points of convergence between those thinkers, and finds the following: "(1) an imperfect first term or non-ground; (2) a process involving increasing hominization; (3) a central role for Jesus; (4) a transformation of nature in the direction of pan-organicism; (5) an emergent God term; and (6) a new creation of genesis at the end." He also adds that "Solovyev had no reservations about making the world an

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[9] Weber, *Apocalypses*, 128.
[10] Lambert, 'Le towianisme en France. La France dans le towianisme', 2.
[11] Cf. Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 6–17.
[12] Cf. Bielik-Robson, 'Will There Be Nothing Rather Than Something?', 49.
[13] Cf. Oklot, 'Apocalypse Left and Right'.
[14] Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*, 69.

anthropodicy or about allowing Sophia to appear in the process to entice men towards the final goal."[15] Finally, Hudson notes that Berdyaev, "like Bloch, studied with Oswald Külpe and was influenced by Franz von Baader and Bergson. Moreover, like Bloch, Berdyaev developed a philosophy of hope as an eschatological process metaphysics, although, unlike Bloch, he broke with Marxism on the grounds that it was incompatible with transcendentalism and settled in Christianity." [16]

While it might be true that a series of Polish and Russian religious thinkers advanced forms of 'universal messianism' between the early 19th and the early 20th century that might resemble Bloch's treatment of the historical development and might seem relatable to his system of metaphysics and his philosophical anthropology, subsuming the latter to the notion of 'historiosophy' appears at least misleading, given the absence of any form of providential agent or transcendental goal from Bloch's system. It is useful in this regard to refer to Bloch's own appraisal of Cieszkowski's work as it appears in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*:

> This series of so-called philosophies of action began with the otherwise not uninteresting work by Cieszkovski: 'Prolegomena to Historiosophy', 1838, a work which expressly presents it as necessary to use philosophy to change the world. Thus in these 'Prolegomena' there are even appeals for rational research into the tendencies of history: so that the correct course of action can be taken; so that not instinctive, but conscious actions form world history; so that the will is brought to the same peak to which reason had been brought by Hegel; so that in this way a not only pre- but also post-theoretical practice can gain space. This all sounds significant, and yet it remained only declaratory, resulted in absolutely nothing even in Cieszkovski's other writings, in fact the 'interests of the future' became more and more irrational and obscure in his work. Cieszkovski's rejection of speculation became a rejection of reason, activity became an activity of 'active intuition', and the whole will towards the future ultimately ended in a theosophy of – Amen in the orthodox church, published at the time of the 'Communist Manifesto'.[17]

This extract, situated at the end of the discussion of Marx's theses 2 and 8 on Feuerbach, briefly discusses Cieszkowski's contribution to the wider problem of the theory-praxis relationship. While Bloch praises Cieszkowski's 1838 work for the relevance the latter gave to the notion of will – therefore approximating Marx's importance of *praxis* –, he also stresses the abandonment of any form of rationality characterising the later developments of his

[15] Hudson, 156.
[16] Hudson, 156.
[17] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 270–71.

historiosophy. The rejection of reason, compensated with the reformulation of his theses in explicitly religious terms, made his historiosophy simply untenable for a thinker like Bloch who consistently adopted Marx's theory-praxis as a model, never denying the crucial contributions of rational thought and always wary of the surreptitious implications of the adoption of an unreflected mystical-theosophic model.

If on the one hand, a more thorough exploration of the possible affinities of Bloch's thought to 19th and early 20th century Polish and Russian messianists might provide useful insights to trace the various developments of religiously informed historical narratives, on the other it does not offer the basis for a genealogy of Bloch's own philosophical positions, all the more considering that none of these authors appears as his early sources, and consequently did not contribute to the formation of Bloch's messianism.

Rather than setting off on the quest for possible precursors to Bloch's messianism, I will therefore investigate the emergence of the messianic trope inside the wider European intellectual environment through a social history of the lemma that starts from its very first occurrences and leads to the debates that inflamed Bloch's generation.

1. The German Romantics

As Cunico has observed, the lemma "messianism" has a rather recent origin, having entered the main European dictionaries only in the mid-19th century.[18] The general rising interest in the messianic figure can perhaps be ascribed to the influence of the 18th century biblical critique and the related theologico-controversistic debate, within which the reference to 'Jesus the Messiah' started to replace the more traditional denomination 'Jesus Christ'. Between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, the reflection of a number of poets, writers and philosophers began to be suffused with this topic, which was acquiring a growing importance in delineating some of the traits of the nascent German proto-romanticism. The general *Weltanschauung* encompassed by that literary and intellectual movement, considered in its link with the religious sphere, embraced an expectation of a new epoch. This latter is characterised by the advent of new gods, depicted with the means of a new mythology, expressing a renovated religious, political and cultural synthesis. This worldview has been described with the term 'Romantic Messianism.'[19] The connection between romanticism and messianism is by no means occasional: though not intrinsically bound together, the semantic extension of the two concepts shows a large overlapping region. Not only the aim for a general

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[18] Cunico, 'Ripensare il messianismo'.
[19] Frank, Der kommende Gott.

and radical renewal characterises both the romantic movement and the messianic spirit, but also a peculiar form of nostalgia for the past, bound together with a passion for the irrational forces that could drive the transformation of the present; not least, the connection with certain forms of nationalism – or at least of patriotism – is common to both concepts.

While considering Romanticism as a literary movement, it is essential to bring into the picture the main intellectual figures that contributed to the construction of the broader cultural (philosophical as well as artistic) background. It is in the works of paramount thinkers that one finds the earliest occurrences of the use of the word 'messianic' within the European intellectual landscape.

In Immanuel Kant's *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793), as well as in his *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (1798), we notice not only the rising importance of the notion of the Kingdom of God – which, though not being exclusively linked with messianism, represents one of its most characteristic images – but also the usage of the word itself (in the adjective form '*messianisch'*), albeit featured here only in a negative connotation[20]. It is precisely between the publication dates of these two mentioned works, in 1795, that Goethe – one of the most influent figures for German romanticism – used the word for the first time in the substantive form '*Messianismus*', as a means of description for the works of Klopstock. It is worth noticing that this text,[21] although featured only in his private notebooks, presents the word as pulled together with '*Patriotismus'*, confirming the partial overlapping of the semantic value of the terms in the romantic connotation. Another significant example of the interest in the topic is to be found in Friedrich von Hardenberg, a leading figure of the German Romantic Movement. In 1799, he called for a reshaped philosophical chiliasm in his influential prophetic-programmatic work *Die Christenheit oder Europa*.[22] Here Novalis did not use the exact term, but it was nonetheless the image of "a New Messiah" which once again took up a central place. All these works, expressive at the same time of the avant-garde German romanticism and of the new light shed on the messianic figure, mirror a general intellectual atmosphere stemming from the uneasy socio-political situation of the turn of the century in Germany. Most

[20] Kant, Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft, B206, Fußnote. Kant, Kants gesammelte Schriften, vol. VI, p. 136; cf. Id., Der Streit der Fakultäten, A 71, 80-81, 99, 103, 107; Kant, Kants gesammelte Schriften, vol. VII, pp. 48, 52–53, 62–63, 65–66; On Kant as an influential thinker for the Romantic Movement, see Berlin, The Roots of Romanticism.

[21] Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke*, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche, vol. 17.

[22] Novalis, Hymen an die Nacht / Die Christenheit oder Europa.

intellectuals at that time seem in fact to have been trapped into “a sort of *ressentiment* (or, minimally, frustration) in the face of an unpropitious social situation.”[23] The relation between the social context, the intellectual atmosphere and the core ideas of Romantic writers has been the object of study of the historian Henri Brunschwig in his seminal book *Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth Century Prussia*. He observed that while the Prussian population has grown at an impressive rate, towards the end of the century the workers’ and peasants’ standard of living experienced a bad deterioration, due to overpopulation in towns, which eventually led to an increase of poverty in towns and countryside. The detrimental effects of the demographic growth – which was once seen as an enhancing factor for the economy – started to attract the attention of the Prussian economists only after the translation of Malthus’s book *An Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798, but it was too late to develop any policy to counter a process which led the Prussian population to grow up from 2.240.000 in 1740 to 6.250.000 in 1805.[24] Likewise, the middle-class was not spared a parallel impoverishment, as posts in society became competitive, regardless of whether they were sought in law and administrative areas, clerical careers or liberal professions:

> Thus, wherever he turns, the middle-class young man graduated from the university cannot find what he is seeking. He cannot always make a career in the civil service; and the state of society is not such as to enable him to earn a living purely as an intellectual. The consequence is that the ranks of the dissatisfied swell; petty officials, theological candidates, tutors, briefless barristers, doctors with no practice, and writers with no readers come to the bitter conclusion that society has not furnished them with a place worthy of their desires.[25]

As a result, the young generation of frustrated intellectuals was “distressed to find a world which differ so greatly with their ideal.”[26] Wackenroder, for instance, expounded his concerns to Tieck, describing how “A man in any way superior to the average [...] cannot live in this jejune, arid, and pitiful world. He is obliged to create an ideal world for himself, of a sort that may make him happy.”[27] The malcontent mood which affected most intellectuals was not limited to the personal and professional sphere but included a dissatisfaction for the political situation as well. The enthusiasm about the great achievements of the French Revolution were paralleled by a sharp disappointment about the impossibility to realise any feat of comparable

[23] Norman and Welchman, ‘The Question of Romanticism’, 63.
[24] Brunschwig, Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth-Century Prussia, 101–6.
[25] Brunschwig, 146.
[26] Brunschwig, 150.
[27] Brunschwig, 154.

momentum within the German borders. The Napoleonic campaigns and the 1806 conquest of Prussia were also welcomed as great enterprises and regarded as some of the striking events of the time. However, the fascination of violence found in many romantic writings is a mere symptom of an attempt to break down a barrier in the fictional world they have been unable to traverse in the real. The indifference or even the declared hostility towards the state and its institutions has never sparked anything more than some almost harmless turmoil; and the inefficacy of these delusive attempts sprouted only a mere idealistic revolutionary feeling, eventually expressed in their literary endeavours with no concrete counterpart.

It is precisely this discontent that led Romantics to merge political, religious and artistic themes. Liessman stressed that one of the main features of the literary movement was an attitude of expectation as a basic aesthetic habitus. Since what is present in the current situation is nothing or just a little, that which should be more - the Real - has always yet to come. In calling it "aesthetic messianism", Liessman highlights how the awaited future started to occupy the imaginary of this generation as a form of secularised deity, overturning the logical implication of traditional messianism: "Modernity no longer waits for the Redeemer to come, but that which will come will be the Redeemer."[28] The central figure of this peculiar messianism which informed the early Romanticism is thus not a proper Messiah or Redeemer, but rather what Frank has called "Der kommende Gott" (the Coming God) in his namesake work. However, the kind of deity which seems to permeate the romantic realm of expectations has more resemblance with a rebirth Dionysos rather than an emissary of Jahweh. Idealist aesthetics is thus the only new religion apt to fill the *Sehnsucht* of this epoch of expectations and disappointments and to prompt the rebirth of holiness and divinity through the merging and the creation of a new "Dionysos-Christos Mythos."[29] In the literary world as well as in popular culture, it was possible to observe a general mentality, described by Brunschwig with the comprehensive category of the "Miraculous". A sort of a mystical trend gained back a cultural primacy in all the spheres of the human life. Thus common to the romantics was a taste for strong emotions, accompanied for a little interest in the future of the society, since life was seen as a "desolate shore, from which some imminent miraculous happening is suddenly to rescue [them]."[30] Here the main purpose of the reference to messianism as a literary category appears to be the shaping of the romantic contrasts rather a depiction of a renovated

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[28] Liessman, 'Die Kunst Nach Dem Ende Des Endes Der Kunst. Reflexionen Über Ästhetische Heilserwartungen', 221.
[29] Frank, Der kommende Gott, 245.
[30] Brunschwig, Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth-Century Prussia, 182.

monotheism. Romanticism has been in fact characterised by the continuous struggle between "incompleteness of the world and infinitisation of the finite,"[31] wait and task, "advent of an epoch of harmonisation" and always possible "transcending of the time into the eternal."[32]
Early Romantics gave voice to the general social distress and discontent of their epoch, rebelling to the frustration and difficulties by turning them into the beauty of their verses. Thus, they have been able to turn the revolutionary impulses from the political to the aesthetic realm.[33] They sought a solution in a renovated religious attitude towards the 'Miraculous', but the *romantic* or *aesthetic messianism*, rather than entailing the forging of a new system or belief, represents but a sublimation of religion and politics into art. Noteworthy is that the first writers who used the word '*messianisch*' were, among the intellectuals, the less concerned with the general anxiety of the epoch and the less engaged with its tumults. Goethe reproached the French revolution as well as the massification of politics, while at the same time holding the position of chief adviser of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach; Kant, an established scholar and professor at Königsberg, albeit embracing the principles of the revolution and backing the claims for a liberal society, rebutted the possibility to transgress the established law; Novalis beside his intellectual production held a post as an auditor for the salt works at Weissenfels and later on he worked for the Mining Academy of Freiburg. All these three intellectuals had a secured professional career and none of them has been at the forefront of the struggles in riots or tumults.
At this stage, Messianism and Romanticism appear as not yet entirely bound together, since the latter seems to be at most a form of aestheticization of the former, where avant-garde art and poetry represent the only possible embodiment of the new epoch. Albeit the general attitude of earl Romanticism has been labelled as 'messianic' and a feeling of dissatisfaction with the socio-political situation is palpable in many of the romantic artworks, the explicit utilisation of the word is far from suggesting a conscious 'messianic' attitude among the German intelligentsia at the turning of the 19th century.

2. Polish Romantic Messianism

A different panorama was viewed in Poland only a few decades later. During the timespan which extends from the late 18th century to the 1840s, the economic, social and political situation of the Polish people worsened dramatically. It is precisely in this context that the first

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[31] Cunico, 'Ripensare il messianismo', 17.
[32] Desideri, *Il velo di Iside*, 33–67.
[33] Safranski, *Romanticism*, chap. 2.

conscious and explicit reference to messianism made its appearance, occupying the core of the Polish national sentiment.

It will be helpful to consider in detail some of the political and economic changes that affected Poland from the late 18th to the first three decades of the 19th century. After that, it will be easier to understand how a peculiar worldview emerged among the Polish intelligentsia, where messianic themes, figures and language have been turned into a polemical tool and have set the vocabulary of Polish irredentists. A review of the reflections of two of the more representative intellectuals – Wroński in the philosophical sphere and Mickiewicz in the literary one – will shed light on the different accounts of the messianic idea which emerged from that background. It will become clear that among the multiple facets of messianism, Polish thinkers isolated and adopted those that were either more suitable for their political purposes or more respondent to their cultural atmosphere. It was within their literary activity that for the first time in modernity the messianic imaginary emerged from under the surface of religious mystery and has been overtly used as an instrument of political emancipation, contaminating the whole European intellectual life.

2.1 Historical Context

During the 18th Century Poland has witnessed a continued erosion of her territories realised by the prospective Holy Alliance powers of Prussia, Russia and Austria, up to the point when, with the 1795 Third Partition, the country was entirely wiped off from European maps. Polish legions then allied with the French revolutionary army and later with Napoleon, hoping to restore the independence of Poland in return of the assistance provided on the battlefield. Established by Napoleon in 1807, the Duchy of Warsaw had a brief life and in 1815, after the Waterloo defeat, every hope of independence under the French protection was crushed. At the Congress of Vienna the victorious Austrians and Russians reconfirmed most of the terms agreed for the Third Partition and established the Kingdom of Poland, under the rule of Tsar Alexander I, in the land under Russian control.[34]

The social fabric of the Kingdom was characterised by an impoverished gentry and an exploited peasantry. Peasants, burdened with serfdom since the medieval age, lived in the worst material condition in Europe, due to heavy loads of labour on the landlords' demesnes and extremely

[34] Reddaway et al., *The Cambridge History of Poland*, chap. XIII.

limited access to land ownership.[35] Stuck in the old feudal system with no hints of industrialisation, Poland appeared as a "petrified society."[36] However, Leslie observes,

> it would be unwise to suppose that it was merely a question of oppression of the poor by the rich. The poverty of the landlords themselves to a large extent determined their unsympathetic approach to the need of the common people. The plight of the peasantry was only one aspect of the agrarian crisis of the nineteenth century.[37]

As it could be expected from a feudal society, revenues from agrarian activities formed most of the income for the Polish nobility. After a period of relative ease, however, the noblemen of Congress Poland found themselves in dire straits because of the amount of debts contracted in the previous decades, the need to support the Army with taxes and the diminution of grain exports.[38] Moreover, the deficit was steadily rising in 1817-1820.[39] With evictions of peasants from their estate and high amount of labour encumbered on them, "the practice of the eighteenth century was revived."[40] The composition of the Polish nobility deserves to be more closely analysed. Walicki – a historian of ideas specialist in Polish Romantic Nationalism – has noted that in Warsaw and inside the Kingdom of Poland, although

> the number of the gentry was as high as 25% of the total population [...] only a small minority of this gentry – about 4.7% – could be classified as relatively wealthy landowners. The rest were petty gentry (about 35-45%) and landless gentry (50-5%), whose influence was greatly reduced, or (in the case of the 'noble proletariat') completely eliminated, due to the introduction of property qualifications to vote. It is understandable, therefore, that the broad masses of poor gentry could not be satisfied with the constitutional regime of the kingdom. In particular the landless gentry, formerly the clients of magnates [...] became increasingly inclined to political radicalism.[41]

Although by the end of the Twenties there were signs of a timid economic recovery and small betterment of the peasants' condition, the hostility towards the tsarist Russia did not diminish, leading eventually to an uprising in November 1830. The uproar soon turned into a real insurrection when, from the very first days, the finance minister together with prince Czartoryski took the lead, steering the revolt in the interests of the Polish nobility. The failure of the negotiations with the Tsar, aimed at recognition of more autonomy in the Polish lands,

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[35] Leslie, Polish Politics and the Revolution of November 1830, 54.
[36] Leslie, 62.
[37] Leslie, 78.
[38] Leslie, 79–86.
[39] Reddaway et al., The Cambridge History of Poland, 282.
[40] Reddaway et al., 282.
[41] Walicki, Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism, 29.

pushed the two countries to confront into a series of battles. During the last of these, the following September, an Army of 80.000 Russian soldiers attacked the fortifications of Warsaw, after the Poles refused to surrender: the revolt was eventually suppressed.

As a result of the extremely harsh conditions imposed on Polish citizens after the revolt has been subdued, a consistent portion of the population chose to emigrate abroad, especially in France. The warmest welcoming was that received from the organised Franco-Polish Committee in Paris; here attempts were made to form a foreign Polish Legion and an active group of intellectuals started to gather regularly. Several politicians also tried to raise the Polish question in other states, especially in England, by means of diplomatic talks. Overall, there was a massive movement of people.

> The impulse of flight which manifested itself in the emigration of thousands of the Kingdom of Poland's best citizens after the fall of Warsaw in 1831 was as instinctive as the autumnal migration of birds and of the same dual character: a primordial urge, on the one hand to escape destruction, and a quest, on the other, for renewal of energy and reinforcement of strength.[42]

Albeit driven by different and somewhat contrasting attitudes, democratic or aristocratic, Polish irredentist movements were formed in several countries. Yet, the greater impact towards the political integrity of the Poles was not that brought through conventional means: "It proved to be neither the politicians nor the secret agents or the diplomats who saved Poland, but the poets. They did this by saving the only part of the nation's entity, which to have lost would have meant death. They saved Poland's soul."[43]

2.2 The Birth of a New Narrative

The desperate situation of the Polish people, deprived of statehood and imbued with an irrational longing for the restoration of a national authority, drove the intelligentsia to devise a narrative pattern shaped by national romantic messianism. If we consider the imaginary, if not in the memories, of the democratic faction in Paris – to which most of the intellectuals belonged – we find here two main elements: the events of the French Revolution, to which the radicalisation of the political thought could be ascribed, and German Romanticism, whose tenets served as pillars for the irrational hopes of the Poles. Decisive for the development of the romantic messianism was the cultural contact with France. The reactionary thinkers De Maistre and Saint Martin had already turned the concepts of *religious expiation* and of a *new*

[42] Reddaway et al., The Cambridge History of Poland, 311.
[43] Reddaway et al., 320.

revelation into political ideas applicable to post-revolutionary France. They described "progress as perfection through suffering, as a process of collective expiation and rehabilitation of fallen man:"[44] what was for them the devastating outcome of the revolution could find its justification only in a providential ordeal aimed at the eventual future perfection of the nation. This perfection, however, could not be possible without the supernatural aid of a divine entity, hence a new revelation is necessary to salvage a fallen humanity. Moreover, the French utopian socialists, i.e. Fourier and Saint-Simon, by quoting and commenting on those passages of De Maistre, were able to link the new revelation to the cause of social justice, seen as the terrestrial accomplishment of the Christian life. In short, the ferment of the whole French intellectual life was fomented by the yeast of expiation, purification and perfectioning.

It is not hard to understand how Polish intellectuals were able to apply those concepts to their tragic national situation. They developed a parallelism between Poland and Jesus of Nazareth, where both were victims of a sacrifice – either individual or national – but by this means both are able to bring about the individual redemption – either of the soul or of the integrity of the state – ultimately leading to that of the whole humanity. This parallelism served not only to provide a justification of the mutilation inflicted to Poland – a sort of theodicy –, but also to offer a glimmer of hope for the possible rebuilding of an independent state. Polish romantic messianism, in Walicki's words, can be described as

> a hope born out of despair; as an expression of an increased feeling of self-importance combined with a sense of enforced rootlessness and isolation in an alien world (emigration); as an ardent search for religious consolation combined with a bitter sense of having been let down by the traditional religious authority. (I mean the condemnation of the Polish insurrection by the Pope.)[45]

This ideology, originated among the petty and landless gentry and celebrated by poets and thinkers, expressed their interests against the substantial gentry of the few wealthy landlords – inclined towards a pacific Russian control of Poland – and the partitioning powers, who attempted to deprive the lower gentry of their noble status. In the decade after the uprising, national messianism earned the approval of most of the Polish emigrées, becoming in the Forties the central reference point for anyone who fought or resisted, directly or indirectly, for Polish independence. In short, they have been able to conceive "the most extreme and best articulated variant of the messianic-millenarian tendencies of European romantic thought."[46] If

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[44] Walicki, 'Polish Romantic Messianism in Comparative Perspective', 4.
[45] Walicki, 3.
[46] Walicki, 7.

this ideology was to gain such a great success among the Polish people, that was thanks to the popularisation of these topics through the poetic verse, an instrument capable to shake and mobilise the innermost parts of the human conscience. The poets writing in the Thirties and Forties, however, could not be able to devise such powerful images without the works of a group of thinkers who were active in France already in the Twenties. These intellectuals built up the philosophical scaffolding which the following generation used to raise the building, armed with poetic equipment.

We shall now focus on two of the most representative figures of the Polish intelligentsia thanks to whom the term 'messianism' made its entry into European dictionaries and started to acquire relevance in religious, political and philosophical debates: Wroński, the philosopher who first used the term as a key concept in the early 1830s, and Mickiewicz, a poet who popularised it in its lectures in the 1840s.

2.3 Józef Maria Hoene-Wroński

Among these philosophers, Józef Maria Hoene-Wroński occupied a place of considerable importance. Even before the November uprising, this polymath endeavoured to design a system of messianism which was nonetheless set up with the uttermost rational rigour and characterised by a linear historical development pattern. His biographical profile itself already accounts for many of the features of his thought. Born in Poland 1776 by Czech father and Polish mother, Wroński took part in the 1794 uprising against the Second Partition of Poland. After having been taken prisoner by Russians he surprisingly joined the Russian Army itself, serving as a major. Being of Polish and Czech descent and a member of the Russian military, he felt to be an authentic spokesman of Panslavism. In 1797 he retired from service and started studying philosophy in Halle and Göttingen. In 1800 he moved to France, first joining the Polish Legion and later on asking for French citizenship and working at the Observatory in Marseille. He started publishing his works in 1803 and decided to write in French for all his following publications. In August of the same year, in a flash of illumination, he claimed to have discovered 'the Absolute' and from that moment on he committed himself to the promotion of his revelation, by means of scientific research and practical realisation. Leaning against the financial support of his wealthy patrons, he explored the fields of mathematics, religion and philosophy of history, but also attempted to realise new technical inventions. Wroński also founded a group called *Union Antinomienne* and even organised his own political party. However, his numerous scientific contributions were coldly received and he did not

succeed in establishing himself as an inventor. Not discouraged from these results, he continued his research and his political activity until his death in 1853.[47]

Wroński can be regarded as the first thinker to have popularised the term 'messianism', whose first public occurrence as a key concept is in fact included in his 1831 work *Messianisme. Union finale de la philosophie et de la religion, constituent la philosophie absolue. Tome I. Prodrome du messianisme*. His 'rationalist messianism'[48]https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?i9g9dm moves from a critique of the Kantian transcendentalism. According to Wroński, the real merit of the German philosopher was not that of distinguishing between phenomenal and noumenal objects, thus safeguarding the possibility of scientific knowledge, but rather the discovery of the 'creativity' of reason in the cognitive process. It was this latter the true *Copernican revolution*: the conception of an archetypal intellect able to create objects by thinking them. If for Kant this was only a mere 'limiting concept', for Wroński it was instead something graspable by the human reason. Unlike what Kant thought, metaphysics "is not only possible, but also indispensable. Its foundation is the absolute, the union of reason and being."[49] This is to say, the *Ding an sich* is not only conceivable, but attainable: it is the Absolute itself. Given that assumption, Wroński developed a method which, instead of a regression towards the unconditioned, consisted in a deductive 'genetic progression' from the Absolute, *a priori* given through a 'genetic intuition'. This irrational flash of intuition, similar in fact to a mystical illumination, is for Wroński not at odds with the identification of the Absolute with creative reason.[50] Messianism, in this frame, is "a doctrine that served to materialize absolute values included in its philosophy of the absolute", a kind of thought which claimed an unconditional foundation and an ultimate aim.[51]

A schematic account of Wroński's 'absolute philosophy' could be provided as follows. His philosophical system of messianism is characterised by a *trichotomic* division which informs almost every branch of it. Three main functions direct the absolute philosophy: (1) the theoretical function, fulfilled in the discovery of the universal laws of every field of knowledge, from physics to history, from religion to politics; (2) the practical function, exercised in revealing to humankind the moral direction towards its fulfilment along with that of the world; (3) the teleological function, actualised in "a harmonious disposition between the inertia of

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[47] Walicki, Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism, 108–11.
[48] Starzyńska–Kościuszko, 'Polish Romantic Messianism', 61.
[49] Starzyńska–Kościuszko, 63.
[50] Walicki, Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism, 113–114.
[51] Starzyńska–Kościuszko, 'Polish Romantic Messianism', 61.

nature and the spontaneity of man, capable of combining these heterogeneous forces for the purpose of the creation of this world, that is to say, to the proper creation of man."[52] These functions aim each to its own goal, be it speculative, practical or absolute.[53] Correspondingly, it is possible to deduce the essence of the Absolute, construed as the process of conditioning the world according to three specific laws. The 'law of creation' (1) or of 'creative progression' informs the dynamic of the *physical genesis* of the universe. Opposite and complementary to this, the 'law of progress' (2) determines the *moral genesis* of the universe: it is the law which sets the return to the Absolute as the moral task of humanity. Human history thus concurs to the building of metaphysics as the Absolute is posed as the eschatological goal of humankind. The accomplishment of its task and the subsequent end of history brings humanity to his auto-creation in God (3) and thus to gaining immortality. This latter, the *absolute genesis*, constitutes the *fundamental dogma of messianism*: "A spontaneous creation of the truth by man, that is to say, the discovery of the absolute, is *the act of man's OWN CREATION; the only act for which the universe exists*."[54] From this succinct sketch it is already possible to infer that messianism, for Wroński, served as an all-embracing doctrine capable of summarizing the rigour of a rationalist philosophy with the ultimativity of the eschatological claims of religion. Albeit its rational framework, the main tenet is dogmatic and requires, as it were, a leap of faith. Nonetheless, at the core of the system there is not the deity but the very human being, since the accomplishment of the speculative aim – the enactment of the absolute function – requires the action of man who plays the main role in history.

From the analysis of Wroński's philosophy of history, other features of his messianism became clear. In the third part of his work, dedicated to the "messianic revelation of the destinies of mankind,"[55] history, as a global process leading humanity into the absolute, is divided into three epochs – confirming the triadic rhythm of his thought – each accordingly to its own aim. Relative (1), transitional (2) and absolute (3) aims are distinguished. The first are 'given' to humanity – which thus only passively receives them – and consist in its physical development. The last are 'created' by humanity itself – this way exercising the creative power of reason – and because of that show a rational character. The second are an intermediate stage of progression. To each of these aims there is a correspondent epoch: the Past (1), when humankind could not help but be guided by Providence, is an epoch of heteronomy. The Present

[52] Hoëné-Wroński, *Messianisme*, I:48, my translation.
[53] Starzyńska–Kościuszko, 'Polish Romantic Messianism', 62.
[54] Starzyńska–Kościuszko, 63.
[55] Hoëné-Wroński, *Messianisme*, I:46 ff.

(2), as a passage from heteronomy to autonomy, is a period of confusion, since man is left alone to himself, but its destiny is not yet clearly visible to his eyes; this leads to conflicts and divisions striking in our current age: sensuous and cognitive consciousness, feeling and cognition, Good and True, conservative and liberals, revelation and experience; thus the Present is marked with crisis and violence – in one word, with *antinomy*. The Future (3) is the epoch when the complete salvation of humankind from its internal struggles is finally achieved thanks to messianism, which unifies Truth and Good in the Absolute, overcoming the 'social antinomies' of the present. From a religious understanding, the Future is the temporal region where a radical reformation is possible, replacing the revelation with a rational and demonstrated religion, which takes the name of 'Sehelianism' or, more plainly, 'messianism.'[56] Leading the historical process, as already hinted, is man himself, but Wroński thinks this task is better performed by an intellectual elite of 'superior spirits' acting on behalf of the whole humankind. Evidently counting himself in this faction and committed to the cause, he even included, at the end of his book, an appendix presenting the "formula of the declaration of the members of the antinomian union,"[57] the institution whose aim would have been that of preventing conflicts and promoting further progress. The close bond of historical and existential goals is easy deducible: in fact, Wroński states that the earthly goals of the organisation were only prodromal to the spiritual ultimate destiny: immortality. That is to say, his messianism showed an inextricable connection of political action, moral perfectioning and universal regeneration. Likewise remarkable is the nationalist torsion Wroński impressed to his philosophy of history in the writings published from 1831 on. In these works, he abandoned his previous conception that national individuality is in its essence incompatible with the realisation of the universal and rational goal of humankind, and embraced a view according to which nations are the actual movers of history and thus vehicles of progress. Every nation was assigned its specific task: Germany embodied the speculative mission and France the practical, whereas Russia, leader of the *Slavdom*, took on the eschatological mission. In order to be successful, however, this latter required the reconciliation with Poland. Despite the cruel repression of the November uprising and the harsh conditions of his compatriots living under the Russian authority, Wroński still believed in the possibility of rapprochement of the two countries under the banner of panslavism.[58]

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[56] Walicki, Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism, 117.
[57] Hoëné-Wroński, *Messianisme*, I:97.
[58] Walicki, Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism, 119.

Overall, this philosopher strove to build an all-embracing theoretical system to support practical aims and found in messianism the keystone of his whole building. In his connotation, messianism was a doctrine which involved political and moral commitment, encompassed a future-oriented philosophy of history and presented an eschatological *afflatus* linked to the ultimate aim. The precision of the architectonic structure of the system is symptomatic of an approach which is rationalist at least in its intentions. The account of history does not exhibit any rupture, intimating a linearity which has its parallels in the positivist ideology of progress as well as in the Christian narration of Providence. Nonetheless, biographical and national features are still visible in Wroński's thought, especially in burdening the Polish nation – along with all the Slavs – with the hard task of accomplishing the eschatological mission. Even when the nationalist tinge is much evident, however, Poland is chosen not for its suffering and grieving, but because of a "profound premonition of *great destinies of the world* [which makes Poles] particularly predisposed to *lead mankind in its march of progress towards its final and autonomous destination*."[59] In casting over the leading figures of history a halo of heroism, nobility and elitism, Wroński paved the way for the birth of the Polish National messianism – whose utmost expression was to make its appearance only few years later, embodying fears, hopes and resentment of the petty gentry in exile.

It is not surprising that his philosophy was one of the topics of the Paris lectures on Polish literature, a cycle of conferences held at the *Collége de France* in 1842 and delivered by the maximum exponent of Polish messianism, Mickiewicz.

2.4 Adam Mickiewicz

The first place among the "three prophetic poets"[60] is without doubt universally allotted to Adam Mickiewicz, for his acumen, literary talent, political engagement and ability to communicate Polish literary culture abroad. Born in the Lithuanian territory in 1798, he was educated in Kaunas and Vilnius, where in the 1820s started composing his first verses. His fiery temperament had already appeared in the university years: he founded a secret student society in Vilnius, whose connections with another organisation with irredentist pro-Polish aims led him and other affiliates to be arrested and imprisoned by the Russian rulers in 1823. After 6 months of detention, Mickiewicz spent the following years in Russia – especially Moscow and St. Petersburg, where he supported the Dekabrists – and, after having received a passport to travel in western Europe, in Germany (he met Goethe in Weimar and attended

[59] Starzyńska–Kościuszko, 'Polish Romantic Messianism', 65.
[60] Walicki, 'Polish Romantic Messianism in Comparative Perspective', 1.

Hegel's lectures in Berlin) and in Italy, finally joining other compatriot emigrants in Paris in 1832. In the French capital he not only managed to publish several of his works, but from 1840 to 44 he also held the Chair of Slavonic Literature at the *Collège de France*. In the early 1840s he came under the influence of the Polish mystic Andrzej Tomasz Towiański, who had established the *Circle of God's cause* in 1841, within which he affirmed his anti-philosophical and anti-rationalist worldview; members of the circle paid the utmost respect to and almost worshipped its charismatic leader, who maintained that by moral and religious readiness to accept the word of God it is possible to accomplish a complete renewal of the world.[61] Since Towiański announced that the Christian epoch had already begun and invited the initiates of the circle to await for the imminent change but this latter did not come, Mickiewicz and other supporters left the circle due to their refusal to a passive attitude and the perceived need to directly intervene on the course of events.[62] And in fact, Mickiewicz was all but alien to political engagement, first mustering Polish soldiers in Italy to fight side by side with the Italian irredentists, and then organising a Polish and even a Jewish legion in Constantinople to join the Ottoman forces against the Russian empire in 1855. It is in this circumstance that he, while visiting a military camp, contracted cholera and suddenly passed away.[63]

Albeit Mickiewicz literary genius is expressed at its best in his poetic works, an organic exposition of his thought is to be found in his Paris lectures on Slavic literature, which he held from the 22nd December 1840 to the 28th May 1844. In these orations he had the occasion to weave his own philosophical, historical and political fabric on which he embroidered the analysis of the literary works as to funnel the multiplicity of artistic efforts into a consistent *Weltanschauung*, his messianic philosophy of history.

A heterogeneous concept of time, along with a tripartite articulation of history lay in the background of his whole worldview. As Walicki has observed, for Mickiewicz "The segments of time, of which human life is composed, are of very different value; the higher truths are revealed to men only in rare moments of ecstasy, and not in the humdrum routine of everyday life."[64] There are specific moments in which inspired and noble spirits are enlightened by a revelation which determines the non-homogeneity of the value of moments in time. The fundamental revelation, that of Christianity, has already marked twice the history of mankind: firstly, with the appearance of the divine Word at the beginning of time, secondly with the

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[61] Starzyńska–Kościuszko, 'Polish Romantic Messianism', 55.
[62] Starzyńska–Kościuszko, 55.
[63] Milosz, The History of Polish Literature, 231.
[64] Walicki, Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism, 261.

advent of Christ. However, a third revelation is awaited: the arrival of 'the new Messiah' is imminent.[65] Beside these main ones, there are also other revelations, related to the national awakening of single countries, and among these Poland stands as the most relevant example, as she is "the nation who has suffered the most for the reaction of the old order of things, the most oppressed nation by the powers that rely on the past [...] has been prepared to receive high revelations."[66] History thus is marked by a series of discontinuous events that set the pace of progress, which is itself conceived not as a uniform march towards the ultimate goal – as it was for Wroński – but rather as "a sequence of sudden upward surges, of inspired longings."[67] This is also the reason why, despite announcing the imminent future revelation, Mickiewicz claims that it is to the present moment that poets and philosophers direct their attention and concerns: "But this present, in their systems, is action, it is life, it is strength, it is the fruit of the past, it is the seed of the future."[68] It is in fact through action that progress is achieved and action cannot take place but in the present moment; it is therefore only in the present that it contributes to the construction of the future. Moreover, the revelation is conceived as opposed to the rational development of a philosophical exposition, which is in fact regarded as "an imitation, or rather a counterfeit of the revelation."[69] Receiver of this inspired revelation and at the forefront of progress in history is "our inner man", who marches towards God, acquiring perfection, power, happiness and foreseeability.[70] However, this man, bearer of a high spirit, cannot achieve this proximity to God and perfection without undergoing a process of transformation: "it is necessary that […] the inner man makes a moral effort, that it changes its nature, that it is reborn, that it regenerates itself."[71] Mickiewicz presents this process of rebirth through his own account of messianism, at the core of which a dynamic of death and resurrection is to be found.

Messianism – "a series of revelations" eventually discovered by the Polish people[72] – plays a central role in his course on Slavic literature. In the lecture of May 28th, 1842, he asks: "So what will make the character of poetry Polish national? It is the messianic spirit. Polish literature, philosophy and poetry are messianic."[73] At the same time he underlines the

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[65] Walicki, 259.
[66] Mickiewicz, Les Slaves, Cours professé au College de France, vol. IV, 26.
[67] Walicki, Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism, 258.
[68] Mickiewicz, Les Slaves, Cours professé au College de France, vol. IV, p. 17.
[69] Mickiewicz, vol. IV, p. 22.
[70] Mickiewicz, vol. V, p. 232.
[71] Mickiewicz, vol. V, p. 260.
[72] Mickiewicz, vol. IV, p. 19.
[73] Mickiewicz, vol. III, p. 348.

importance of poetical creation for the social life of the nation: "You already know that the poetic and literary Poland, which can be considered as organs of the Political Poland, waits for an era, a future, a new state of affairs. This waiting corresponds to that of all the peoples of Europe."[74] There is a close correspondence between the artistic expressions of the spirit of the Polish people and its political life; poetry and literature shape the horizon of the leaders of the nation and indicate the direction towards their goal. This latter consists in an utterly new socio-political reality and this absolute renovation is achieved via messianism, whose main tenets are: sacrifice; the Christian mission of death and resurrection; universality. Sacrifice is necessary for the commencement of any action or thought whatsoever and assumes the form of death and resurrection, thus being justified on the moral and theological basis of Christianity; the Polish mission is however not limited to the restoration of the national integrity and circumscribed to the political sphere, but it has to avoid any form of egoism and to be elevated towards universality.[75] No nation – neither Poland – can achieve such a great result without the help of a great leader, embodiment of the "high spirit" and, as a mediator,[76] capable to open a breach in history and through it bring the people into the new era. Not in the dead doctrines nor the ephemeral schools of thought is the force and the direction to be found, but in the living might of a man: the embodiment of the Verb.[77] Mickiewicz looks for a leader for the nation and finds him in the New Messiah, whose advent is imminent, whose force is irresistible and whose deeds will be extraordinary. The most colourful description of this figure is contained in a subsequent lecture, held on the 30 April 1844, and it is probably the most accurate example of the theological-political twine that describes Polish national messianism:

> We must squeeze all the religious and political past, make it a flame, and feed it in the sanctuary of our soul, so that all that was holy, true and great in history is found at the bottom of us in germ, in virtuality and in power. Such was the man-God, such must be the man in charge of continuing his work in the present time. This man must have the zeal of the apostles, the devotion of the martyrs, the simplicity of the monks, the audacity of the men of 93, the firm, unshakable and thunderous value of the soldiers of the grand army, and the genius of their leader. These, gentlemen, are the features of the ideal man of our time; that is what one must be to dare to inaugurate a new epoch; here. what we must be to dare to say to the French and to the Poles: Follow me.[78]

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[74] Mickiewicz, vol. III, p. 362.
[75] Mickiewicz, vol. III, pp. 349, 365.
[76] Mickiewicz, vol. III, p. 365.
[77] Mickiewicz, vol. III, p. 354.
[78] Mickiewicz, V, 247.

This mixture of humane and divine, of devotion and power, makes up the hero that is awaited to lead Poland – and every other nation – outside the political deadlock where they are stuck. The marks of suffering, though present and visible in the figure of the martyrdom, do not determine the ultimate features of the Mickiewicz's Messiah, who emerges with strength and might. The new Messiah is thus "not a Christ before Pilate, but a Christ risen, Christ transfigured, armed with all the attributes of power, Christ the Avenger and Redresser, Christ of the Apocalypse and of Michelangelo."[79] As such, the awaited Messiah is the head of the people, and he is so for his natural predisposition to lead: "The best developed soul is in charge of leading men who are found on the lower levels. This is the main dogma of messianism. Such a soul is chosen to serve as an organ to the Divinity. God has no other way of speaking to men."[80] To the non-homogeneous moments of time corresponds an unequal distribution of capabilities among men. Only a few are able to conduct the masses, who in turn are more apt to follow; thus, Mickiewicz presents the natural hierarchy that imbues the structure of society, wherefrom the geniality of the hero emerges, endowed with a force of divine provenance.[81] It is thanks to this might that the Messiah is able to bring forth the "Spirit of the Gospel", in sheer contrast with the tenets of rational philosophy and the obliging common-sense which bound men to pursue their own egoism following the immediate interest.[82] Against this pusillanimous attitude, the messianic spirit not only renders the individual strong and generous enough to devote himself to a superior goal, but also diffuses to all the members of the community, thus becoming the "spirit of the nation [...], its eternal personality."[83]

To sum up, Mickiewicz presents his messianism as a series of divine revelations, in compliance with the Christian theological tenets, to which only a few illuminated and hard-working spirits have access. These extraordinary men embody the messianic spirit and are thus endowed with the necessary strength to lead all the inferior members of the community. The path of spiritual renovation is necessary to the political renewal which, albeit starting with Poland, has a universal character. Suffering is a necessary step and it is part of the process towards perfection. In Mickiewicz's lectures there are continuous references to the political meaning of messianism, although being subordinated to the spiritual one. A hierarchical pattern of the

[79] Mickiewicz, vol. V, pp. 274–275.
[80] Mickiewicz, vol. IV, p. 19.
[81] Mickiewicz, vol. V, p. 286.
[82] Mickiewicz, V, pp. 264–265.
[83] Mickiewicz, vol. V, p. 254.

society, a worship for the leader and – despite the universalistic claim – sharp nationalistic traits also define his conception, which is the most representative among his compatriots.

While being the most important interpreter of Polish national messianism, Mickiewicz did not shirk from substantially contributing to the national cause by the means of his art. The most relevant example of his messianic poetry is that of *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*], a poetic drama divided in four parts composed at different moments. The most famous and quoted is part III, written in 1831, shortly after the failure of the November insurrection, while the poet was sojourning in Dresden. It is worth considering some verses as they perfectly express the feeling of dashed hopes for an independent Poland and the willingness not to surrender at the same time. The characters of the composition are Polish prisoners of the Russian conqueror and among them a poet, Konrad, and a priest, Piotr, sing their visions and their songs of lamentation. Konrad's long monologue – which bears the title *Improvisation* – is a heart-rending call to God in which the solitude and feeling of misunderstanding are elevated to the height of the cosmic movements of the stars up to the point that the poet's creation – his verses – are compared to those of God – His creatures. The desperate and defying tone of the monologue resembles the lamentation of Job, where a silent God seems not to care about the sorrows of his faithful creature. However, here a further step is made as Konrad substitutes himself to God claiming love, might and even the power over time for himself – his poetry is in fact soaring thanks to his wings: "The right wing strikes the future and the left the past,"[84] thus making him able to embrace the entirety of time. It is not hard to see here the autobiographical element of the poet who wails to a deaf God the sorrow of the injustice he endured and at the same time claims a superior value and power to himself. Albeit his solitude, he does not speak for himself alone; on the contrary, the poet bears the weight of the whole Polish people and his chant is that of his nation:

> I and a nation's mighty heart are one;
>
> Thrones, powers, armies follow in my train
>
> [...]
>
> I have grown up in suffering and love,
>
> And though of my own happiness dispossessed,
>
> I beat my hands upon my bleeding breast,

[84] Mickiewicz, 'Forefathers' Eve, Part III, Sc. II-V', 44.

But never raised them against heaven above.

[...]

My name is million, for I love as millions,

Their pain and suffering I feel

[...]

I feel within myself my country's massacre

Even as a mother feels within her womb

The travail of the children whom

She bears.[85]

As it will later become clear, the poet enacts the messianic role of suffering and leading the nation, but his empathy with the people to which he belongs reaches the point of a complete identification: he becomes thus a collective messiah who suffers in deprivation while expressing the love and power of a multitude. It is Piotr, the priest that in a subsequent scene of the poem has a vision, while he finds himself confined in a cell, where Konrad's destiny is openly revealed:

But see – a child escapes, grows up – he is our saviour,

The restorer of our land!

Born of a foreign mother, in his veins

The blood of ancient warriors – and his name,

Shall be forty and four.

O Lord, wilt Thou not deign to speed his coming,

My people to console?[86]

Father Piotr sees a wrecked nation whose youth is hopelessly confined in exile; only one breaks away from them and is thus saved – a clear reference to the messianic *topos* of the remainder, the small part that is spared from the wrath of God and will rejoice in the Day of Atonement. But in the poem the saved and the saviour are one and he will lead the nation out of its exile.

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[85] Mickiewicz, 48–49.
[86] Mickiewicz, 63.

In this cryptic passage the priest describes this leader pointing out the foreign descent of the saviour – “born of a foreign mother” – but also hints at his name – “shall be forty and four”. These lines, that have been extensively commented, are probably referred to Mickiewicz himself. The most plausible explication of the hidden meaning of the number used here to allude to the name of the saviour is that provided by the *gematria*, a code used in Kabbalistic practice consisting in a system of correspondence between determinate letters to determinate numeric values. The two numbers quoted here, forty and four, correspond to the letters *Mem* and *Daleth*, the two consonants of Mickiewicz’s name, Adam. The letter A (*Aleph*) should also have been taken into account as its value is one. However, it is reasonable to think that he learned the numerical value of his name in his youth and used it here in the poem, “disregarding the *one* either from forgetfulness or from caprice, or to suit the rhythm of his verse.”[87] These two inklings of Mickiewicz’s acquaintance with the Jewish world are confirmed by his generally favourable attitude towards the Jewish people, often paired up with the Polish one in their common misfortune of exile.[88] Even more remarkable is a lecture given by a Polish journalist, Emil Haecker, who reported that “during his childhood Mickiewicz spent his vacations with the brother of his maternal grandfather, who was an unbaptized Jew.”[89] This fact, if proven true, could confirm the possible Jewish descent of he himself and account for an explanation not only of his acquaintance with themes and references to the Jewish world, but also of his continuous interest in the Jewish people and the closeness of the Polish to the Jewish question in his political views. Besides his personal lineage, it must be remembered that his wife, born Celina Szymanowska, was part of a Frankist family: the set of mystical doctrines of this Jewish movement of converts to Christianity – which left a deep mark on his literary production – must have reached Mickiewicz through his marriage. Of one thing we can be sure, that in his lectures he acknowledges the existence in Poland of “a large Jewish sect, half Christian and half Jewish, who was also waiting for messianism, and who believed to find in Napoleon a Messiah or at least his forerunner.”[90] The reference is clearly to the Frankist movement of converted Jews. In summary, it seems not an exaggeration to affirm that it is with Mickiewicz that the mystical messianic beliefs, previously hidden and secretly bequeathed from generation to generation within the Polish Jews, came to light and acquired a central place in shaping the imaginary not only of a sect or a small movement but of the entire Polish nation.

[87] Mickiewicz, 63, note 2.
[88] Duker, ‘The Mystery of the Jews in Mickiewicz’s Towianist Lectures on Slav Literature’, 48–50.
[89] Duker, ‘Polish Frankism’s Duration’, 306, note 107a.
[90] Mickiewicz, Les Slaves, Cours professé au College de France, vol. III, p. 305.

This tradition, passed down by the Sabbateians to the Frankists and made famous by Mickiewicz's verses, became determinant to the shape of Polish identity and the hope for a restoration of a national unity.

2.5 Polish Romantic Messianism

When the whole of the Polish romantic messianism is taken into consideration, both as a literary movement and as a political inspiration for the Polish emigrants exiled in France, it is possible to affirm with Walicki that this movement "'exploited to the fullest extent of their logical conclusions' the messianic-millenarian tendencies of European romantic thought."[91] It is within this movement that the first conscious usage of the term 'messianism' outside an explicitly Jewish environment has been made. Broadly speaking, the features common to all the poets and philosophers belonging to the movement are: the feeling of a "unique, incomparable, *messianic* mission, bringing about the *universal* salvation of mankind", together with the awareness that their messianism

> was not merely national; they were also, and first of all, *religious* Messianists [...] Their Messianism was a soteriological and eschatological conception, historical and metahistorical at the same time, closely bound up with milleniarism – i.e. with the religious belief in an imminent, collective and terrestrial salvation, accomplished with the aid of supernatural divine agencies.[92]

Despite their main common traits, these millenarian impulses have been channelled into two main directions:[93] on one side, an evolutionary and progressive development, liable of systematic and philosophical explanation, like that of Wroński; on the other side, the same impulses have been conveyed into revolutionary and chiliastic forces, whose impetus can be accounted for only by a mystical vision, as we find in Mickiewicz's version, whose parallel with "primitive millenarism is close and overt."[94] This latter then established as the ideological core of the Polish émigrées.

Given the situation of extreme political distress in which the Polish emigrants found themselves after the suppressed November insurrection and considering that the greatest losses in terms of wealth and political influence were those of the petty and landless gentry – the *slachta –,* to which most of the intelligentsia belonged, it is not surprising that the literary production of the national poets gave voice precisely to their needs, complaints and hollow hopes. As Walicki

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[91] Walicki, 'Polish Romantic Messianism in Comparative Perspective', 13.
[92] Walicki, 1–2.
[93] Starzyńska–Kościuszko, 'Polish Romantic Messianism', 55, 58, 59.
[94] Walicki, Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism, 249.

again observed about Mickiewicz, his “backward-looking” and “reactionary ideals” were but “an apologia for the Polish ‘gentry-democracy.’”[95] Thus, the messianic imaginary is bent towards the nationalistic goal of a restored state unity and the romantic spirit which imbues Mickiewicz’s verses often acquires the nostalgic flavour of the past. Romantic, almost Mephistophelian, is also the feeling of defying and the titanic struggle for an impossible goal – a battle which nonetheless has to be fought. In addition, the aristocratism of the poet is perfectly reflected in the elitist account of the messianic leader as well as in the exclusivity of the revelation, which both result in the worship of the hero and the cult of the personality that stands out from the mass of people. While the merging of Romanticism and messianism in the case of the German *Frühromantik* had the extrinsic character of a juxtaposition – as we have seen in the previous section –, in Polish romantic messianism it has to be observed how the features of the former require the expression of the latter – and vice versa –, determining a homogeneous and indissoluble unity of the two. Thus, in this configuration, the irrational and tense character of the messianic doctrines, along with their nationalistic turn and their urge to restore a past condition prevailed.

Leaving aside the interest of the social class poetically reflected in verses and considering the overall situation of adversity, it is again not hard to account for the features of Polish romantic messianism. Firstly, the necessity of suffering for the achievement of redemption – one of the main tenets of messianism *tout court* – has been instrumental for helping the citizens of an annihilated state believing in a justification for their desperate condition. Secondly, facing a condition in which their success was against all odds, they grab on to the irrational belief in the possibility of redemption messianism furnished them, assigning in return the task of developing their moral perfection. Thus, political goals and ethical perfectionism are intertwined and the abstraction from individual egoism and the movement towards universality can match the Polish (and Jewish) quest for their nation. Thirdly, the emphasis on action instead of thought and on deeds instead of doctrines is more than comprehensible, given the political deadlock and economic stagnation. Fourthly and lastly, drawing the messianic imaginary has allowed Polish poets, mystics and philosophers to convey the expectation of a future – sometimes imagined as imminent – status of bliss, linking it with the need for anticipating it through action in the present moment. In this regard, messianism was also a pattern to mould a philosophy of history where the current moment is but a passage through the next era, where an imminent and radical change is to be awaited, revealed and realised.

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[95] Walicki, 248.

If the development of the messianic doctrines, movements and beliefs is considered in its wholeness and the impact of Polish romantic messianism in terms of linguistic relevance and philosophical reflections is considered, it seems not to be a hazard to affirm that this movement represents the point of inception of messianic doctrines and imaginary into the European intellectual life. What was before a subterranean and secret set of dogmas developed and transmitted by Jewish mystical sects and movements, with the philosophical systematization of Wroński and even more with Mickiewicz's lectures on Slavic literature made their entry inside the literary and political discourses of Poland, France and of Europe as a whole. It is characteristic of this emergence that the Jewish character of the doctrines appears to be spurious: the mediation of Frankism determined the merging of the Christian and the Jewish imaginary, forging a new and unique way of interpreting messianism. This syncretic creation constitutes only one of the possible configurations of messianism, but it proved to be one of the most fruitful for the subsequent philosophical, political and theological debates in Europe.

3. The birth of the Jewish 'Messianic Idea': Cohen and Klausner between assimilation and Zionism

At the opposite side to the neo-Frankist Polish National Romanticism, the overtly Jewish usage of the term and discussion of it was marked, at least for the late 19th and early 20th century, by reclaiming the intrinsic Jewishness of the concept and by developing a peculiar understanding of it very much informed by the cultural transformation the European Jewry went through in the previous decades.

The Romantic appropriation of messianic themes consisted mainly in the sifting of subterranean mystical elements which were then re-worked and rearranged in some sort of syncretic creations. In these cases, it was mainly the external form, so to say the shell of messianism, that which was transplanted to a different imaginary. In brief, messianism was deprived of one of the basic elements it was born with: the hope for the redemption for the Jewish people. The German and east-European Jewry, on the contrary, never lost sight of the promise of the final redemption included in messianism. However, a definite conceptualization of it came only after the scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* brought about their contributions to the study of the sacred texts.

It will be helpful to consider some main historical and cultural phenomena which affected the life of Jewish European communities and therefore influenced the conceptualisation of messianism. The emancipation of the Jews, also fostered by the *Haskalah* – the Jewish Enlightenment – kindled the process of assimilation, but waves of antisemitism hindered if not

fully blocked it in some areas. As a response to this, the Zionist movement emerged, but many advocates of the assimilation continued to encourage the encounter of the Western and the Jewish cultures. After that, an analysis of the positions of two representative scholars – Joseph Klausner and Hermann Cohen – will elucidate the issues at stake and contribute understanding how a reworked messianic concept has helped Jewish intellectuals backing their positions.

3.1 Historical Context: the European Jewry between Assimilation and Antisemitism

After the first half of the 19th century, under the influence of rationalism and the many changes that affected the European society, the condition of the Jews in several countries registered a significant amelioration. Jews were turned "from barely tolerated individuals and communities into full-fledged citizens, a transformation usually designated by the term "emancipation."[96] The 1850s and 1860s in particular have been a "happy period", in which Jews attained full civil equality in Italy, Austria, Germany, Italy and Scandinavia and overall in Europe antisemitism was relatively little.[97] This process, although carried out at a different pace in every country, slowly engendered a sense of self-confidence in the European Jewry and set the conditions for its prosperity, especially in western countries.

The cultural basis for these political improvements, however, has been already set in the 18th century, when several Jewish intellectuals entered into the dialogue with Western culture and gave birth to the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment. Arguably a branch of the all-European enlightenment, by which it has been thoroughly influenced, "the Haskalah was indeed an unprecedented, revolutionary historical event in Jewish history."[98] Despite being fostered by a limited number of people – most of which belonged to the wealthy cultural elite of the mid- to late-18th century – it gained ample resonance in central and east Europe as it waged a cultural war against the 'hierarchy' (as the rabbinical leadership was derogatorily called at that time). The urge to a greater openness to the Western society together with the call for greater religious tolerance were distinctive traits of this movement, which has been appropriately described as secular [99]. In the attempt to extricate the Jews from the then-perceived cultural backwardness, the *Maskilim* – those who adhered to the *Haskalah* – appealed to liberal values, demanded a more appropriate schooling of Jewish children and contributed to the renovation of the Jewish literary production, not to mention the linguistic effort in coining modern Hebrew and turning Yiddish into a written language – in short, they championed the creation of the "new Jew" in

[96] Katz, Emancipation and assimilation, ix.
[97] Laqueur, A History of Zionism, 25; see also Katz, Emancipation and assimilation, 4.
[98] Feiner, The Jewish Enlightenment, 366.
[99] Feiner, 371; Brown and Berk, 'Fathers and Sons', 18.

all aspects of life.[100] As a result, in the following generations many religious tenets – the pillars of the edifice of an ancient religious tradition – were gradually relinquished. The Jewish community, despite keeping the distance from Christianity, "sacrificed most of what had previously characterized it and instead adapted many of the cultural patterns prevailing in the surrounding society. Such a process is usually called assimilation."[101] A new social and cultural arrangement shaped the relations of the Jewish and Christian communities. The new Jew, however, regardless of how good they adapted to their surrounding social environment, "continued to belong to a subunit – the Jewish minority."[102]

Subsequently, from the 1870s and 1880s a general change of perspective came to happen. The responsibility of the major financial crisis happening in Germany in the early 1870s was often cast upon the individual Jews who took part in the speculations. A new wave of antisemitism rose; to be sure, this did not curb the assimilation movement, but for sure limited the expectation that an amalgamation of the two peoples would be rapidly accomplished.[103] Although antisemitism in its most virulent form prevailed in central Europe, where the material conditions of the Jewish communities were no more an issue and where assimilation had already substantially transformed their relations with non-Jews, numerous episodes of violence occurred in the Russian empire. After the assassination of Alexander II was blamed on the Jews by the government, a long series of *pogroms* – targeted and repeated violent riots against an ethnic group –, up to two hundred were inflicted upon the Jewish population.[104] Even though "as a social problem the Jewish question was far less acute in 1880 […] political and cultural tensions persisted and were the source of the new antisemitism."[105]

While in western Europe the Jewry had progressed too far on the road to the assimilation to be able to conceive another solution as a viable possibility to break away from that threatening situation, a ferment from east and central Europe led to the beginning of a wide movement, Zionism. In its core, "Zionism is an ideological formation based upon the theory that *the Jews are a people with a right to constitute itself in its own national home – in the Land of Israel.*"[106] Given the complexity and the manifoldness of this movement and of its historical development and consequences, it is possible to offer now but a concise summary of its tenets and to offer

[100] Feiner, The Jewish Enlightenment, 368–69.
[101] Katz, Emancipation and assimilation, x.
[102] Katz, x.
[103] cf. Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, 28, 30.
[104] Klier and Lambroza, *Pogroms*, 376.
[105] Laqueur, A History of Zionism, 38.
[106] Braiterman, 'Zionism', 627.

some hints about its embryonic phase. The essential aims of the movement were to "regain Jewish self-respect and dignity in the eyes of non-Jews; and to rebuild a Jewish national home."[107] By depreciating life in the diaspora as unsafe for Jewish citizens and despising it as morally besmirched, it elected assimilation as its main antagonist.

The germinal point of the movement has been identified in the set of organizations which went by the name of *Hovevei Zion* – lit. 'Lovers of Zion'. They started to be constituted after 1881 in response to the pogroms in Russia and were officially constituted as a group at a conference led by Leon Pinsker in 1884.[108] One of the main consequences of the *Hovevei Zion* movement was the first wave of the *Aliyah* (1882-1903), the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Palestinian land, when more than 25.000 Jews moved there.[109] However, it was only in 1896-97, when Theodor Herzl published *Der Judenstaat*[110] and the first World Jewish Congress took place in Basel (29-31 August 1897), that modern Zionism properly speaking was born.[111] In his pamphlet he advanced the idea that the minoritarian position of the Jews would lead them to face antisemitism no matter the conditions in which they lived and therefore advocated for the creation of a state for the Jews with a sketch of pragmatic proposals concerning economic and geopolitical issues which would have to be addressed. The movement sought support for their goal from the British authorities and other world governments as well. At the first Congress a central authority was created that could organize the movement and speak on behalf of Zionists around the world. Other conferences succeeded in the following years and in parallel to these debates, a second wave of *Aliyah* led around 30,000 Jews to resettle in Palestinian lands.[112] During these years the movement gained few concrete results, due to the weakness of the Zionists in the Ottoman Empire.[113] On the other hand the Zionist Organization grew significantly, to the point that "by 1914, then, 127,000 Jews throughout the world were paying the "shekel" of Zionist membership. Zionist associations were functioning even in South Africa and North and South Americas."[114] After the sixth Congress (23-28 August 1903) Herzl's leadership within the Zionist Congress faded and he passed away the following year, nonetheless the organization did not stop thriving.[115] Due to the massive rearrangement of the

[107] Laqueur, A History of Zionism, 599.
[108] cf. Vital, *Zionism*, 135–86.
[109] Sachar, A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time, 26–30.
[110] Herzl, Der Judenstaat.
[111] Laqueur, A History of Zionism, 84; Vital, The Origins of Zionism, 233–45.
[112] Sachar, A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time, 72.
[113] Vital, Zionism the Crucial Phase, 6.
[114] Sachar, A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time, 66.
[115] Vital, *Zionism*, 277.

geopolitical horizon, “like the Poles and the Czechs, Zionists had their historical opportunities only after the First World War.”[116] It was specifically the Balfour declaration, a public statement issued by the British Government in 1917, that played a decisive role for the following developments of Zionism and the formation of what will ultimately have become the state of Israel. This document clearly stated that the government “view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object.”[117] After the war, the Mandate for Palestine and Transjordan assigned the territory of Palestine to the British jurisdiction in 1920. From the aftermath of WWI to 1923, a migration of 40,000 Jews to Mandatory Palestine constituted the third wave of *Aliyah*.

To sum up, Jewish Enlightenment brought liberal values into the Jewish communities in Europe and kindled the process of assimilation, which was successful in the 1850s and 1860s; nevertheless, waves of antisemitism from the 1870s and particularly acute after 1881 threatened the central and east European Jewry. In response to this situation, the Zionist movement emerged, advocating for the foundation of a Jewish state, although several intellectuals never abandoned the idea of a peaceful life in the diaspora and continued to support the assimilation. Within this frame, two Jewish intellectuals who dealt with their religious and cultural heritage while at the same time firmly rejecting mystical and potentially heretical twists. They both highlighted the central role of the Jewry for European as well as for world culture and both advocated for a renovation of the Jewish life – although their cultural and political proposals point to different and opposite directions.

3.2 Joseph Klausner

Among the active supporters of the Cultural Zionist cause and belonging to one of the first groups who decided to re-settle in the then British-led Palestinian mandate, Joseph Gedaliah Klausner (1874-1958) played a decisive role in the history of Israel, for his political commitment as well as for his cultural contributions in the fields of history and biblical criticism. Born in the Vilna Governorate (Russian Empire), he moved to Odessa in his twenties, where he took part in the literary and scientific life of the city, aligning himself with the Russian Zionists and joining their political circle. Klausner obtained his Ph.D. in Heidelberg in 1902, where he became acquainted with Western philosophy while focusing his research on the Talmudic production of the *Tannaim*. A strong supporter of the cause of a Jewish state – he

[116] Laqueur, A History of Zionism, 593.
[117] Rothschild, ‘The Balfour Declaration’, fol. 3.

attended the first Zionist Congress in Basel and knew personally Theodor Herzl[118] –, Klausner moved to Palestine in 1919, short before the British Mandate was established, and got a position at the newly born Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He kept supporting the Revisionist Zionists[119] and even stood as a candidate for the first presidential elections in 1949, when he lost to Chaim Weizmann. While in Palestine, he was part of a group of "nationalist educator intellectuals,"[120] who contributed to furnish their fellow Israeli countrymen the cultural elements to devise a moral and national orientation drawing material from the common Scriptural heritage.[121]

In this capacity, Klausner rehabilitated the usage of biblical criticism incorporating it into his lectures and essays, where he arranged the materials to convey a vision which would be suitable to the tenets of cultural Zionism. However, these attempts did not always receive appreciation, also due to his "entirely unorthodox" account of Judaism, deeply reliant on the results of modern biblical criticism.[122] On top of this, when in his autobiography he acknowledges the influences of his work, he is not reluctant to affirm that "Plato and Kant, Tolstoy and Carlyle, Shadal (Samuel David Luzzatto) and Smolenskin" have been much more important to him rather than the fathers of Cultural Zionism.[123] And the contribution of this array of thinkers to his worldview is palpable and evident in his merging of "national distinctiveness and universal openness"[124] as key characteristics of Judaism from the ancient pre-exilic times to his time. The keen interest for the national quest of the people of Israel drawn from prophetic texts and the Torah did not prevent him from the wish of a renovated mankind *tout court*. Already in 1905, short after his *Promotion*, he published "a collection of essays entitled *Judaism and Humanity*, in which he sought to show how allegiance to Judaism involved service to humanity as a whole. He maintained that Judaism, far from being at odds with the heritage of the West, had always constituted one of its vital constituent element."[125]

Given his very overt political inclinations, it comes as no surprise that these leanings informed his academic work to a great extent. In this regard, an orthodox Jewish historian remarked:

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[118] Shindler, Triumph of Military Zionism.
[119] Cf. Braiterman, 'Zionism', 618–19.
[120] Arkush, 'Biblical Criticism and Cultural Zionism Prior to the First World War', 122.
[121] cf. Smith, *National Identity*, 69.
[122] Arkush, 'Biblical Criticism and Cultural Zionism Prior to the First World War', 123, 126.
[123] Klausner, *Darki Li-Kerat Ha-Teḥiyah Veha-Ge'ulah: Otobiyografyah*; cited in Arkush, 'Biblical Criticism and Cultural Zionism Prior to the First World War', 125.
[124] Holtzman, 'Klausner, Yosef. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe.'
[125] Arkush, 'Biblical Criticism and Cultural Zionism Prior to the First World War', 126; cf. Klausner, *Yahadut we-enoshiyut (Judaism and Humanity). Collection of articles.*

> "It is hardly a secret that Zionist ideology had a profound impact on Joseph Klausner's historiographic enterprise. Even a superficial perusal of his works reveals a powerful Zionist commitment expressed in both rhetoric and analysis, so much so that his right to teach the period of the Second Temple in the Hebrew University was held up for years on the grounds that he was more of a publicist and ideologue—and of the Revisionist variety no less—than a historian."[126]

Klausner utilized the tools of biblical criticism to investigate the sacred texts, but always took the effort of demonstrating the development of the key Jewish concepts or ideas, stressing their historical journey through the centuries. In his "evolutionary understanding of Judaism,"[127] however, he managed to curtail what would have otherwise been a simplistic straight path across time, pointing out instead, with regards to the messianic idea, that "There is an evolution here, but not in a straight line, but – like history in general – zigzag."[128] The dependence upon historical events in shaping the form and the semantic of the concepts he analyses is noticeable already from the customary expository style he often adopts in his works, where the cultural features discovered in the lyrical and prophetic production are quickly juxtaposed to the historical facts or the forces at work in the specific historical contingency. Again talking about the messianic idea, Klausner maintains that

> If we understand properly the character of the prophets [...] then we shall be forced to recognize that in every generation the Messianic conceptions were influenced on the one hand by the political situation, and on the other hand by a desire to take over the controls of the machine of the national, political and social life of Israel and to incline this machine toward the will of the prophets, the creators of the messianic conceptions.[129]

The way Klausner displays the evolution of a term, however, is not entirely reliant on the nude historical fact. It is evident, from the criteria he embraces to operate the selection of the passages he quotes and comments, that a pre-conceived pattern of a determinate idea leads the sifting of the verses he scrutinises in his works. This selection becomes almost obvious and patent, for example, whereby his conception that "the Messianic idea is primarily the hope for the political fulfilment of the political expectations of the Jewish people; and these expectations remained by nature more or less mundane"[130] determines the exclusion from his analysis of all

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[126] Berger, 'Maccabees, Zealots and Josephus', 312.
[127] Arkush, 'Biblical Criticism and Cultural Zionism Prior to the First World War', 127.
[128] Klausner, The Messianic Idea in Israel from Its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah, 242.
[129] Klausner, 114.
[130] Klausner, 418.

the Talmudic sayings that included topics such as resurrection, paradise and the 'World to Come'. He labels these latter as "eschatological" and places them "*after* the Messianic age". Quite surprisingly, however, "[…] where we find in a saying about "the World to Come" materialistic and political expectations […] we can confidently say that "the World to come" is another name for the Messianic age."[131] This methodological choice clearly shows the arbitrariness of the nonetheless accurate examination of the sources: although thoroughly investigated, these are cunningly fitted in the Procrustean bed of his Zionism whereby the quest for the land is deemed to be the first concern. In other words, the disposition of the materials is arranged so that it can comply with the pre-given cultural and political aim of the book.

It is now necessary to take a closer view to his work about the messianic idea, by which the cultural operation Klausner has been able to perform will surface. What appears now as a single book titled *The Messianic Idea In Israel From Its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah* firstly appeared in an English translation in 1955, but the history of its composition is a complex one. The book is divided into three parts, dealing respectively with the period of the prophets, the books of the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, and the period of the Tannaim. The last one was the first to be written and was completed by 1902, forming Klausner's doctoral dissertation at Heidelberg; it has been published in 1904 in German. The first part has been redacted in Hebrew in 1903 and in the years 1907-08; it firstly appeared on the journal *Ha-Shiloah* and then as a separate book in Cracow in 1909. The second part, elaborated while the author was already living in Jerusalem, was written in Hebrew and printed there in 1921. This fragmentary and intermittent composition not only accounts for the slight inner incoherencies in terms of style and method, but has somehow rendered possible for the text to absorb the changes that the life of the Jewish people was facing and to reflect them in the book. In the preface to the second Hebrew edition (1927), Klausner wrote: "During the twenty-five years that have passed since the first and the third part of this book were printed, the idea of redemption on Israel has spread and overflowed into many hearts like a flood in mighty waters."[132]

The fact that Klausner uses the term "idea" to refer to the redemption and that the whole book revolves around messianism presented as an *idea,* constitutes the paramount novelty his approach introduced with regards to this theme. Writing from a Jewish cultural perspective and a Zionist political standpoint, in his work messianism is intrinsically part of his religious and political tenets, therefore there is no need to adjust the concept to an alien narrative or to an

[131] Klausner, 414.
[132] Klausner, ix.

extrinsic political goal, as it has been shown it was the case for the Polish Romantics. There is not, in Klausner's writings, an abstraction of the concept of messianism, so that the exterior pattern could suitably be applied to a determinate concrete situation; without depriving the concept of its contents as they have been formulated in the Torah, by the prophets and by the Talmudists, he rather gathers these literary materials to foster a renovated promise of redemption for the people of Israel in the form of re-gained statehood and recovered morality. To be sure, other Jewish scholars have dealt with the problems posed by messianic doctrines since the birth of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and the consequent application of the critical method of inquiry to the sacred texts, but none of them conceived it in the guise of an *idea*. This way of devising it is the second and most relevant aspect of Klausner's mode of setting out the concept of messianism. He presents an idea to strive for, a far-reaching goal that in turn builds up an altogether teleological account of history, oriented towards the progress of Israel and of mankind. Klausner does not focus on the wait for an outstanding political leader who would stir his people to rise up and seize back political power, because the Messiah appears as an idealized man and Zionist's claims are not so much dependent on his individual existence as on the general messianic expectation into which messianism has been transformed. Given this explanatory pattern, the references to classic Greek and German philosophers – as it has been mentioned in the case of Klausner's autobiography – come to no surprise. Immanuel Kant's account of the dignity of man [*Menschenwürde*][133] and also the "conception of the [upper] limit of man"[134] are driven to perfectly collimate with the *ideal man* or the *glory of God* in Judaism. Klausner goes so far in this series of similes as to juxtapose the name of the Messiah in Talmudic literature to the eidetic doctrines of Plato:

> we have no recourse, therefore, but to accept the hypothesis […] that "the name of the Messiah" is the *idea* of the Messiah, or, more exactly, the *idea of redemption through the Messiah* […] The idea of the Messiah […] had been predestined before Creation […] and by the keeping of the festivals the children of Israel had shown themselves worthy of this "idea" of the Messiah. We have here, in some measure, the Platonic doctrine of ideas.[135]

In short, it seems possible to affirm that a form of hellenization of the figure of the Messiah is put in place by Klausner, which serves however not to advocate for the assimilation of the Jews in Europe, but rather for supporting his Zionist claims.

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[133] Klausner, 118.
[134] Klausner, 523.
[135] Klausner, 460–61.

As a justification of his espousal of a Greek pattern to explain an allegedly sheer Jewish concept, Klausner resorts to a conceptual distinction which grants him the possibility to distance his interpretation from a literal perusal of the sacred text. At the outset of the book, he explains:

> A distinction must be made between the vague Messianic expectation and the more explicit belief in the Messiah. The definition of the messianic expectation is: The prophetic hope for the end of this age, in there will be political freedom, moral perfection and earthly bliss for the people Israel in his own land, and also for the entire human race. But the definition of belief in the Messiah is: The prophetic hope for the end of this age, in which a strong redeemer, by his power and his spirit will bring complete redemption, political and spiritual, to the people Israel, and along with this, earthly bliss and moral perfection to the entire human race.[136]

This double definition serves him to scrutinise the texts of the prophets, the apocrypha, the pseudepigrapha and the Mishnah to extrapolate tendencies or hints of messianism even when the word *mashiach* has not directly been used. Furthermore, both the definitions entail the coming of a future – the "end of this age" – when a general positive social and political situation will be inaugurated: this scheme is presented to the reader right in the first chapter and is in fact been used in the subsequent chapters as a theoretical filter to frame the appearances of the messianic idea through the analysed sources. In the following chapter, dealing with the *source and beginnings of the messianic idea*, the reader apprehends that the "Messianic expectation is the *Golden Age in the future*", but also "*the positive element in the message of the prophets*."[137] While the prophetic texts are undoubtedly permeated by foresights of doom for the sinful nations, there can also be found several rosy depictions of a peaceful idyllic society: Klausner bundles these images and promises up together and, although not explicitly messianic – there are only seldom references to the Messiah in the Torah –, categorises them as such in compliance with his aforementioned definition. Thus he draws the identity between this *golden age in the future* and the "end of the days" which appears in the Scripture.[138] To be sure, Klausner is not the only scholar to have adopted the simile with the golden age and having flipped it from past- to future-oriented. The peculiarity of his move lies rather in the description of the path that leads toward this future goal. On the same page, in fact, he secures his position against his opponents who advanced the claim that Messianism "is an idea of sudden,

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[136] Klausner, 9.
[137] Klausner, 14, 21.
[138] Klausner, 25.

catastrophic change" by reminding them of "the repentance which precedes the redemption; in the repentance required in the Messianic age a basic element is the demand for *moral reform* – and this is the very foundation of the idea of progress."[139]

This results in a progressive and continuous account of the historical development towards the attainment of the messianic goal, which represents the core concept, along with that of the ideal, in Klausner's exposition. Both these elements emerge and became clearly evident when the attention is devoted to the analysis of the first part of the book of Isaiah. Here Klausner not only provides a good explanation of how messianism emerged out of the historical contingency in which the prophet lived, but also expounds the broadening of it to the extent of encompassing a whole universal ideal. If messianism if first and foremost a promise – firstly of prosperity and political security –, he argues, it is when this promise is not fulfilled in the present time (or in the imminent future) that rather than being effaced from the prophetic narrative, it is postponed to a later time. At this moment the promise undergoes a transformation:

> Such postponement was natural and necessary. It was also *proper*. For the basic principle of the Messianic expectation is nothing else than the longing for the Golden Age in the future, whether near or distant – the exact time was not the most important thing […] since fundamentally this was dependent on repentance and good works. And this basic principle is the secret of the eternal endurance of the Messianic expectations. By means of this all Messianism became an everlasting ideal.[140]

This transformation, a sort of sublimation of a terrestrial dream into an "everlasting ideal", is explained through distinguishing the achievements that this "magic dream" has brought forth on the historical level. This "dream is far from being entirely realized. Yet such is its divine greatness and such its eternal sacredness that it unceasingly continues to achieve a *partial* realization, without attaining *complete* realization."[141] In other words, Klausner is positing a continuous striving for the absolute and perfect attaining of the ultimate goal. Afterwards, he introduces the idea of progress to clarify what he is concerned with when he addresses the messianic idea:

> the quintessence of Jewish Messianism is included in this [Isaiah's] unique prophecy, and it has made the Jewish Messianic idea not a national ideal alone, but also a universal

[139] Klausner, 25, note 25.
[140] Klausner, 57.
[141] Klausner, 70.

> ideal: the ideal of unceasing progress, of continuing spiritual increase – of the brotherhood of peoples, and of the Golden Age *in the future.*[142]

The Jewish messianic idea is thus conceived as "a world-wide, broadly humanitarian vision," perfectly collimating with that of the enlightenment and of 19th century philosophy on progress. As to providing an explanation of the sequence of events or historical laws that rule the historical development of progress, Klausner extrapolates from the Scripture a "Messianic *chain*,"[143] whose elements are to be found in a series of basic links arranged one after the other and which are worth a succinct mention. The point of departure is Israel's *sin*, that "brings after it punishment", consisting in wars, destructions, exile, etc. – all of which are later gathered under the term "the birth pangs of the Messiah" – or in other terms the *day of judgment*. This latter produces *repentance*, which will in turn "bring after it *the redemption*": at this time only "the remnant of Israel" has remained and can thus enjoy the bliss of the latter days. This "small group of the upright" who survived the destructions will relish the restored "*political power* of Israel", together with the "*material prosperity* in their land", portrayed in the richest and most colourful images, and "the *spiritual welfare*", consisting in the knowledge of God, the study of the Torah and the dominion of love, justice and mercy among the people.[144]

It is quite noticeable that in all these descriptions and in the reconstruction of the messianic chain, the belief in the individual Messiah is not required at all for the scheme to be working. To be sure, Klausner not only does not exclude this belief, especially in pre-exilic or Tannaitic times, when there could be found a point of reference in a determinate king or political leader – such was for example the case of Hezekiah for Isaiah or Bar Kochba for the Tannaim –, but also explicitly recognises that in determinate cases this individual figure was at the core of the prophetical preaching. In the case of Isaiah, the Messiah is "actually *the supreme man*, politically and spiritually, physically and ethically, alike."[145] In the post-Biblical periods, the individual Messiah becomes even more necessary since "concerning a kingdom of heaven on earth without the ideal king […] the Tannaim know nothing at all."[146] It is here that this figure is vested with the attributes of the kingship, as a descendent of the house of David and serves the purpose of rebuilding the shattered state. Interestingly, Klausner does not linger over the famous depiction of the Messiah as the servant in the book of deutero-Isaiah (52:13-53:12) – in which he is described as "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" – and patently

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[142] Klausner, 70–71.
[143] Klausner, 385.
[144] Klausner, 237–40.
[145] Klausner, 65.
[146] Klausner, 461.

excludes from his interpretation the also remarkable Talmudic portrayal of the Messiah as the leper at the gates of Rome, since it comes from the Amoraic period. To sum up, the already scanty references to the individual Messiah (the chapter about his name and personality takes only 12 pages) tend to exclude from the picture the details that could cast a halo of excessive weakness on his representation. Whatever features of the personal Messiah are highlighted, their importance remains at any rate relatively limited, since for the purpose of the book the messianic expectation outdoes the belief in the individual Messiah.

With respect to the definition of welfare, it is undeniable that Klausner's messianic idea bears a clear normative content, although outlined in very general terms. This content comes to be delineated also through the idea of human perfection:

> The messianic expectation of spiritual welfare includes the idea of *Human perfection and the perfection of humanity* in the Age to Come […] and thus also the idea of *improvement and progress*, which are incorporated in the idea of repentance, and which also involve a definite material prosperity for society and for the nations.[147]

It goes without saying, the kind of material prosperity and spiritual welfare hinted in the work find their implementation through the political wage of cultural Zionism. The aim of the prophets was "*to create a positive ideal of national regeneration, religious and political*,"[148] and – Klausner suggests – it is still valid, or even more so, at the time when he writes.

It is here important to stress that, although the messianic idea in the fashion Klausner delivered it presents the people Israel at the centre of the historical development and assigns to it the primacy among the other nations; although Klausner refuses to accept any form of "*cosmopolitianism*" in which nations and peoples would merge in an undifferentiated mass, he does underline and value the *universalistic* part of the messianic idea.[149]

> Israel will remain, *and remain in Zion*, with Jerusalem as the center of its life; but it will be preserved in order to teach righteousness and justice to all mankind, and it will be gathered in to Zion in order to make this place a place of instruction to all peoples.[150]

Lastly, condensing it in one sentence at the end of the book, he pulls together Judaism's primacy, progress and the universalistic side of the idea: "the Jewish Messianic faith is the seed of progress, which has been planted by Judaism throughout the whole world."[151]

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[147] Klausner, 240.
[148] Klausner, 131.
[149] Klausner, 4.
[150] Klausner, 70.
[151] Klausner, 531.

This examination of Klausner's messianic framework leads us to consider him a staunch Jewish scholar who devoted a great deal of efforts in exhibiting the significance and the central role of messianism not only for ancient Israel but also and overall for his contemporary fellow countrymen. To do so, he became the first to introduce the "messianic idea" – a concept which will be destined to exert a notable influence on some of his contemporaries in Germany and Palestine. Klausner conceived of messianism as the ideal of an unceasing progress and defended it against his opponents. He merged some of the staple concepts of the Western tradition of thought – from the enlightenment and utilitarianism – with the tenets of Judaism and has thus been able to build a solid justification for his cultural Zionism and the resulting plea for the rebuilding of the state of Israel in Palestine. His book about the messianic idea, besides being a robust and informed work on the topic, constitutes a literary demonstration of the instrumental character that the engagement with messianism can assume and provides us with a striking example of how spiritual, cultural and political aims have called for its mobilization.

3.3 Hermann Cohen

If already Klausner in his work on the messianic idea has been able to link this Jewish concept to the Platonic doctrine of ideas, he did it nonetheless in a cursory, although indicative, passage, without providing a proper argumentation in favour of this juxtaposition. What in Klausner's book looks like a hasty reference can find its definitive robust theoretical grounding in the works of another coeval thinker. It can be argued that Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) devoted his entire life to the research of a synthesis between the German philosophical and cultural tenets – represented for him, as a neo-Kantian, by critical idealism – and the Jewish religious tradition. An inspection of Cohen's thought, with particular reference to his last written work, *Religion of Reason*, will lead to identify the core concepts and patterns that lay beneath Klausner's work and of which they form the skeleton. A deeper and more rigorous exposition of the arrangement of the basic concepts that construct their messianic idea will therefore emerge more clearly.

Cohen belonged to the generation previous to Klausner's one, being born in Coswig, Saxony, in 1842.[152] Here he had a Jewish upbringing both at home – he was the son of a Hebrew teacher – and at school. He furthered his Jewish studies in Breslau and then moved to Berlin to study mathematics and philosophy, eventually earning his Ph.D. in philosophy in 1865 at Halle and

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[152] All biographical details are drawn from Samuelson, *Jewish Philosophy*, 162–65.

starting teaching in 1873 in Marburg. In Marburg he became the principal exponent of one of the two main schools of Neo-Kantianism, contributing to reinvigorate the interest in Kantian epistemology, stressing the importance of concepts over intuitions and embracing a rigorous scientific approach to philosophy. Cohen's interest for the Jewish culture and religion, although marginal in his early productions, grew with time and became his central interest in the last period of his life. In 1914 he spent a period in Vilna and Warsaw to help establishing an independent institute of higher learning. The following year he started teaching in Berlin's liberal rabbinic seminary *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. He died in 1918.
Jewish political philosopher Leo Strauss described Cohen in a nutshell as a "liberal Jew who abhorred mysticism."[153] It would not be misleading to summarize Cohen's attitude towards Judaism if he were described as a champion of the assimilation of the Jews in the respective society where they lived in the diaspora. This position conferred on him the role of the enlightened German-Jewish thinker, ever hopeful of a peaceful and fruitful coexistence of the Jewish and the German people within the frame of the German nation state. He coherently maintained this attitude throughout his entire life, and this is clearly stated already in some writings belonging to his early production. An article he published in response to an anti-Semitic attack by a colleague in Marburg[154] is often considered a watershed in his work, after which he started devoting more and more attention to the Jewish question. In this article, Cohen "defended the integration of Jews into German society [and] argued that Jews, as the inheritors of traditional Jewish values, represent what is most worthwhile in German culture."[155] However, even before enduring this attack, he advocated for a tightening of the relations of the Jewish and the German culture. He went so far as to suggest in an essay[156] that "the Jewish Sabbath and Christian Sundays should coincide as to facilitate greater Jewish integration in the German society and to spread the ethical and social meaning of the Sabbath more effectively throughout the wider culture."[157] It is the year 1880, still, the turning point which "marked the beginning of Cohen's long "return" to Judaism,"[158] leading him to become a "*Baal teshuvah*", a "man of conversion and a man of return."[159]

[153] Strauss, 'Introductory Essay', xxv.
[154] Cohen, Ein Bekenntniß in der Judenfrage.
[155] Samuelson, *Jewish Philosophy*, 163.
[156] Cohen, 'Der Sabbath in seiner kuturgeschitlichen Bedeutung'.
[157] Poma, 'Hermann Cohen', 87.
[158] Poma, 83.
[159] Rosenzweig, 'Einleitung'.

Cohen’s stance towards the assimilation led him to deepen and ground rigorously the possibility for this cross-cultural encounter, developing a system of thought fertile for this aim. Overall, “there can be little doubt that an integral synthesis between critical idealism and Judaism was Cohen’s lifelong purpose.”[160] And this very purpose was pursued with a strenuous effort, leading him to recognize a sort of symbiotic coexistence, almost a perfect overlapping, of the Jewish and the German culture. This latter, moreover, holds a decisive importance even beyond its relevance pertaining to the philosophical sphere, and Cohen stretched this relation to the point that he was able “to recognize Germany as the bearer of universal humanism, messianic socialism, and perpetual peace (that is, the eternal ideas comprising the essence of Judaism.”[161] Greek culture, particularly Platonism, was presented as the basis for German Idealism and an inspiration for Jewish monotheism, a common token belonging to both Christian Germany and Judaism. The move of grasping some conceptions from Greek idealism and of merging them with the Jewish tradition – despite the cold to hostile reception on both sides of the dialogue – finds ample resonance with the work of Klausner, and although this latter would not adhere to Cohen’s assimilationist stance, his works are well aligned with Cohen’s ones on a purely theoretical level.

Cohen’s perspective of messianism must be seen in the light of his rationalism, informed by both ancient Greek philosophy and critical idealism. Messianism is a decisive concept in the overall architectural structure of Cohen’s religious Neokantianism. Wendell Dietrich has observed that “as an interpretation of Judaism, Cohen's mature thought is noteworthy in its selecting for special prominence the messianic idea as a Judaic religious category and in further making that idea an organizing principle for his system as a whole.”[162] While this is patently true for his last work, it should be remembered that already in 1907 Cohen gave a lecture about religious postulates,[163] among which “messianism” stands as one of the most important. Cohen acknowledges “monotheism” as the first and foremost religious postulate, but “messianism” immediately follows. The authentic meaning of the latter notion – Cohen argues – must be found in “the vocation of the people of Israel to live amongst other peoples precisely so as to promote universal humanity.”[164] The messianic idea necessarily entails a kind of universalism, which for Cohen takes the form of a cosmopolitanism in which the Jewish people can and

[160] Poma, ‘Hermann Cohen’, 87.
[161] Poma, 94.
[162] Dietrich, ‘The Function of the Idea of Messianic Mankind in Hermann Cohen’s Later Thought’, 246.
[163] Cohen, ‘Religious Postulates’.
[164] Poma, ‘Hermann Cohen’, 90.

should live among the nations. Cohen affirms: "The Unique God has deprived us of our homeland to return it to us in humanity […] If we did not have, or no longer had, this mission, there would be no *Jewish* sense in preserving our ethnic identity."[165] Furthermore, his rationalism goes hand in hand with his (critical) idealism and this applies to whatever sphere of human life and culture he deals with, religion included; therefore even "*Judaism for Cohen is always the "conceptual idealization" of Judaism.*"[166] In other words, as Kenneth Seeskin has remarked, "it stands to historical religion as the idea of a perfect democracy stands to the day to day workings at city hall."[167]

The paramount importance of of messianism comes to the fore in his 1919 posthumous work *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums.* The title of the book, published posthumously in 1919, is all but casual. Schwarzschild wonderfully wraps up its meaning:

> "Religion of Reason (1) out of the Sources of (2) Judaism" (3) is intended to convey briefly that (3) historical Judaism will be treated as the empirical matrix out of which (2) the rational, a priori (necessary and universal) concepts are transcendentally educed, which (1) are in turn the "synthetic" producers of the universal human religion of ethics.[168]

In the book, Cohen presents the moments of creation (of man and the world) and revelation (of God to human reason) in terms of a rationally explicable process, where reason is seen as the organ of concepts and thus underlying the universal ethical tenets at the centre of religious life. The necessity of religion depends on the fact that whereas ethics, rationally grounded, deals with the compliance with general rules accepted by all humanity without caring about what happens to individuals when they fail to comply with its compelling demands, religion addresses precisely the individual's inadequacies in the form of sin and guilt, by including the possibility of redemption. The latter constitutes a third moment in the scheme, after creation and revelation. With respect to the moral duty of mankind, Cohen posits God as a model, the "idea of a perfect agent,"[169] and introduces the concept of holiness as the mode of human behavior ordained in accordance with the correlation between man and God. Holiness, although "connected with spirituality […] develops out of the latter into morality", whose essence is in

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[165] Cohen, 'Religious Postulates'.
[166] Poma, 'Hermann Cohen', 92.
[167] Seeskin, 'How to Read Religion of Reason', 29.
[168] Schwarzschild, 'The Title of Hermann Cohen's "Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism"', 18.
[169] Seeskin, 'How to Read Religion of Reason', 29.

fact nothing but “the correlation of God and man.”[170] The human pursuit of holiness is oriented towards the idealized image of God.

> The love of man for God is the love of the moral ideal. Only the ideal can I love, and I can grasp the ideal in no other way than by loving it.[171]

The moral task thus becomes an infinite striving for the moral ideal, coming asymptotically closer and closer but without ever fully attaining it.

> You desire to strive for holiness: prove it by your humble self-restraint to do your purely human action. The latter, however, can never be completed; it can only persist in the elevating of the task. […] You desire to prove your holiness through a perfection which you allot to your entire human doings: you prove with this fancy only that you did not understand the entirety of human doings, the problem of human action as an *infinite* task, which is determined through the correlation of God and man.[172]

This eternal task is the cardinal feature of Cohen’s idealization of Judaism. The Jewish God is turned into a moral ideal which is nonetheless actually unattainable. Knowing God means loving God and this love is performed as an act of the will which makes man perform this eternal task without being ever able to fulfil it entirely. In this continuous movement towards the ideal all religious and moral life of man is summarized.

Now can we finally appreciate messianism’s role at the core of Cohen’s philosophical system. And this because it is messianism that “has fixed the goal of the love of god in a permanent though infinite point.”[173] Messianism comes finally to occupy its highest position in Cohen’s thought, an overarching concept that encompasses reason and religion, the Jewish tradition and the secular culture together with its liberal tenets. But how exactly does messianism comprise and synthetize all the other elements? On the one hand there is reason – the autonomous human faculty that regulates the domain of ethics, setting the ground for universal tenets and criteria which have to be valid for the entirety of mankind, but which cannot respond to the individual’s need of forgiveness for his sins. In his ethical relation to the other, through compassion man is discovered as the ‘fellowman’ towards which moral commandments apply. On the other hand, religion responds to this request of succour for the individual soul and offers the individual the possibility to be relieved of the suffering depending on the burden of one’s own guilt: moral frailty is not an obstacle anymore. Through Atonement, man is thus discovered as the

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[170] Cohen, Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism, 98.
[171] Cohen, 161.
[172] Cohen, 111.
[173] Cohen, 148.

'individual', the 'I', finally freed from the grief resulting from his guilt. He is not responsible for the guilt of his fathers and ancestors, nor for those of his people; he bears responsibility for his own action alone and in this capacity and only thanks to God's goodness is rehabilitated as an individual. However, the individual's atonement lasts for but an instant and has to be perpetually renovated, for man's moral frailty leads him to sin again. Man's social behaviour – his relation to his fellow – is also never perfect and justice appears at present more as a mirage than as an actuality. Both individually and socially, man is never completely just nor completely untarnished, and keeps striving to attain holiness, that is: a perfect moral behaviour, the enactment of the love for God. Messianism, that fixed the goal of this love asymptotically, works as the keystone of Cohen's entire edifice of the *Religion of Reason,* as it pulls together the universality of reason and its demand for absolute justice with the atonement of religion and its aspiration for holiness. Messianism furnishes the only horizon within which this infinite striving finds its perfect accomplishment. And it does so by introducing the concept of redeemed mankind, the true focal point of all messianism.

Already in his *Ethics of pure Will* ,[174] Cohen presented the idea of a universal humanity which, as a postulate of moral reason, "functions in giving coherence to the personal moral life as a totality [and] indicates, further, Cohen's distinctive way of characterizing the infinity of the moral task."[175] In *Religion of Reason*, the idea of universal humanity is explained as the messianic end-goal that takes the form of the 'prophetic idea of mankind'. The overcoming of the ethnic and national differences and the attainment of a universal and cosmopolitan idea is to be credited – in Cohen's view – to religion, as its "highest triumph."[176] In ethics, Cohen explains, man is regarded in relation to his fellows as a plurality, which, as Kaplan remarks, "retains the reference to diversity and particularity and is therefore a relative unification, as is represented, for example, by the notion of a people or a congregation."[177] But the concept of humanity entails the realization of the ethical goal in its *totality*, which is "the final integration of the individual in the ideal unity of mankind, which is considered absolute and is realized through the unity of the state as a step in this integration" (Ibid.). Ethics, although necessitating this ultimate goal, does not provide the solution. Religion rescues ethics by introducing "God's

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[174] Cohen, System der Philosophie. Teil II. Ethik des reinen Willens.
[175] Dietrich, 'The Function of the Idea of Messianic Mankind in Hermann Cohen's Later Thought', 247.
[176] Cohen, Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism, 238.
[177] cf. Cohen, 15, footnote.

universal love as presented in Messianism,"[178] whose tendency originates from the correlation with man, which for Him exists in its infinity. Therefore,

> God loves the stranger, he loves the poor man. Thus he will also not stop with the love for Israel only, which is merely a historical point of departure, similar to that of the stranger and the poor man. He will love man as a *totality*. For he himself is not in need of man as the fellowman.[179]

The notion of the correlation is a tool that Cohen uses to explain the peculiar relation of God and men, where the former stands as the ideal, as the archetype for moral action, and the latter gains knowledge of God by loving him in the infinite task of pursuing this ideal. The correlation, which man experiences always as a finite being, exists for God "in its infinity", *sub specie aeternitatis*. The infinite task finds its actuality only in the essence of God, never in the everyday wordly experience of man. Nonetheless, the goal of this eternal striving is fixed by messianism in the eternal mankind, where man finds itself not just as an individual or group, but as a totality. In this correlation, the unity of mankind is "linked with the unity of God. To put it in terms of the sources of Judaism out of which a religion of reason emerges, the messianic unity of humanity is linked to Judaic faith in the One God."[180] The ideal endpoint of the infinite task of man, comprising ethics and religion and representing their peak as well as their point of convergence, is therefore the totality of man in its unity – universal mankind – as presented by messianism. From a Kantian point of view, messianism thus occupies the same place as the *focus imaginarius* in the *Critique of the Pure Reason*, a transcendental imaginary point which nonetheless performs an immanent function by orienting knowledge and will and securing their unity in all acts of the intellect. In Cohen this overarching concept of messianic mankind stands as the focal point towards which all human actions ought to be performed and therefore unifies ethics and religion, despite their utterly different methodological approaches. As Dietrich has observed, in addition to the parallel of the uniqueness of god and unity of mankind, "there is a parallel between the supersensible reality of God and the supersensible reality of the future."[181] Messianism is not just a hovering idea exerting its influence down to earth, it also confers a direction to man's actions and sets it within a time frame. Prophetic messianism – the privileged source out of which this concept is drawn – has oriented man's morality to a future goal: "The messianic future is the first conscious expression of the

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[178] Cohen, 158.
[179] Cohen, 148.
[180] Dietrich, 'The Function of the Idea of Messianic Mankind in Hermann Cohen's Later Thought', 249.
[181] Dietrich, 249.

opposition to moral values derived only from empirical sensibility. One may therefore describe it as an *ideal* in opposition to actuality."[182] The prophets, in detaching morality from the actual behaviour of the Jewish people and in positioning the moral goal of holiness in the future, have been able to introduce a new notion of history, which was "in the Greek consciousness identical with knowledge simply."[183] What in his *Ethics of Pure Will* appeared as the "eternity of ethical progress,"[184] is treated here as the continuous endeavour to attain messianic mankind: messianism introduces progress in history. The infinite task of the individual, when extended to the whole of humanity and transplanted onto historical ground, necessarily engenders the idea of a never-ending progress, almost identical with Klausner's view. What in Klausner's book about the messianic idea was only hinted at, however, finds now in Cohen's account of God as the archetype of action and of messianism as the ultimate goal in history a more satisfactorily grounded explanation.

Coherently with the sketched framework, Cohen proceeds to an "idealization of the Messiah,"[185] whose figure therefore occurs only as a symbol, as he "can no longer have the meaning of an individual *person*."[186] Rather, "he is the ideal representative of eternal mankind."[187] The person of the Messiah fades away and leaves on the messianic stage its idealized counterpart: he becomes nothing but the eternal model for moral behaviour. He is the representation of man's relations to God and to other men in the context of the achieved goal of eternal humanity. The Messiah nonetheless performs a crucial act which is loaded with particular significance by Cohen: that of suffering: "the highest figure of monotheism, the Messiah himself, is transfigured through this suffering so that he suffers for mankind. And he himself is only a symbol for Israel, so Israel suffers for the peoples who do not accept the unique God."[188] The centrality of suffering in Cohen's overall thought depends on the fact that this experience is necessary for the religious amendment of the single human being: "*suffering is the punishment that man demands inexorably of himself and for himself*."[189] It is a mandatory passage in the road to forgiveness and thereafter to redemption. As Cohen puts it: "It is only a preliminary step to redemption, to the completion of humanity in accordance with the

[182] Cohen, Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism, 249.
[183] Cohen, 261.
[184] Cohen, System der Philosophie. Teil II. Ethik des reinen Willens., 424; cf. Rotenstreich, Jewish Philosophy in Modern Times, 54.
[185] Cohen, Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism, 260.
[186] Cohen, 261.
[187] Cohen, 251.
[188] Cohen, 229.
[189] Cohen, 226.

perfecting concept of the unique God."[190] But if only in the messianic idea of humankind humanity can find its completion, the Messiah as a symbol and as an ideal man embodies suffering at its utmost expression, namely vicarious suffering. In this way the messiah takes the role of the "representative of suffering" and only thus "does he become the ideal image of the man of the future, the image of mankind as the unity of all peoples."[191] But not only for man's sinfulness does he take these woes on his shoulders, but also in connection with what Cohen calls "social suffering,"[192] viz. poverty – the principal cause of grief for man. This connection with the problem of poverty and inequality shows that the messianic redemption as advanced by Cohen includes a social and political dimension: perfected mankind cannot bear the mark of inequality and the continuous progress of human history is directed towards the wiping out of this substantial source of grief. As Dietrich remarked, "Such projection in terms of the ideal end of a universal humanity implies as well a democratic socialism in the ordering of a nation's economic affairs."[193]

It must be noted that in parallel to this idealization of the Messiah, the people of Israel are also idealized: "*national* limitations are abandoned for the sake of Messianism. Consequently, the "people of Israel" becomes "the remnant of Israel." The people with all its members is not worthy of ethical monotheism."[194] This remnant is the Israel of the future, whose election is nothing but its "*elevation into one mankind*."[195] It is a consequence of Cohen's extensive idealization of Judaism that Zionist claims are abandoned and that on the contrary a clear anti-Zionist thesis is advanced:

> But how little the state meant to this people is manifested in the continuation and the blossoming of the people even after the destruction of the state […] With this people [Israel], however, the great event occurred: without the state, even after the destruction of the state, the people flourished and grew into a inner unity.[196]

This thesis – especially when juxtaposed with the aforementioned idea of progress – results in a sharp and striking contrast with Klausner's adamant Zionism. Nonetheless, this divergence manifests with great clarity how a very similar theoretical framework can underpin two completely divergent political stands.

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[190] Cohen, 233.
[191] Cohen, 264.
[192] Cohen, 135.
[193] 'The Function of the Idea of Messianic Mankind in Hermann Cohen's Later Thought', 249.
[194] Cohen, Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism, 259.
[195] Cohen, 260.
[196] Cohen, 251.

While Klausner has been the first thinker to introduce the 'messianic idea', the rigorous philosophical foundation and together with it a more elaborated theoretical structure supporting the conception of messianism as an ideal is to be found in Cohen. The latter, moving from critical idealism – in its Neo-Kantian declension –, had adjusted Kant's elaboration of the regulative idea as presented in the first *Critique* to the religious sources of Judaism. In so doing he identified messianism as the *focus imaginarius* of man's actions. It is a fixed point, although infinitely distant, which teleologically orients the moral behaviour of man by providing an ultimate horizon in which the idea of a universal mankind is set as the goal of all human endeavours and as the outcome of God's benevolence towards man. The price of this elaboration is without doubt the deprivation from Judaism of any miraculous act, from God of any interaction with the domain of sensibility, from religion of any supernatural force: the idealization of Judaism as the religion of reason, a religion which ought to be eventually accepted by any member of the human race and is therefore undone of its historical clothing. If this is the price, the weighty gain of this framework consists in a conception of a progress-oriented history, thought as the everlasting process of perfecting humanity. This distinct position is shared by both Klausner and Cohen, two devout although not orthodox Jews, and represents the *Stimmung* of late 19th enlightened Judaism. In a way, this philosophical framework well resonates with the tenets of the Jewish Haskalah, of which it could be said to be one of the most elevated pinnacles as well as one of the last examples.

The pressing demands posed by the problematic coexistence of the Jewish people within the German Bismarckian state found an outburst in the devising of the idealization of Judaism. This thrust towards idealization, however, was channelled in two different and opposite direction with regards to the practical solution to be advocated. Klausner's messianism – in which the figure of the Messiah is often associated with that of the Davidic king, in accord with the earliest occurrences of the word in the Scripture – served him to provide his Zionist position a solid traditional background. Even if he stressed the universalistic character of messianism, he nonetheless attributed to Israel a pedagogical function and consequently a primacy over the other nations. The difficulties of assimilation and rising antisemitism could and should be solved, for Klausner, with the restoration of the Jewish state, a sovereign nation whose institutions, thanks to the rule of law, can guarantee the safeguarding of the rights and the values of the Jewish people. The same distress of the German Jewry – well reflected in the designation of the Messiah as the representative of suffering – led Cohen to hope for an alternative scenario regardless of the actuality of the historical conditions. Messianism in his system is used to indicate the optimal state of affairs and its universalism is bent in the direction

of a cosmopolitanism in which the Jewish people could not just survive but flourish in its diasporic existence. The pedagogical task of Israel is for Cohen performed among the nations and can be explained as the spreading of the knowledge of a religion of reason. Not by chance in *Religion of Reason*, besides the suffering Messiah, the figure of the "prince of peace" is remembered – the same eternal peace Kant claimed in his well-known essay, we could say.

In short, out of the hardships and grievances of the late-19th to early-20th century German Jewry, an idealization of Judaism has been devised whose messianic element occupies the place of the ultimate goal of an unceasing progress valid for the whole of mankind. This framework has been adapted by Klausner for backing his cultural Zionism and by Cohen to advocate for democratic socialism. Once more, messianism emerges from a situation of adversity and plays a crucial and contested role in the construction of the political and social proposals for tackling the issue.

4. The Radicalization of the 'Messianic Idea': Bloch's Generation

When compared with the tendency towards the rationalisation of the messianic idea embodied by thinkers such as Klausner and Cohen, the following generation of German-Jewish thinkers displayed the exact opposite attitude. To the dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the assimilationist attempts other endogenous and exogenous factors were added on. The outbreak of the First world war, the Russian Revolution and the brief life of the Bavarian Council Republic are the three main historical events composing the background against which a generation of well-educated, marginalised, frustrated and politically radicalised intellectuals rebelled against the narrative of their predecessors. They erupted with what Rabinbach has labelled "modern Jewish Messianism,"[197] whereby the messianic idea was now conceived in all its disruptiveness, or – to quote perhaps the main protagonist of this group of intellectuals – in its "destructive character," its "need for fresh air and open space."[198]

4.1 Sociological Background

What was so suffocating for the German-Jewish intelligentsia working in the first two decades of the 20th century? The abovementioned historical milestones certainly shaped the European (and global) environment within which the Mitteleuropean Jewry came to express its peculiar *Stimmung*. Beside political events, however, one should take into account the socio-economic conditions of the German-Jewish *milieu*. The fast development of capitalism, where economic growth was brought about by a fast process of industrialisation, the increase in the

[197] Rabinbach, 'Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse', 82.
[198] Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin*, 541.

mechanisation of labour, together with the urbanisation process, produced a sudden transformation of the German and Austro-Hungarian societies in the last quarter of the 19th century. The outcome of this rapid process on the social body is documented in the well-known sociological studies of Weber and Tönnies: a drive towards efficiency and rationalisation, and the shift from the small-scale pre-modern *Gemeinschaft* to the individualised and utilitarian *Gesellschaft*[199] are two of the most remarkable trends of the time. At the beginning of the 20th century, German and Austrian societies were still adjusting to these quick changes.

Within this frame, the Mitteleuropean Jewry experienced a sort of inner contradiction. The economic developments favoured many industrious families, allowing the Jewish bourgeoisie to acquire a considerable wealth and good positions in society. As an indicator, in 1914, the 23.7% of the 800 richest individuals in Prussia was made of Jews.[200] The flourishing economy allowed many to exit the ghetto where they were for the most part confined. Indicative in this sense is the participation of Jews in the process of urbanisation: for instance, from 1867 to 1927 the percentage of Prussian Jews living in small villages dropped from 70% to a mere 15%.[201] Entering the city and acquiring a bourgeoise status was however not sufficient: the main goal, as seen above, was assimilation, the fully recognition as German or Austro-Hungarian citizens. A career in the army or in civil service, although officially open to any citizen, was still precluded to the Jews "through various tricks and under all sorts of flimsy pretexts."[202] As a consequence, many sought to obtain social recognition through the prestige conferred by an academic position, thus entering the "intellectual and spiritual aristocracy."[203] Notable is the fact that, in German universities in 1911, Jews comprised 8% of the student cohorts[204] – nine times more the share of Jews in the overall population in 1910 (0,92%).[205] Many of these students, coming from well-off familial backgrounds, rejected a career in business and scornfully distanced themselves from their own bourgeois origins, with an aspiration to an "intellectual life style."[206]

At the same time, however, the prominence of technical knowledge in the industrialised society meant a decline in influence of the academic mandarinate, and a marginalisation of the

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[199] Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*.
[200] Berghahn, *Imperial Germany, 1871-1914*, 104.
[201] Bronsen, *Jews and Germans from 1860 to 1933*, 11.
[202] Berghahn, *Imperial Germany, 1871-1914*, 105.
[203] Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 31.
[204] Berghahn, *Imperial Germany, 1871-1914*, 105.
[205] Rosenthal, 'Trends of the Jewish Population in Germany, 1910-39', 236.
[206] Grunfeld, *Prophets without Honour*, 19, 28-29.; cf. also Kaplan, *Jewish Daily Life in Germany, 1618-1945*, 210–14.

academic elite.[207] Besides that, obtaining a promotion was becoming increasingly hard for a Jew. It is telling that in 1909, a mere 2% of full professorship were held by Jews – concentrated in the sciences – and 7% of assistant professorships.[208] In brief, those pursuing a career in the humanities had to face serious hardships.

Despite the official recognition of their citizen rights, Jews were particularly exposed to the new wave of Jew-hatred at the turn of the century, having to endure many forms of marginalisation. This pushed large shares of the German Jewry into a *pariah* condition, a "distinctive hereditary social group lacking autonomous political organization"[209] and characterized by endogamy on the one hand and by negative privileges, both political and social, on the other. Löwy summarises the contradictory condition of the young Jewish graduates aiming at an intellectual career:

> deeply assimilated yet largely marginalized; linked to German culture yet cosmopolitan; uprooted and at odds with their business and bourgeois milieu of origin; rejected by the traditional rural aristocracy yet excluded in career terms within their natural sphere of acceptance (the university).[210]

It is from this conflicting and insolvable tensions that a resurgence of romantic motifs came out. The most convincing depiction of such a revival of romantic schemes and sensibilities, now turned against the mechanisation and rationalisation of modern society, is offered by Löwy's category of 'Romantic anti-capitalism': "a world-view characterized by a (more or less) radical critique of industrial/bourgeois civilization in the name of pre-capitalist social, cultural, ethical or religious values."[211] To the extent that Romanticism is characterised by the fascination with the "miraculous"[212] and the end of the 19th century is, on the contrary, marked by a "disenchantment of the world,"[213] this resurgence of a sort of neo-romantic spirit, Löwy argues, may well be characterised as a "nostalgic and desperate attempt at re-enchantment of the world, one of whose main aspects was a return to religion, a rebirth of various forms of religious spirituality."[214] Paradoxically, Romantic patterns offered these intellectuals an occasion to rediscover their own religion, Judaism, although admittedly very rarely in its

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[207] Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, 12–13.
[208] Berghahn, *Imperial Germany, 1871-1914*, 106.
[209] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 493.
[210] Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 32.
[211] Löwy, 28.
[212] Brunschwig, *Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth-Century Prussia*, 182.
[213] Weber, 'Wissenschaft als Beruf', 488.
[214] Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 28; on the enduring influence of the romantic spirit on German culture, up to the 'eruption of Mystik' in the late Wilhelminian years, see Safranski, *Romanticism*, 207–11.

orthodox rabbinical form. Be it as it may, this generation of German-Jewish intellectuals underwent a peculiar process of de-assimilation, claiming back their religious – and sometimes ethnic – origins.

The romantic aura that suffused their re-appropriation of Jewishness conferred to the latter a "non-rational and non-institutional dimension, [letting] its mystical, explosive, apocalyptic, 'anti-bourgeois' aspects" emerge.[215] The Jewish intelligentsia, reclaiming the stigma of its own Jewishness, was able to develop a rebel "pariah consciousness", opposing the conformism of the *parvenu*.[216] Parallel to the rediscovery of mystical Judaism was the political radicalisation of the German-Jewish milieu, which now prevailingly leaned towards socialism, anarchism or communism. Some years later, in the Weimar Republic, one finds that "a large part of the Left intellectuals are Jewish, and nearly all left-wing Jews are intellectuals."[217] In sharp contrast with the conciliatory liberal faith in progress that accompanied the previous generation, romantic anti-capitalists display a loathing for "political evolutionism which it avoids in whatever form: Social Democracy, Zionism and liberalism."[218] To be sure, several thinkers adopted a more or less nuanced Zionist stance – Buber was active in the movement from its inception, Scholem's later allegiance with the Zionist cause was testified by his early resettlement to Palestine in 1923 – but never espousing an evolutionist standpoint.

Political radicalisation and revival of Judaism found in Jewish messianism the perfect synthesis – or, in the Löwy's terms, an accomplished 'elective affinity'. Considering the work of the early Bloch and Benjamin, Rabinbach notes: "The Messianic idea implied the radical rejection of any sort of quotidian politics combined with a characteristically apocalyptic attitude, which often incorporated an anti-politics *in extremis*."[219] While this judgement seems apt for a thinker like Benjamin, later on I will show that Bloch's repudiation of bourgeois politics does not imply a rejection of the political *in toto* – rather the opposite. Although Rabinbach seems to think that the tragic destruction of the First World War was the main factor for "the radical and apocalyptic aspect of Modern Messianism,"[220] it seems to me that another event, indeed taking place during the war years, was of more central importance: the 1917 Russian revolution. To get an idea of the impact of the communist revolution on the political and religious imagination of this generation, one can read, for instance, Scholem's remarks in his notebooks. Despite not

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[215] Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 35.
[216] Cf. Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, 144.
[217] Knütter, *Die Juden und die deutsche Linke in der Weimarer Republik 1918-1933*, 37.
[218] Rabinbach, 'Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse', 83.
[219] Rabinbach, 82.
[220] Rabinbach, 103.

being a committed communist himself – contrary to his older brother Werner, who also had a seat in the Reichstag from 1924 to 1928 as a member of the KPD – Gerhard[221] Scholem was so deeply influenced by the revolution to retain that "Bolshevism has a central idea that confers on its movement a revolutionary magic. This is: the messianic realm can only be unfolded through the dictatorship of poverty."[222] Remarkable here is the quick and unquestioned association of Bolshevism's revolutionary stance with the achievement of the messianic realm. Although the repression of the German insurrection after the war – first in 1919 in Bavaria and eventually in 1923 in Hamburg – curbed political enthusiasms and hopes for an immediate victory, this 'elective affinity' of libertarian ideas and messianic imaginary continued to nourish the imaginary of the German-Jewish intelligentsia. As Löwy suggestively remarks, messianism, "provided, of course, that it is stripped of the liberal, neo-Kantian and *Aufklärer* interpretation [was] the *Shibboleth* of the religious anamnesis of the Jewish-romantic generation of the 1880s."[223]

The pivotal figure in the endeavour to rejuvenate the Jewish tradition was without any doubt Martin Buber.[224] His rediscovery of Hasidism (he is still recognised one of the world's leading interpreters of this movement),[225] his advancing of a form of religiosity freed from the constraints of strict halakic regulations and his advocacy for a spirituality infused by the continuous presence of God exerted an enormous influence on the German-Jewish intelligentsia. Especially his 1909 *Drei Reden über das Judentum*[226] inspired a whole generation of Jewish thinkers, including Bloch, as I will later show.[227] In the 1930s, with the publication of *Königtum Gottes*,[228] a scholarly work comprising a "genealogical reconstruction of the origins of messianism, Buber hoped to demonstrate that Israel's eschatological faith in the kingship of God originated in the ''genuine historical life of faith,'' that is, in Israel's concrete historical experience."[229] An attention to messianic trope is however already present in his early writings, imbued with the mystical aura of rediscovered Hasidism. Buber's account of messianism, being deeply linked to his understanding of the principal tenets of Hasidism, although powerfully sustained by the idea that any just act of the righteous contributes to the

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[221] Born Gerhard Scholem, he changed his name to Gershom upon his arrival in Palestine in 1923.
[222] Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, 556.
[223] Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 36.
[224] Löwy, 48.
[225] Silberstein, 'The Buber-Scholem Debate Reconsidered', 657.
[226] Buber, *Drei Reden über das Judentum*.
[227] Rabinbach, 'Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse', 88.
[228] Buber, *Königtum Gottes*.
[229] Schaefer, 'Between Political Theology and Theopolitics', 241.

redemption, and significantly leaning towards an anarchism, does not present explosive traits characteristically found in apocalypticism. If one is to look for the most extreme and thoroughly investigated account of the messianic idea within the circle of romantic anti-capitalists, one must turn the attention to the work of Gershom Scholem.

4.2 Gershom Scholem

In Gershom Scholem one finds his generation's accomplished reworking of the messianic idea, in its full maturity, with the most striking explosiveness, backed by the acutest perusal of Jewish sources. As Silberstein observes, "Scholem, whose early interest in Jewish mysticism was partly a result of Buber's influence, is generally recognized as the leading scholar of kabbalah."[230] Through his work he arguably "created an entire discipline,"[231] re-admitting to scholarly investigation an entire body of writings – Jewish kabbalah – that for centuries was dismissed by rabbinical studies as either confuse gibberish or dangerous speculations leading to heresy. The disruption of the Scholem's discoveries in the field of Jewish mysticism could not reverberate in his account of the Messianic Idea, which he appraised on the basis of the newly unearthed kabbalistic material and of the carefully reconstructed history of messianic movements to it connected.

Shaul Magid notes that the medieval Kabbalah's revival of mythical lore and re-shaping of cosmogonic and cosmological myth against the prevailing medieval rationalism is not dissimilar from "Scholem's rejection of the Enlightenment rationalism of the Science of Judaism."[232] His characterisation of the messianic reflected his aversion for rationalistic accounts, implicitly criticizing the progressive account put forward by Klausner. As Löwy has aptly stressed, Scholem's work "is also polemically aimed at Joseph Klausner, his colleague at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and nationalist historian of Messianism."[233] Not by chance he used the same locution, 'the messianic idea', but expounded its features in a diametrically opposed direction. While the rejection of Klausner's position was evident, his rebuttal of Cohen's progressivism and his corresponding assimilationist positions was voiced out loud. When Cohen suggested that Greek classicism was the point of contact and the common denominator of both German and Jewish cultures, Scholem observed in his diary that this was "an impossible piece. The connections he conjured up are [such] that one would like to run

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[230] Silberstein, 'The Buber-Scholem Debate Reconsidered', 657.
[231] This observation is generally attributed to Buber himself.
[232] Magid, 'Gershom Scholem'.
[233] Löwy, 'Messianism in the Early Work of Gershom Scholem', 191, n. 38.

away."[234] Even more explicit is Scholem's rejection of an evolutionist idea of history. In the diary we read:

> "The messianic realm and mechanical time have planted the dastardly bastard idea of 'progress' in the heads of the Enlighteners. Because once one is an Enlightener […] the perspective of messianic time must be distorted into progress. [...] These are the fundamental mistakes of the Marburg school: the lawful, deductible reduction of all things into the neverending task in the spirit of progress. This is the most pitiful interpretation that Prophetism has had to put up with."[235]

Against all this, he endeavoured to develop a radically other account of messianism that would reflect the then-forgotten subterranean explosive impulses of Jewish mysticism. Decades of study on the subject are brought to a synthesis in his essay *Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism*, arguably the best text to retroactively understand what was at stake for the generation of romantic anti-capitalists.

It is worth recalling the main features of Scholem's messianic idea, beginning with the most startling, its catastrophism. In this essay Scholem posited that

> Jewish Messianism is in its origins and by its nature – this cannot be sufficiently emphasized – a theory of catastrophe. This theory stresses the revolutionary, cataclysmic element in the transition from every historical present to the Messianic future.[236]

For Scholem, the most remarkable aspect in the treatment of the messianic theme across the main Jewish mystical trends was the way the transition from the current to the future aeon was described. The event ushering into the messianic age is often described through the simile of the 'birth pangs of the Messiah', the affliction endured by the people of Israel just before the advent of the redeemer. Scholem appealed to the many reformulations of this motif to attribute a central place to the catastrophic aspects of these doctrines. This is in turn closely linked to the second aspect of Scholem's messianic idea, the apocalyptic one:

> When the messianic idea appears as the living force in the world of Judaism […] it always occurs in the closest connection with apocalypticism. […] Apocalypticism appears as the form necessarily created by acute Messianism.[237]

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[234] Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, 207 f.; quoted Poma, 'Hermann Cohen', 94.
[235] Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, 330f.
[236] Scholem, 'Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism', 7.
[237] Scholem, 4.

The liveliness and potency of the idea, according to Scholem's account, is a response to the sense of urgency that the Jewish people felt in many historical occasions, a proximity to the end that renders all things worldly of relative value. Nonetheless, Scholem propounded that, contrary to what one sees in Christianity, the awaited redemption – and this is perhaps one of his most contested theses – must take place on the historical level:

> Judaism […] has always maintained a concept of Redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community […] in the visible world and which cannot be conceived apart from such a visible appearance.[238]

These three features – apocalypticism, catastrophism, immanence to the historical level –, together with the expunging of the notion of progress, represented the radicalisation of the messianic idea that characterised many of the thinkers of the German-Jewish milieu. Walter Benjamin, with whom Scholem maintained a close friendship from 1915 until his tragic death in 1940, clearly embedded in his own writings the precious insights Scholem drew from his study of mystical Judaism. It is possible, however, that during the 1910s and early 1920s, Scholem also was under Benjamin's influence regarding the messianic theme. Without delving into the matter of Benjamin's messianism, it is necessary here to parenthetically recall two oft-quoted Benjaminean texts wherein Scholem's messianic idea appears wrapped in philosophical reasoning. The stark rejection of bourgeois politics, soaked with an apocalyptic tone, clearly transpires from the close of the *Theologisch-politisch Fragment*, probably composed between 1920 and 1921:

> Nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.
>
> To strive after such passing, even for those stages of man that are nature, is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism.[239]

A thorough comment of the much-discussed fragment, itself part of a review of Bloch's *Geist der Utopie*, would require a study on its own.[240] It suffices here to notice that a philosophy that accepts and comprises such an account of the messianic idea as the one later presented by Scholem must bring to the extreme consequences the apocalypticism it carries with. As a result, only a nihilistic conception of politics – and of history – can ensue. This conception was maintained – although, to be sure, refashioned in Marxist terms – in Benjamin's later writings,

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[238] Scholem, 1.
[239] Benjamin, 'Theologico-Political Fragment', 313.
[240] For a possible reading of Benjamin's philosophy in light of Scholem's messianism, see Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane*; Jacobson, 'Understanding Walter Benjamin's Theological-Political Fragment'.

most notably in his theses *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. The thesis IX displays a rebuttal of the category of progress that perfectly parallels Scholem's critique of Cohen's enlightenment approach to history. Benjamin comments Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*.

> This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[241]

Once again, Benjamin's philosophy of history is deeply imbued with the same catastrophism that Scholem presents as inextricable from the Jewish messianic idea. Ineluctable violence and devastation are all there is to be seen in history, despite the desperate will to rescue those who suffer and have suffered them. This will – still a messianic will – is however also part and parcel of Scholem's messianic idea, in so far as it presents an unsettling paradoxical character. The best example of messianism's paradoxality is to be found in Scholem's analysis of the Sabbatian movement. Although his thousand pages long study appeared only at the end of his career, Scholem was introduced to Sabbateanism already in 1916–18 and conducted the first researches on the topic in 1927.[242] In 1936 he published a seminal essay, *Redemption through Sin*, where he not only provided a stronger theoretical investigation into the core tenets of the movement, but also advanced one of the most important theses on messianism *tout court*. The messianic movement of Sabbateanism originated in Europe from the followers of the alleged messiah Sabbatai Ṣevi, who was to bring about the awaited redemption in 1666, according to the prophecy of his contemporary Nathan of Gaza. However, in Istanbul he was arrested and shortly afterward forced to convert to Islam. To the consternation of his followers, he did pronounce an apostasy in the very year in which he was expected to redeem his people. Here lies the astonishing character of the Sabbatian faith. How did believers explain that, right when redemption and the ushering into a new aeon seemed at hand, Sabbetai disavowed his Jewish creed? "A paradoxically compelling answer was quickly offered: the apostasy of the Messiah was itself a religious mystery of the most crucial importance!"[243] In other words, the apostasy,

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[241] Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 257–58.
[242] Magid, 'Gershom Scholem'.
[243] Scholem, 'Redemption through Sin', 94.

the worst of the sins, was indeed itself part of the messianic plan, it was one of the 'strange acts' "necessary for the fulfilment of his mission."[244] Rather than imploding, the movement outlived the conversion of its leader "on the paradoxical assumption that the messiah's apostasy was a mystery and – appearance notwithstanding – a positive event."[245]

The capital importance of this movement for the explanation of Scholem's messianic idea resides in two aspects. First, the admission that transgressions to the law for the sake of redemption were not only tolerable but themselves desirables: the development of a radical antinomianism. Second, the Sabbatian faith provided the perfect background for Marranic mentality: if Sabbetai, the concealed messiah, was a Jew forced to 'don the garments of a Marrano', then "only what is concealed can be an authentic faith; what becomes positively revealed is nothing but an official religion"[246] – a statement that holds true, we incidentally observe with Bielik-Robson, for the resurfacing of the antinomian spectre in modern Jewish philosophy. Curiously, Scholem himself displays the traits of a Marrano thinker, concealing his partisanship under the veil of objectivity of the historian. If one reads attentively the first of his *Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala*, the telling statement according to which "authentic tradition remains hidden"[247] may count as a conspicuous hint betraying his own marranism.

The destructive character of Sabbatianism consisted precisely in its sharp antinomianism, a characteristic that Scholem was keen to underline and understand in historical context: "the destruction of traditional values in the wake of bitter disillusionment and intense religious awakening led to an outburst of antagonism towards the Law."[248] While Sabbatians conceived their paradoxical creed on the basis of a failed redemption, for Scholem's intellectual *milieu* it was the betrayal of the promises of assimilationists on the one hand, and a growingly inhospitable German state on the other, that pressured them towards stark antinomian positions. These were best represented by either the adherence to anarchic-libertarian or communist positions, or the assumption of an altogether anti-political attitude. Looking back to Cohen's messianism, the distance seems unbridgeable. For him

[244] Scholem, 95.
[245] Scholem, *Sabbatai Ṣevi*, 793.
[246] Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity*, 15.
[247] Biale, 'Scholem's "Zehn Unhistorische Sätze Über Kabbala"', 71.
[248] Scholem, *Sabbatai Ṣevi*, 797.

> Man in the infinity of his moral task, in the infinitely distant view of his horizon, man in his moral absoluteness, detached from all the relativity of nature and history, this absolute man becomes the carrier and guarantor of the holy spirit.[249]

For the generation of Scholem, Benjamin, and Bloch, a staunch antinomianism was raised in the wake of the harbinger of the catastrophe. This was paired with a sense of precipitousness of history, whereby the moral and political task, rather than being asymptotically aimed at an "infinitely distant" ideal, is performed in the cogency of the here and now, the poignancy of the *Augenblick*.

5. 'Messianism': a Polemical Trope

From this survey of the historical usage of the term 'messianism' from its surfacing into European culture up to the generation of Ernst Bloch, we can draw some provisional conclusions on the various connotations that it assumed over time.

First, the emergence and the usage of term 'messianism' in all of the four moments analysed in this chapter has always been connected with a political, social, or economic situation of distress. In this frame, a messianic narrative has often served as an explanation of the current situation of hardship and suffering, by offering the perspective of an otherwise unthinkable redemption. Be it an awaited gift or a prize to be grasped, a future utopia or the restoration of a past idealised era, messianic time has always been associated with a form of redemption. Sometimes the messianic timeframe has been forced into the rationalistic account of a continuous progress, more often it has eschewed conventional historicist explanations and refused conventional logic and common sense. In any case, the redemptive state has been pictured at odds with the everyday – although, to be sure, potentially emerging from it – and in striking antagonism with the status quo as a strong dissatisfaction with it has emerged. Regardless of the direction towards which this protest against the present state has been bent, messianism has been used as a polemical tool to voice out discontent and urge to take a critical position to change the state of affairs. In this sense, messianism has appeared always loaded with a performative value, being used to escape from, combat against, suspend, or enhance a situation of adversity. Furthermore, it fits an agenda of practical philosophy and political intervention.

Secondly, exiting the ordinary dissatisfying stream of time at the same time often requires and involves a radical change – from extraordinary leaders to brutal wars, from a sanctification to a revolution. Dealing with an utterly different order of things, the dynamic of this

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[249] Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, 108.

transformation results in a movement that in most cases eschews explanations in conventional logical terms. The paradoxical nature of this transformation – exemplified by the couplets *death and resurrection* or *sin and redemption* – is another trait that has often been associated with the messianic. To be sure, even the most puzzling transformation can be, with due effort, brought back to a rational scheme, but even when such attempt is made – as we have seen in the case of Cohen – there is no way to expunge the element of suffering, that continues to tarnish the otherwise rosy path towards progress.

Lastly, we can observe that the messianic trope in its modern appropriation reached an acme of eruptive potency at the beginning of the 20th century, a time of emergency marked by disruptive changes that radicalised the Mitteleuropean intelligentsia. Belonging to the German-Jewish *mileu*, Bloch developed a messianism deeply influenced by the atmosphere of his time. He polemically used the messianic trope, taking a political position, and mobilised images of utopian expectations as well as other paradoxical aspects to fit his philosophical-political agenda. Nonetheless, the set of sources he selected, their peculiar re-working and re-composing, and their ensuing theoretical and political outcomes make his peculiar appropriation of messianic lore stand out from his contemporaries. To investigate his specificity, it is necessary to first single out the elements of his messianism. To this endeavour is devoted the next chapter.

Chapter II. Messianic Analytic: Tracking Down Bloch's Messianism

Approaching the early works of Ernst Bloch, a reader who is not accustomed to the intellectual atmosphere permeating the German-Jewish intellectual *mileu* of the first decades of the 20th century would likely be caught in bedazzlement at the multifarious and somewhat disparate religious imagery convened in those texts. But even if the peculiar atmosphere of the German-Jewish cultural world was not alien to the scholar, the distinctiveness of Bloch's combination of bits and pieces of theological elements would be perceived as strikingly unique.

Bloch's appropriation of the messianic imagery is in fact accompanied by a swirling orchestration of several different images, notions, doctrines, myths, which sometimes show quite a loose connection – if any – with the Judeo-Christian messianic tradition. Before posing the question about the reasons and the results of Bloch's conceptual manoeuvring, it is therefore necessary to clarify – when it is possible – which are the main sets of sources Bloch drew his conceptions from. Tracking down the derivations of the single concepts, or of the general vocabulary, that occur in Bloch's early writings, this chapter consists in an '*analytic*' of his messianic mythologems, to which will later follow a '*dialectic*.' This will help on the one hand understand the often merely hinted meanings of Bloch's mythologems and therefore obtain a more thorough comprehension of them. On the other hand, the chapter will be a crucial preparation to explain Bloch's operation of 'inheritance', considered in detail in the next chapter. Distinguishing carefully between a mere repetition of mythology-informed old-fashioned metaphysics and a novel account of a re-shaped messianism – in other words, assessing the originality of Bloch's appropriation of the messianic tropes – requires that we pay attention to the putative sources Bloch has relied upon.

1. Weaving together different traditions of thought

The issues arising from an attempt to disentangle the actual sources deployed in Bloch's philosophy are well known to the scholars and have been the object of several studies. Before the analysis of the sources for Bloch's philosophy of religion, however, it is worth offering a brief mention of the most relevant authors and currents to which Bloch explicitly refers in his works.

1.1. The Sources of Bloch's Philosophy

Bloch's philosophical apprenticeship, during his studies in München and Würzburg, has been deeply informed by Neokantianism, which was a central concern in his doctoral dissertation, devoted to a critical discussion of the philosophy of knowledge and of history of Heinrich

Rickert.[1] Together with Rickert – whose conceptions of the the 'irrational' and of 'values' are criticized through recurring to the thought of his student Emil Lask[2] – another notable Neokantian influence derived from Hermann Cohen, a lecture by whom Bloch assisted in the early 1910s.[3] It is from Cohen – through Oswald Weidenbach – that Bloch likely acquired the themes of the centrality of future time, the origin as a question and the practical role of ideas.[4] In the same period Bloch also developed the basis of his philosophy of history, whereby Karl Lamprecht's idea of (often asynchronous) historical transitions will later on reverberate into Bloch's notion of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*.[5] Other significant influxes came from the vitalism of Simmel and Nietzsche,[6] the relevance of this latter being also evident in the first edition of *Geist der Utopie*, wherein, despite the critique of the eternal return and the will to power, Bloch praises his daring attempt at a new Dionysian philosophy as a storm against "the faltering heavens."[7] Albeit deeply influenced, as it is now clear, by the anti-historicism and anti-Hegelianism that pervaded the last decades of the 19th century, it is on the one hand to Hegel,[8] on the other to the whole German classical idealism, that Bloch turns his sight when it comes to the construction of the basis of his metaphysical edifice. The systematic endeavour of his entire thought reflects the ambition to completeness of Hegel, whereas his "speculative" materialism has been juxtaposed to Schelling's philosophy of nature.[9] Bloch's utopian ontology is also deeply indebted to Aristotelian metaphysics, whose notion of possibility is at the same time one of the starting points for Bloch's reflections on the pivotal notion of not-yet-being,[10] and the primal notion out of which his concept of non-mechanistic matter – accreted with the reflections of Avicenna, Avicebron and Giordano Bruno, all of which are comprised under the Bloch-coined umbrella term "*Aristotelische Linke*" – will be developed.[11] Besides the theoretical foundations of Bloch's materialistic utopianism, this latter is also mirrored in the reflections on art that compose his aesthetic philosophy; in this field, the theories of art

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[1] Bloch, 'Kritische Erörterungen'.
[2] Pelletier, 'Introduction', 266–69.
[3] Markun, *Ernst Bloch mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, 115–16.
[4] Cf. Pelletier, 'Hermann Cohen Dans La Formation de La Pensée d'Ernst Bloch'; Cf. also Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*, 24.
[5] Cf. Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, 104–160.
[6] Pelletier, 'Introduction', 262–66.
[7] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 267–71: 'den zögernden Himmel.'
[8] It must be noted that the only monography Bloch devotes to a philosopher is his book on Hegel: Bloch, *Subjekt - Objekt*.
[9] Habermas, 'Ein marxistischer Schelling'; For a positive appropriation of the term 'speculative materialism' against Habermas's reductive account, see Moir, *Ernst Bloch's Speculative Materialism*.
[10] Cf. Cunico, *Essere come utopia*.
[11] Cf. Goldman, 'Introduction'.

historians such as Alois Riegl[12] and Wilhelm Worringer played a crucial role in Bloch's treatment of non-European art, the Baroque and of Expressionism,[13] the latter of which was adopted by Bloch as the avant-garde movement of choice for its utopian potential. All-embracing and all-encompassing is finally the philosophy of Karl Marx, whose influence has been more and more visible since the the 1920s, when Bloch's thought developed into a fully-fledged – although critical – Marxism (the main turn arguably happening between the last years of the first world war[14] and the publication of *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*[15] by his close friend Lukács in 1923).[16]

Bloch's messianism, as will be argued in the following chapters, far from being a mere appendix of his metaphysics, rather constitutes an expression, in mythological form, of large parts of his utopian philosophy. Due to the many references made to single authors and works, the investigation into artistic and philosophical streams that prevailingly inspired the devising of Bloch's utopian philosophy does not generally present particular hurdles. On the contrary, attempts to determine the provenance of notions and concepts of his philosophy of religion is not equally straightforward. In this case, in fact, mythologems, religious doctrines and theological notions are often directly embedded in the stream of thought, lacking quotations and in many cases appearing as a juxtaposition of quite disparate and not well-known religious traditions, resulting in a sometimes almost incomprehensible syncretic pastiche. If this peculiar but obscure set of combinations takes the form of a montage, as I will later argue, what are the single pictures of Bloch's religious philosophy? It must be observed at this point that it is not always possible to identify the origin of all mythologems, therefore the tracking-down work will often conclude with but a tentative indication of the source. Notwithstanding these complicacies, the reconstruction of a general frame within which Bloch's messianism finds its depiction will shed some light on his original appropriation. It is of particular interest to focus on the timespan between the period when Bloch started manifesting his interest towards Judaism and mysticism (around 1907 as he moved to Würzburg)[17] to the time when he gathered the materials for his first published book, *Geist der Utopie* (1915-16, during his Swiss exile),[18]

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[12] Cf. the use of the notion of Kunstwollen in Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 37ff.

[13] See Latini, *Il possibile e il marginale*, chaps 2, 3, 4; for a discussion of Bloch's thought as a form of expressionist philosophy, see Ujma, *Ernst Blochs Konstruktion der Moderne aus Messianismus und Marxismus*, 199–242.

[14] Especially after the success of the Russian Revolution. Cf. Bloch and Löwy, 'Interview with Ernst Bloch', 40.

[15] Bloch's remarks about Lukács's book, itself critical of several aspects of Bloch's philosophy, are contained in Bloch, 'Aktualität und Utopie. Zu Lukács »Geschichte und Klassbewußtsein«'.

[16] Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*, 31–49; Bloch, Tagträume vom aufrechten Gang, 27.

[17] Hudson,, 6.

[18] Cf. Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 347.

when his messianic conception had already coalesced. This book – of central importance for this investigation – presents messianic mythologems mixed with elements stemming from other religious traditions, but these latter clearly serve the former in ancillary form, and are introduced so to possibly meld with them. Yet it is important mentioning the main non-messianic religious elements before addressing those pertaining to this tradition.

1.2. Non-messianic Religious Elements

Noteworthy is the presence of notions drawn from the Upanishads, namely the concept of "Tat Twam Asi,"[19] literally translated meaning "That Thou Art,"[20] referred to the relation between the individual and the Absolute, and notably popularized in Germany by the works of Schopenhauer,[21] through which Bloch presumably apprehended it. Another element that the scholars have stressed among Bloch's religious influences is the theosophy of Rudolf Steiner, whose name is featured in the first edition of *Geist der Utopie*.[22] Here, describing the intellectual atmosphere of his time, he briefly acknowledges the presence of occultism, whose main merit would be that of "knowing how to make the old theosophical inheritance alive again."[23] Although some critics have stressed the presence of Steiner and pulled Bloch and anthroposophy near each other,[24] others – in my view better understanding Bloch's intentions – have remarked that anthroposophy "plays a totally secondary role"[25] in Bloch's philosophy, and that he distanced himself critically from Steiner and Blavatsky's doctrines in later works.[26] The other main religious elements that came to be an integral part of Bloch's philosophy of religion have all accreted the main pillar of messianism and gained their strategic importance in relation to that. The variety of sources quoted or hinted at in Bloch's early writings themselves display an intricate network of connections, interpretations, re-readings and innovative transformations, such that it is often impossible to tell whether Bloch drew his mythologems from one author or from those quoted in this latter's works. Despite these difficulties, I argue that it is possible to distinguish three main groups of religious sources:

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[19] Used in two different contexts: at the end of the chapter on his aesthetics of the ornament and within the treatment of the theme of love: Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 52, 359.
[20] It is the refrain of the Chāndogyopaniṣad, 6.8-16. For a discussion on the meaning and translation of the concept, see Brereton, '"Tat Tvam Asi" in Context'.
[21] On Schopenhauer's reading, cf. Bhatawadekar, 'The Tvat Tam Asi Formula and Schopenhauer's "Deductive Leap"'; Ruffing, 'The Overcoming of the Individual in Schopenhauer's Ethics of Compassion, Illustrated by the Sanskrit Formula of the "Tat Tvam Asi"'.
[22] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 239–41.
[23] Bloch, 239'[...] der das alte theosophische Erbgut wieder lebendig zu machen weiß.'
[24] Christen, Ernst Blochs Metaphysik der Materie, 45–47.
[25] Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 127.
[26] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1187; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1396.

Jewish (including Jewish mysticism and kabbala), Christian (mostly Christian mystics and heretics) and Gnostic sources.

2. Jewish Sources

Ernst Bloch was born into an assimilated Jewish family in the industrial town of Ludwigshafen in 1885. As Bloch explained in a late interview released in the Seventies, his father had "no relation to Judaism whatsoever and I myself grew up without a connection to Judaism of any kind."[27] Despite his Jewish ethnic origin and the fact that during his lifetime he was continually surrounded by fellow Jewish friends, it has been noted that for him "being a Jew was more of an outer rather than inner destiny."[28] With this remark, philosopher (and son of George-Kreis attending parents) Michael Landmann meant that Bloch "did not perceive his social situation as that of a Jew."[29] It is indeed Bloch himself that, commenting the various influences of his work, affirmed: "Judaism is – perhaps unfortunately – only an element in this series. That I am a Jew by birth, is a coincidence."[30] He also added the curious comment that, rather than being an assimilated Jew, he gradually "assimilated himself into Judaism."[31] Bloch's absorption of a Jewish identity, besides being partial, occurred step by step, not having been exposed to the core of Judaic teachings from his childhood the same way it happened to other coeval thinkers. Landmann reports that "Bloch's first girlfriend during his university years was a Zionist. Since she studied in Würzburg, he left Munich, where he had begun his studies, and moved to Würzburg to study with Külpe for his degree and doctorate."[32] Although Hudson asserts that "Bloch became interested through a Zionist friend in the Cabbala and in Jewish mysticism,"[33] in his interview Bloch affirmed that she introduced him to the Jewish world: "through her I've really got to know Judaism, during long, extensive walks. […] Only later on I became interested in Kabbala and Gnosis, as well as in the philosophy and tradition of German Romanticism."[34] It seems that this relationship acted as the gate through which Bloch came to be accustomed to the general concerns of Judaism, but the mystical aspects of the Jewish tradition were not yet

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[27] Bloch, *Tagträume vom aufrechten Gang*, 110: 'keinerlei Beziehung zum Judentum hatte, und ich selbst wuchs ohne jegliche Bindung an das Judentum auf.'
[28] Landmann, 'Das Judentum bei Ernst Bloch und seine messianische Metaphysik', 162.
[29] Landmann, 164.
[30] Bloch, *Tagträume vom aufrechten Gang*, 109–10"Der Judaismus ist – leider, vielleicht – nur ein Element in dieser Reihe. Daß ich von Geburt Jude bin, ist Zufall.".
[31] Ibid.: "an den Judaismus assimiliert."
[32] Landmann, 'Das Judentum bei Ernst Bloch und seine messianische Metaphysik', 161.
[33] Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*, 6.
[34] Bloch, *Tagträume vom aufrechten Gang*, 109–10: 'Über sie lernte ich auf langen, ausgedehnten Spaziergängen den Judaismus erst richtig kennen. [...] Erst relativ spät begann ich mich für die Kabbala und die Gnosis zu interessieren, ebenso wie für die Philosophie und die Tradition der deutschen Romantik.'

in the sphere of his interests at that time. From a Letter to Lukács dated 31st August 1911, Bloch informs his friend that his researches at that time reflected his will “to look through the Old Testament for its theosophy” to reconstruct “the Conceptual order of the Elohim, the universals of the homecoming god.”[35] The explicit mention of a theosophical reading of the old testament and the hint to the *Heimkehrende Gott* might indicate that it was around this period that Bloch not only developed his interest in Jewish mysticism but also started moulding some notions which will be accorded a central role in his mature philosophy: one just has to think about the utopian understanding of *Heimat* at the end of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* to descry the relevance and pervasiveness of a vocabulary that started coalescing already in the 1910s. It must be noted, however, that at that time the main works of the Kabbala, the Bahir and the Zohar, were not yet available in German translation[36] and Bloch did not have sufficient knowledge of Hebrew or Aramaic to read the original texts.[37] The mystical and kabbalistic notions that appear scattered through his works must therefore have been apprehended through the mediation of other sources: handbooks, conversations with friends, Christian mystics, German-Jewish authors.

2.1. The Influence of Contemporary Jewish Intellectuals: Landauer and Buber

During the first two decades of the 20th century, Bloch engaged with several Jewish intellectuals, gradually becoming acquainted with the atmosphere of profound renewal that started to be felt among many of them. Several critics have noticed, for instance, the indebtedness of several parts of Bloch’s utopianism to the thought of Gustav Landauer. Münster, for example, acknowledges their communal interests (such as the relevance of utopian novels of More and Campanella, the importance of Thomas Münzer,[38] and an attempt to re-invigorate the communism of Christian origins), but at the same time stresses the originality of Bloch’s notion of Utopia, which is further developed into an ontological system and

[35] Bloch, *Briefe, 1903-1975*, 59: "Will ich das Alte Testament auf seine Theosophie durchsehen [...] Begriffsordnung der Elohim, der Universalien des Heimkehrenden Gottes.“.

[36] Given the mole of work required for the translation of such an imponent work, the first translation of the Zohar in German, appeared in Vienna in the early 1930s, included onnly extracts from the whole book. See Müller, *Der Sohar*; the Bahir appeared in German translation with the publication of Scholem’s dissertation in the early 1920s: Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir*.

[37] The presence of a direct quote from the Idra Rabba (a late zoharic treatise) contained in *Atheismus im Christentum* is adduced by Tacik as a hint that Bloch may have read the Zohar. It is to be noted, however, that the passage quoted there (Idra Rabba, 141b) is among the most referenced of the text and that it appears at a late stage of Bloch’s production. It seems to me more probable, therefore, that Bloch acquired and quoted this passage from a third source. Cf. Tacik, ‘Ernst Bloch as a Non-Simultaneous Jewish Marxist’, 5; Cf. Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, 139.

[38] Also stressed by Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 142.

remarkably different from Landauer's.[39] While Münster, following Christens,[40] noticed the striking resemblances between the two authors, several commentators went so far as to raise an allegation of plagiarism.[41] Discarding this unsubstantiated accusation, Pelletier attributed the similarities of both authors to a "common context and an analogous projects on both sides," consisting in an attempt to "Reorient towards the left the same neoromantic ideology that was sweeping across Germany at the turn of the 20th century, towards which they were both very sensitive: the völkisch ideology."[42] For Boldyrev the analogies are also evident in *Geist der Utopie*, "where anarchism is combined with spiritual aristocratism and where utopia is understood in a revolutionary, activist sense."[43] Regardless to the unsupported allegation of plagiarism, it is clear that, although Landauer exerted more or less directly an influence on the young Bloch, it was his religious utopianism and his reading of Christian heretics that mostly attracted Bloch's influence. This latter's interest for Jewish mysticism must have come through another connection. Hermann Cohen, although one of the most authoritative Jewish thinkers at the turn of the century and – as it has been mentioned – a significant author for the formation of Bloch's *Erkenntnistheorie*, presented a rationalised version of Judaism that averted the usage of the mystical and kabbalistic notions which would assume central importance for the spirit of a renovated Judaism.

The pivotal figure in the endeavour to rejuvenate the Jewish tradition was without any doubt that of Martin Buber. His rediscovery of Hasidism, his advancing of a form of religiosity freed from the constraints of strict halakic regulations and his advocacy for a spirituality infused by the continuous presence of God exerted an enormous influence on his contemporaries. Bloch was no exception, although in the course of his life he almost never acknowledged it. In the same late interview, he resolutely affirmed that his becoming accustomed with the tenets of the Jewish life did not occur "through the writings of Martin Buber, but mainly through other sources"[44] – interestingly not mentioning them. Not only the similarity of several themes and of the general *Stimmung* in the writings of the 1910s, but even the exact same use of several terms and concepts did not pass unnoticed by his contemporaries and by modern commentators. Upon perusing the freshly printed first edition of *Geist der Utopie*, Gershom Scholem was

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[39] Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 125–26.
[40] Christen, *Ernst Blochs Metaphysik der Materie*, 36–38.
[41] Cf. Doktor Eisenbarth, 'Ernst Bloch — Empiriker des Mystischen', 57; Braun, *Die Utopie des Geistes*, 128; Krochmalnik, 'Ernst Bloch im jüdischen Messianismus', 30–31.
[42] Pelletier, 'Bloch A-t-Il Plagié Landauer?', 76.
[43] Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries*, 103.
[44] Bloch, *Tagträume vom aufrechten Gang*, 109–10: '[...] und zwar nicht etwa durch die Schriften von Martin Buber, sondern vor allem durch andere Quellen.'

urged to write to his friend Walter Benjamin (letter 05.02.1920) about the two chapters *Form of the Unconstruable Question* and *Symbol: the Jews*:

> I have your impression that Bloch is crossing the line in the worst possible way, using unsuitable means, into an area that this book should at most limit. With the gesture of the magician (and, alas, I *know* the sources of this magic), he is making statements here about the stories of Judaism, about History and Judaism, which clearly bear the terrible stigma of Prague – it doesn't help, even the terminology comes from Prague. The Jewish generation that Bloch invented does not exist, it only exists in the spiritual realm of Prague.[45]

In a very contemptuous way Scholem expresses his scorn for the way the Jewish spirit is presented in *Geist der Utopie*, noting that Bloch's 'wizardry' is totally indebted to Buber's scholarship and the *Bar Kochba* circle of Prague. After having expressed his disdain for Bloch's disregard for philological methods, Scholem goes on to address what he finds absolutely unacceptable as a Jew in Bloch's work:

> In an almost magnificent incoherence, Jewish categories loom in a discussion that is entirely inappropriate for them, so naturally giving rise to just as many misunderstandings: *kiddush hashem* (in its most pitiful misinterpretation, originating from the 'Buch Vom Judentum'); the name or names of God, not to mention many other things. Of course, all of these are just reverberations of the central Christology that is foisted upon us there. It is not possible for me to grasp the Corpus Christi in *any* sense as the substance of our history and I look with no avail for the credible attestations that speak for a disappearance in Judaism of the "old traditional fear" before the founder of Christianity, if I prescind – as it is wholly legit – from attestations coming from hybrid spheres.[46]

Referring to this very point later in his life, Scholem asserted that "Bloch has fibbed a lot about his relationship with Buber. He spoke about Buber almost only dismissively and derogatorily, but was deeply influenced by him, as an analysis of the first edition of Geist der Utopie shows, in many places he used Buber's phrases without quoting their source (sometimes even grotesquely)."[47] Modern commentators, although abstaining from the harsh tone of his criticism, agree with Scholem's assessment of Bloch's sources. Following Scholem, Landmann cites Buber and the Bar Kochba-inspired *Buch vom Judentum* as sources for the young Bloch,[48]

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[45] Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 113–14.
[46] Scholem, 113–14. Scholem is referring to a specific passage in *Geist der Utopie*: Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 323.
[47] Scholem, *Briefe*, vol. 3, p. 172; Cf. also Scholem, vol. I, pp. 398–99.
[48] Landmann, 'Das Judentum bei Ernst Bloch und seine messianische Metaphysik', 165.

and Mendes-Flohr affirms that “the language and substance of his essay [“Symbol: Die Juden”] were manifestly indebted to both Buber’s Hasidic writings and his *Drei Reden*.”[49] He particularly stressed Bloch’s terminological indebtedness to Buber, evident in the former’s usage of a specific jargon used to distinguish Judaism’s proactive and striving posture towards the realization of awaited redemption, in contrast to the typically contemplative attitude of the mystic. In *Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum*, Buber spoke of a “motoric” character, shared by all Oriental peoples and most clearly evident among the Jews:

> But […] the unified world must not only be conceived, it must be realised. It is not merely given to man, it is given to him as a task; he is charged with making the true world an actual world. Here the motor character of the Oriental [*der motorische Charakter des Orientalen*] is evidenced in his highest sublimation: as the pathos of the command […] [And] the supreme sublimation of the Oriental’s motor character, the pathos of a divine command, attained its greatest intensity in Judaism.[50]

The proactive character of Judaism that Buber highlighted in his lectures was appropriated by Bloch in his essay on the Jews, later included in the first edition of *Geist der Utopie*. Here the ‘motoric’ character is associated with the messianic goal, to the not-yet conscious and not yet realised end of history, which acts as a towing force for history. To qualify the character of this end goal, Bloch calls it the “motoric-messianic Omega to be achieved,”[51] manifestly re-using Buber’s terminology. Besides, a few lines before, Bloch advances his reading of the new Jewish world sentiment [*Weltgefühl*], articulating it in three traits: first, a “striving thoroughly volitional behaviour towards the world”[52]; second, the “urge to transform life towards purity, spirituality and unity”[53]; and lastly, the abovementioned “motoric as well as incisively historical, pictureless, preternatural being directed towards a not yet existing messianic goal over the world.”[54] With regards to this passage, Gianfranco Bonola has noted that Buber, in the third of his *Drei Reden über das Judentum* (1911), has depicted the Jewish spiritual process through three main ideas: “unity” [*Einheit*], “the deed” [*Tat*], and “the future” [*Zukunft*][55], all of which compose the attitude towards the world [*Weltgefühl*] of renewed Judaism. Despite the different order in which these traits are presented by the two authors, there is a striking parallel

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[49] Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions*, 103.
[50] Mendes-Flohr, 104; Cf. Buber, *Band 2.1 Mythos und Mystik*, 190, 194.
[51] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 322‘das erst motorisch-messianisch zu erringende Omega’.
[52] Bloch, 321: ‘das eifernde, völlig willensmäßige Verhalten gegen die Welt’.
[53] Bloch, 322: ‘der Drang auf die Verwandlung des Lebens zur Reinheit, Geistigkeit und Einheitlichkeit’.
[54] Bloch, 322: ‘das ebensowohl motorische als prägnant historische, unbildliche, unnaturhfte Gerichtetsein auf ein noch nicht daseiendes messianisches Ziel über der Welt’.
[55] Buber, Band 3 Frühe jüdische Schriften 1900-1922, 243; Cf. Bloch, Gli Ebrei, un simbolo, 124–25.

between them: the volitional character in Bloch is derived from Buber's idea of the prevalence of the deed over faith in the Jewish spirit[56]; Bloch's brief account of the tension towards unity and purity is but a summary of Buber's idea of unity[57]; lastly, a clear reference to the messianic goal and its corresponding future-orientation is patently present in both thinkers[58]. In this context it is worth mentioning another not negligible aspect of Buber's production, his rediscovery of Hassidic tales, which – as again Scholem has observed – have in turn been taken up and creatively reformulated in Bloch's *Spuren*.[59] Summing up, although it is unlikely that the mystical and specifically kabbalistic mythologems scattered through Bloch's works stem out of Buber's writings, these latter have not only exerted a considerable influence on the general perception that Bloch the 'assimilated Jew' had of Judaism – informed by the Hasidic approach Buber re-enlivened – but also provided him with specific notions such as the 'Sanctification of the Name' the 'motoric' quality of the end goal, and the primary importance of messianism for the Jewish spiritual life.

2.2. Second-Hand Jewish Sources: Eisenmenger and Molitor

Still, if Bloch embedded in his writings a series of kabbalistic images, but direct sources were not available to him, where did he draw them from? Despite the impossibility to answer this question with certainty, some modern interpreters have descried some hints in epistolary exchanges among friends and acquaintances of Bloch that may provide useful hints as to the origin of such mythologems. Anson Rabinbach, contesting Scholem's suggestion that Bloch's terminology stems from the Prague circle of Buber, argues that "the abovementioned "source" is probably Johann Andreas Eisenmenger."[60] To affirm that, he refers to a letter by Scholem himself to Benjamin, where he recounts to his friend the first visit he paid to Bloch, in May 1919:

> "When I entered his study, I saw on a shelf on his desk Johann Andreas Eisenmenger's two-thousand-page *Entdecktes Judentum* [Judaism Unmasked], the most scholarly anti-Semitic work in the German language, published in two fat volumes in 1701. In response to my surprised look, Bloch said that certain large portions of it were the finest writings about Judaism he knew; the author, however, had been a nincompoop who had

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[56] Cf. Buber, Band 3 Frühe jüdische Schriften 1900-1922, 246.
[57] Cf. Buber, 244–45.
[58] To the point that Buber, expounding the idea of the future, affirms: 'Der Messianismus ist die am tiefsten originale Idee des Judentums.' Cf. Buber, 251.
[59] Cf. Scholem, *Briefe*, vol. 3, p. 172: 'It is simply not true that he knew Hasidic stories before Buber, even if he boasted. [...] It goes without saying that Bloch modified such stories greatly, even if they came from Buber (he was a genius storyteller after all), and there is clear evidence of this in the volume Traces in particular.'
[60] Rabinbach, 'Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse', 114.

> quoted and translated the most wonderful, most profound things in order to ridicule them or decry them as blasphemies. He said one only have to read those things from the opposite point of view to have an eminently worthwhile experience. I liked this assessment very much, and when I acquired my own copy of the work two years later, I found it confirmed."[61]

More recently, Boldyrev has mentioned Eisenmenger as a possible source for Bloch's kabbalistic passages too, without linking it to a specific passage though.[62] Albeit it seems likely, contrary to what Rabinbach suggests, that those specific passages of *Geist der Utopie* wherein Bloch deals with the Jewish identity are in fact deeply indebted to Buber's thought and writings – as the borrowed terminology shows –, it is certain that Eisenmenger's treatise has been perused by Bloch and probably used for other notions. In a letter by Dada's father and Bloch's friend Hugo Ball, dating back to the years of Bloch's Swiss exile (18.11.1917), we read about Ball's relationships with his circle of friends: "[…] I now often meet up with a utopian friend, E.B. [Ernst Bloch, *t/n*], who prompted me to read More and Campanella, while he in turn studies Münzer and Eisenmenger."[63]

A closer reading of some mythologems featured in Bloch's early writings shows that Eisenmenger's scholarship might have been useful for Bloch's revisiting of *Geist der Utopie*. In the second edition of the work (1923), a lengthy paragraph is devoted to the expounding of the doctrine of the wondering of the souls. In the final chapter of the book, as Bloch poses the problem of individuality and the brevity of life within the frame of the attainment of the utopian goal, he discusses the theological doctrine of the transmigration of the souls:

> All the more strongly, however, did post-Christian rabbis remember transmigration as the divine spark's already intracosmic power over death. A statement by Rabbi Meir ben Gabbai discloses in brief form the entire intensive-ethical foundation of this doctrine, of this already mundanely implanted and operative postulate of a white magic we possess against death's black magic: 'You should know that this work [the repeated translocation of souls] be God's mercy on Israel, so that the souls of light may be worthy of the highest light and, as our rabbis, hallowed be their memory, have said, all of Israel may attain a part in eternal life.' Everywhere, then, where mere initiates speak of the wayfaring and not of the 'Messiah' who of course will abolish all occurrence in time – indeed in all the world's occult doctrines, not only in Buddhism, but equally in the central Sudan, in druidic Ireland, among the Sufis, in the Kabbalah, among the Cathars,

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[61] Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, 80.
[62] Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries*, 99–100.
[63] Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, 201–2.

> throughout the old Christian Rosicrucianism, this second, more just, more loving doctrine-transmigration, this more apportioned, complicated form of immortality, forms as much the final lesson for the neophyte as the recurrent, comparatively verifiable *arcanum* of the mysteries. Under the aspect of multiple lives, then, as Lessing also emphasized […], there can never be too much death and end for one person alone."[64]

Bloch is interested in this doctrine for its ethical foundations, since it makes justice to the single individual in the struggle for the attainment of the ultimate goal of redemption, despite their death might occur on the path towards the goal itself. It is remarkable that, among the many versions of the doctrine, Bloch chose to refer to a kabbalist like Meir ben Ezekiel ibn Gabbai (1480-.ca 1540), a Spanish rabbi who was a Precursor of Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570) and Isaac Luria (1480-1540).[65] His most influential work, *Avodat HaKodesh* [*Sacred Service*] (1523-1531), is also mentioned several times by Eisenmenger in his monumental treatise.[66] Although modern commentators have intimated that the influence of Lessing and even of Saint Simon might have played a role in Bloch's acquisition of this doctrine,[67] it seems more likely that – also considering the timeframe (Bloch is said of reading *Entdecktes Judenthum* between 1917 and 1919, the second edition of *Geist der Utopie* appears in 1923) – it has been Eisenmenger the one providing Bloch with this kabbalistic reference.

Another second-hand source which might have played a significant role in Bloch's acquisition of kabbalistic scholarship is Franz Joseph Molitor, a German romantic freemason and theosophist, author of a four-volume work wherein he re-casted his Talmudic and Zoharic knowledge into his theosophy-informed doctrine. This work exerted an enormous influence on the German-Jews of Bloch's generation, having been a point of departure for Scholem as well

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[64] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 259; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 322: 'Desto kräftiger aber erinnerten sich nachchristliche Rabbinen der Seelenwanderung als einer bereits innerkosmischen Kraft des Funkens über den Tod. Der Satz der Rabbi Meir ben Gabbai erschließt in Kürze die gesamte intensiv-ethische Fundierung dieser Lehre, dieses bereits irdisch eingesenkten und wirksamen Postulats unserer weißen Magie gegen die schwarze Magie des Todes: »Du mußt wissen, daß dieses Werk (die mehrmalige Versetzung der Seelen) eine Barmherzigkeit Gottes über Israels sei, damit die Seelen des Lichts des höchstens Lichts würdig werden, und wie unsere Rabbinen, gesegneten Gedächtnisses, gesagt haben, das ganze Israel Teil an dem ewigen Leben erlange.« Überall daher, wo bloß eingeweihte Männer vom Untervegs und nicht der freilich alles Geschehen auflebende »Messias« sprechen, ja in allem Geheimlehren der Welt, nicht nur in der buddhistischen, sondern genau so gut im innersten Sudan, im druidischen Irland, bei den Sufis, in der Kabbala, bei der Katharern, im ganzen alten christlichen Rosenkreuzertum, bildet das zweite, Gerechtere, Liebevollere: die Seelenwanderung, diese aufgeteiltere, kompliziertere Form der Unsterblichkeit, sowohl das letzte Lehrstück der Neophyten als auch das regelmäßige, vergleichend feststellbare Arkanum in den Mysterien. Es gibt dann, im Aspekt eines mehrmaligen Lebens, wie auch bei Lessing […] pointiert, nicht etwas zu viel Tod und Schluß für einen allein.'

[65] Bloch et al., 'Gabbai'; see also Diamond, 'Meir Ibn Gabbai (16th Century)'.

[66] Cf. the second edition of Eisenmenger's work: Eisenmenger, *Entdecktes Judenthum*, 865, 880, 887, 890–92, 998.

[67] Cf. Walicki, Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism, 257.

as for Benjamin.[68] In a passage of *Geist der Utopie*, also maintained in the following editions, Bloch – claiming he is quoting from the Zohar – reports a discussion about the "double view" on all things in the world:

> "Know this," says an old manuscript of the Zohar in a related sense, "know that there is a twofold view of any world. One shows its external aspect, namely the general laws of this world in its external form. The other shows the inner essence of this world, namely the quintessence of the souls of men. Accordingly there are also two degrees of action, namely works and ascetic disciplines; works are for perfecting worlds with respect to their externality, but prayers are for causing one world to be contained in the other, and raising it up."[69]

On this particular passage, it is informative to refer again to a letter by Scholem to Landmann (30.01.1978):

> I don't believe a word of the fact that Bloch, as a high school student, read Molitor's work on Kabbalah. [this is Landmann's hypothesis, *t/n*]. That he later read it in Heidelberg or somewhere else in his mystical time, before or during the writing of the 'Spirit of Utopia' (and used it heavily – the end of the book [*Geist der Utopie*] is not from an "old manuscript of the Zohar," but probably from a Lurianic manuscript in Munich quoted by M[olitor], which has long been printed!) [this seems probable]. […] I think it is very easy to distinguish between what in Bloch comes from Böhme, from Schelling and what from the Kabbalah. […] When a gentleman I know from Lausanne, who was very impressed by Bloch's writings, visited Bloch once in the 1960s and asked him where all the Kabbalistic elements in his books came from, Bloch replied: Of course from Scholem, with whom I discussed about these things for a long time! Imagine my amazement when the gentleman told me this one year later in St. Moritz! But that's the way Bloch was.[70]

Several modern interpreters have hinted at the possibility of Molitor's writings on the development of Bloch's kabbalistic expertise, but all ultimately relying on Scholem's accounts and mostly without being able to track down single concepts or doctrines to the 19th century

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[68] Löwy, Redemption and Utopia, 61, 100.

[69] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 278; cf. Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 444: ''Wisse', sagt ein altes Manuskript des Sohar, 'wisse, daß es einen doppelten Blick für alle Welten gibt. Der eine zeigt ihr Äußeres, nämlich die allgemeinen Gesetze der Welten nach ihrer äußeren Form. Der andere zeigt das innere Wesen der Welten, nämlich den Inbegriff der Menschenseelen. Demzufolge gibt es auch zwei Grade des Tuns, die Werke und die Ordnungen des Gebets; die Werke sind, um die Welten zu vervollkommen in Hinsicht ihres Äußeren, die Gebete aber, um die eine Welt in der anderen enthalten zu machen und sie zu erheben nach oben.'

[70] Scholem, *Briefe*, vol. 3, p. 173.

German theosophist.[71] Bonola is an exception, noting that Bloch is indebted to Molitor for another quite relevant mythologem, the consolator [*der Tröster*]. The term translates the Greek παράκλητος [germanised as *Paraklet*], which Bloch uses in several passages of *Geist der Utopie*,[72] but it is in the section *Symbol: die Juden* that it seems to acquire argumentative relevance, where both forms (Greek and German) are used. Here Bloch refers to the consolator as the "the thought of the consolator, of the third beyond Jew and Christian, which Judaism never gave up."[73] It is through the notion of the paraclete that Bloch winds together the rabbinical and the Christian traditions, as Bonola has observed.[74] On the one hand, the Hebrew term for consolator, *Menachem*, is one of the names of the Messiah; on the other, *Tröster* is the Lutheran translation of the Greek-Christian term paraclete (John 14:16). The conflation of these two, however, is worked out in Molitor's treatise. He affirms: "Following the doctrine of the kabbalah, the holy spirit *qua* celestial consort is the *consolator* […], *intercessor* […], and *mediator* […] of her children."[75] The juxtaposition, if not the synthesis of Christianity and Judaism Bloch attempted in this section of *Geist der Utopie* – eliciting reproachful reactions by Scholem and Benjamin, whose debt towards the theosophist is nonetheless remarkable – is almost certainly indebted to Molitor's views, that tried to consolidate different religious traditions in his Christian Kabbalah.

Going back to Scholem's letter, however, it is not only possible to determine one clearly direct influence of Molitor's works, but also discern another – quite astounding! – origin of Bloch's mystical passages: Scholem himself. It was in fact this latter the hidden author of a doctrine as profound and influential for Bloch's philosophy of religion as one regarding messianic times can be. In *Spuren*, published in 1930, Bloch presents, among other folk stories and anecdotes, a brief tale whose theme revolves around the nature of the messianic kingdom. At the conclusion of a tale titled *Die glückliche Hand*, where the central theme is the value of ordinary objects and daily activities – in this case a half burned-out candle – Bloch adds a short saying by a purported kabbalist rabbi:

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[71] Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 141; Bonola, 'L'impulso dello spirito ebraico all'utopia', 280–81, note 13; Latini has commented on the "doppelte Blick" alluded in Bloch. Cf. Latini, *Il possibile e il marginale*, 160–62; Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries*, 108. Curiously, the otherwise very well-informed discussion of Jewish sources in Münster does not mention Molitor. in his commentary on the section 'Symbol: die Juden', Bonola correctly tracks down the quotation featured in *Geist der Utopie*. Cf. Bloch, *Gli Ebrei, un simbolo*, 222.
[72] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 122, 146, 155, 309, 322, 442.
[73] Bloch, 329: 'den von dem Judentum niemals aufgegebenen Gedanken des Trösters, des Dritten über Jude und Christ.'
[74] Cf. Bloch, *Gli Ebrei, un simbolo*, 138–39.
[75] Molitor, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, 2:259.

> And another rabbi, a true Kabbalist, once said: To bring about the kingdom of freedom, it is not necessary that everything be destroyed, and a new world begin; rather, this cup, or that brush, or that stone, and so all things must only be shifted a little. Because this "a little" is hard to do, and its measure so hard to find, humanity cannot do it in this world; instead, this is why the Messiah comes. Thereby this wise Rabbi too, with his saying, spoke out not for creeping progress, but completely for the leap of the lucky glimpse and the invisible hand.[76]

Scholem, reading *Spuren*, could not oversee the passage and in a letter to Benjamin dating back to July 1934, he asks his friend:

> And one question: who did these many stories actually come from: did Ernst Bloch draw them from you or you from him? The great rabbi with the profound dictum about the messianic kingdom who also appears in Bloch is no other than *myself*; that's how one rises to glory! It was one of my first ideas about Kabbalah.[77]

A variation of this story is in fact also presented in Benjamin's tale *In der Sonne*,[78] hence Scholem's surprise and curiosity. Regardless of who inspired whom, it is relevant here to underline the remarkable role that conversations with friends and acquaintances played for the construction of Bloch's account of messianism. The value of cultural and political *marginalia*, – a theme well developed in *Spuren* – is presented in the shape of an ancient messianic doctrine to be inherited. The origin of the doctrine, however, instead of an ancient 'kabbalist rabbi,' was Bloch's contemporary Scholem.

2.3. The Influence of Prophetic Kabbalism

Other kabbalistic mythologems featured in Bloch's early writings are common to many authors and well-known among scholars of Jewish mysticism: given their wide diffusion, it is impossible to link Bloch's usage to a specific author or source, but it is nonetheless worth listing them. The last section in *Geist der Utopie*, titled *Gestalten der universalen Selbstbegegnung oder Eschatologie*,[79] maintened, although reworked, in the second edition of

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[76] Bloch, *Traces*, 158; Bloch, *Spuren*, 201–2; 'Und ein andrer Rabbi, ein wirklich kabbalistischer, sagte einmal: um das Reich des Friedens herzustgellen, werden nicht alle Dinge zu zerstören sein, und eine ganze neue Welt fängt an; sondern diese Tasse oder jener Stein und so alle Dinge sind nur ein wenig zu verrücken. Weil aber dieses Wenige so schwer zu tun und sein Maß so schwierig zu finden ist, können das, was die Welt angehet, nicht die Menschen, sondern dazu kommt der Messias. Dabei hat auch dieser weise Rabbi, mit seinem Satz, nicht der krauchenden Entwicklung, sondern durchaus dem Sprung des glücklichen Blicks und der glücklichen Hand das Wort geredet.'

[77] Benjamin and Scholem, *Briefwechsel 1933-1940*, 154. In the letter to Landmann quoted above, Scholem remarks, on this same point: 'This is probably the most successful apocryphal sentence with which I entered the most recent philosophy. (I invented it in a conversation with Benjamin in 1916, to counter Benjamin's penchant for beginning sentences with the words: It is a metaphysical truth that...).' Cfr. Scholem, *Briefe*, 173.

[78] Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV, p. 419.

[79] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 430–42.

the book,[80] deals with one of the central concerns of the book: the encounter with the self, the necessary path towards the inner soul that solely leads to a genuine external expression of human's will. Münster, following Scholem's discussion of the theme, suggests that this stance derives from the acquisition of a kabbalistic doctrine about the self, a "mystical immersion in the figure of the hidden god"[81] inside ourselves. Scholem refers to the doctrine of the *Zelem*, understood as "the special individual spiritual nature of human beings,"[82] a spiritual principle – comparable to the *principium individuationis* – that was added to the psychology of the book *Zohar* so to counter the detractors of the doctrine of the wandering of the souls by affirming the permanence of an individual principle after death. A further development of this doctrine, outside the circles of the Zohar, referred to the same spiritual principle with the term *Etsem* [עֶצֶם = bone, substance, self], to which the same semantical value was attributed. After having remarked that this particular development is to be found in a manuscript of an early-renaissance mystic, Moses ben Jacob of Kyiv, Scholem observes that the *Etsem*-doctrine can be at least in part traced back to the school of the late-medieval influential mystic Abraham Abulafia,[83] noting that

> it was precisely in this circle that prophecy was once again placed at the centre of mysticism as a living reality, and it would be easy to understand that real experiences of Abulafia, his teachers or even his friends may have given rise to this ecstatic reinterpretation or elaboration of the *Zelem* conception. In any case, the world of the Zohar is completely alien to such occultist prophecy.[84]

The peculiarity of this doctrine – and its distance from the Zoharic ones – consists in the specific role it assigns to prophetical activity. A passage from the extract Scholem reports is enlightening in this regard, as it also shows a remarkable affinity to Bloch's mystical passages in *Geist der Utopie*:

> Know that the fully perfected mystery of prophecy for the Prophet consists in this, that he suddenly sees the image of his self standing out before him, and forgets his self and it is enraptured by it and he sees the image of his self before him, how it speaks with him and proclaims the future to him, and of this mystery the wise men have said: Great is the power of the prophets, who compare the image to its bearer.[85]

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[80] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 332–42.
[81] Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 137.
[82] Scholem, 'Eine Kabbalistische Erklärung Der Prophetie Als Selbstbegegnung', 285.
[83] Scholem, 'Eine Kabbalistische Erklärung Der Prophetie Als Selbstbegegnung', 286.
[84] Scholem, 289.
[85] Moses ben Jacob of Kyiv, 'Schuschan Ssodoth', fol. 232b—233a, §451; cited in Scholem, 'Eine Kabbalistische Erklärung Der Prophetie Als Selbstbegegnung', 287–88.

The prophetic experience of the initiated is here presented as a dialogue and an encounter with the image – Scholem translates *Gestalt* – of one's self. Said encounter is described as an enrapturing mystical experience; furthermore, through this dialogue it would be possible to catch a glimpse of – not to say to foresee – the future. The remarkable resemblance with Bloch's ideas of the contemplation of our own finally unveiled image, the whole itinerary of the encounter with our inner self, and the notion of an anticipatory consciousness, is – I argue – not a coincidence. These teachings, stemming out of barely known late-medieval conventicles, must have somehow trickled through the centuries and reached those 20th century readers with an avidity for secret as much as potentially disruptive ancient doctrines. Although it is not possible in this case to cast light on the whole series of transmissions from author to author down to Bloch's source, it is here extremely important to note that one of the core Jewish mythologems in Bloch's philosophy can be ultimately tracked down to Abulafia's school. In contrast to the mainstream understanding of messianism, deeply linked with Jewish apocalypticism, whose understanding of redemption places it on the historical level and entails a collective and outward attitude, Abulafia (1240-1291) – the founder of prophetic kabbala and a self-declared Messiah himself – in fact presents an individual, spiritualised and internalised account of messianism and redemption.[86] Lastly, it is worth noticing that Scholem reports another early modern author as an exponent of the doctrine of prophecy as encounter with the self: Meir ibn Gabbai,[87] whose doctrine of reincarnation is also – as I mentioned above – quoted in *Geist der Utopie*, therefore once more confirming the closeness of these kabbalistic doctrines with Bloch's thought.

2.4. Other Kabbalistic Mythologems: the *Shekhinah*, *Metatron*, *Adam Kadmon*, the *Makanthropos*, the Suffering Messiah, and the Shards of Light

One may finally compile a short list of the other kabbalistic mythologems that one can encounter in Bloch's early works. The most relevant ones are: the *Shekhinah*, the archangel Metatron, Adam Kadmon, the Makanthropos, the doctrine of the suffering messiah and the doctrine of the shards of light.

The *Shekhinah* (שכינה) is a feminine principle in Jewish mysticism[88] that expresses the dwelling or presence of God, thus the place where His Glory is manifest. Already featured in rabbinical literature,[89] this notion acquires primary importance in the *Zohar*, where the *Shekhinah*

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[86] Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 58–100.
[87] Scholem, 'Eine Kabbalistische Erklärung Der Prophetie Als Selbstbegegnung', 289–90.
[88] On the notion of the feminine in the Shekhinah, see Scholem, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, 143–59.
[89] Lodahl, *Shekhinah/Spirit*, 51–58.

corresponds to one of God’s countenances, “the tenth and lowest power in the divine realm, and therefore closest to the material, created world and to human beings.”[90] The concept, probably of gnostic origin itself, [91] is common to all kabbalistic reflection and has the role of a feminine lower power which needs to be rescued and brought back to her heavenly husband, the masculine divine principle. In *Geist der Utopie* the term is used in passing and qualified as “the certainly much weaker Shekinah, given only as "problem", "essence,"” and is associated to “the still homeless divine glory of El, the goal, wandering with men.”[92] Bloch suggests the becoming character of the divine Glory and its dependence on human activity: the final aim is here presented as the yet to be known and realised essence, therefore only as a problem, as a question to which humankind has to find an answer.

The *Shekhinah* is sometimes associated with the archangel *Metatron*,[93] due to the close vicinity of both to the terrestrial realm. *Metatron*, a figure already described in rabbinical literature,[94] is referred to as “’the prince of the face’, the highest power in the celestial worlds besides God,”[95] since all countenances of God are embodied in him. According to several kabbalistic doctrines, his closeness to God endowed him with an awesome might, due to which he has also been portrayed in the form of an archon, a mediator of God and ruler of the world. It is in this last meaning that the figure is appropriated by Bloch, who, describing the human magical powers one could learn from Orient, seems to summon them “against the heavenly High Priest or Metatron.”[96] Here Bloch seems more interested in the evocative power of the image rather than to the complexities of its (literally) multifaceted nature, which are left aside and do not appear to hold any philosophical relevance.

The human figure and the human body are also accorded a mystical treatment in the kabbala, wherein one can find the mythological figure of *Adam Kadmon* playing a crucial cosmogonic role. He is the originary man who “comprises in Himself the totality of the kabbalistic Pleroma of all aeons and potencies.”[97] Although the term *Makro-anthropos* is the hellenicized version

[90] Dan, *Kabbalah*, 45–46.
[91] Dan, 48.
[92] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 385‘die freilich weit schwächere, nur als „Problem‘, „Essenz" gegebene Schechinah, [..] die mit den Menschen wandernde, noch heimatlose Gottesglorie Els, des Ziels.”.
[93] For instance, early-Medieval Provencal kabbalist Abraham ben David advances the interpretaion of Metatron as the ‘body of the Shekhinah’ Scholem, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, 189; Cf. also Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 184, 223–26, 256, 258, 261–63, 313, 334.
[94] Moore, ‘Intermediaries in Jewish Theology’, 62–79.
[95] Dan, ‘The Seventy Names of Metatron /19’, שבעים שמות של מטטרון.
[96] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 317; ‘gegen den himmlischen Hohepriester oder Metatron.’
[97] Cf. Scholem, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, 123.

of Philo of Alexandria of the same *Adam Kadmon*,[98] arguably maintaining its semantic value, Bloch adopts the two terms by marking a differentiation:

> Moreover, the last miracle is greater than the first, it says in the Gemara, which is why […] the Adam Kadmon is absolutely defined by the last hermaphroditically restored Makanthropos, the Paraclete, and the Alpha, […] immobile, prehistoric, is absolutely defined by the […] Omega.[99]

This extract, also stemming from the later deleted section *Symbol: die Juden*, refers directly to a saying from a Talmudic source (one of the commentaries of the *Gemarah*), and opposed the two anthropomorphic images of *Adam Kadmon* and *Makanthropos*, depicting the former as the primordial man before the creation, and the latter as the man *qua* macrocosm, at the *end* of the process of creation.[100] The following dyad of alpha and omega clarifies that it is only the last goal, the end one aims to, that bestows meaning to the origin of the historical process. Far from being synonyms, *Adam Kadmon* and *Makantrhopos* come to signify the tension in an anthropocentrically depicted course of human and natural history. The latter mythologem is also found in Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1840-44), in a passage of which he affirms to have given evidence to "the world as *Makanthropos*; insofar as will and imagination exhaust his essence."[101] Bloch might have been struck by the anthropomorphic portrayal of the world in Schopenhauer's account and decided to embed this figure in his philosophical system: the notion of a "humanization of nature" will be later developed in his *Das Materialismusproblem* in the 1930s. In *Geist der Utopie*, however, the materialist reflection is yet to be developed and this can but be a hint to the goal of the harmonious coexistence – till the point of identification – of man and nature.

The *Gemarah*, along with the other Talmudic commentary, the more ancient *Mishnah*, is cited as a source, together with the book of Isaiah, for the doctrine of the suffering Messiah – the suffering servant, the son of Joseph –, which is however distinguished in the *Haggadah* from the ruling Messiah – the triumphant and ruling son of David.[102] Not only there is a multitude of different sources, ancient and modern alike, dealing with the interpretation of Isaiah 52.13-

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[98] Ibid.

[99] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 322; "Überdies, größer als das erste ist das letzte Wunder, heißt es in der Gemara, weshalb auch [...] der Adam Kadmon durchaus durch den letzten, hermaphroditisch wiederhergestellten Makanthropos, durch den Parakleten, und das Alpha, [...] unbeweglich, vorhistorisch zu sein, durchaus durch das […] Omega definiert wird.".

[100] The image of Adam Kadmon is also featured in a late Blochian work, where there appears with a quote from the Zoharic appendix 'Idra Rabba' (141b). Cf. Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 198.

[101] Schopenhauer, *Werke*, vol. II, p. 747.

[102] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 325.

53, but the issue of the origin of the messianic conception linked to the servant song is still disputed.[103] Without venturing into conjectures, here it suffices to note that Bloch is aware of the double characterization of the Messiah in Talmudic literature.

A Jewish mystical teaching that instead emerged far later than the compilation of the Talmud and went through several adjustments before being adopted into the early modern Lurianic kabbala is the doctrine of the sparks of light, which is in turn another central mythologem in Bloch's philosophy of religion. Landmann in fact notes that "the Kabbalistic idea that sparks of a future redemption are already contained in the present entered Ernst Bloch's philosophy in his concepts of 'Latenz', 'Gären', the 'Zukunft in der Vergangenheit'."[104] The doctrine of the sparks of light, as Jewish mysticism scholar Joseph Dan explains, developed as a coherent development of Lurianic cosmology, whereby each of the ten *Sefirot* (divine countenances) assumed the shape of vessels, wherein the flow of divine light was continually poured. The vessels, however,

> could not contain the immense flow of divine light, and the seven lower ones broke, their shards falling down and their essence ascending and returning to its source. This is called in Lurianic terminology 'the breaking of the vessels' (*shevirat ha-kelim*), expressing the concept that the initial attempt by the Godhead to establish the system of emanated divine powers failed, resulting in a state of destruction and crisis within the divine realm.[105]

As a consequence, the world where humans live is tainted with imperfections, suffering and evil, and awaits redemption, the restoration of the primordial unity, to which kabbalists refer with the term *tikkun.* In Lurianic kabbalah, the *tikkun* was presented with a metaphor drew from Isaac Luria's precursor Moses Ben Jocob Cordovero (1522-1570):

> The captive divine sparks […] have to be redeemed by human deed. When the breaking of the vessels and subsequent catastrophes occurred, most of the divine essence contained in the vessels escaped and ascended back to its divine source. But, many divine sparks remained enclosed by the shards of the vessels, and they are kept captive by the evil powers governing the lower realms. [...] If all the sparks are uplifted and returned to their proper place in the upper divine realms, evil will have no source of divine light and it will cease to exist.

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[103] Page, 'The Suffering Servant between the Testaments'.

[104] Landmann, 'Das Judentum bei Ernst Bloch und seine messianische Metaphysik', 167–68.

[105] Dan, *Kabbalah*, 75.

> The process of *tikkun* is therefore one of separation: uplifting sparks separates the good from evil, thus causing the abolishment of evil.[106]

The idea that interspersed among the evils of a tarnished world there are, hidden, the elements of redemption and that is it mankind's task that of freeing and gathering them is not exclusively kabbalistic, being found in other versions also in Gnostic mythology. At any rate, Bloch's philosophy has been deeply influenced by this doctrine, to the point of moulding it in new concepts in his philosophy of history and in his ontological account. The fact that this doctrine –an eminently kabbalistic and messianic one – displays such a pervasiveness in Bloch's system of thought is but a litmus test of the relevance of messianism in his philosophy *tout court*.
Summing up, through the analysis of the Jewish sources in Bloch's early writings, it is possible to affirm the following. First, several kabbalistic doctrines to which Bloch implicitly referred were themselves in turn influenced by Gnostic mythology and imagery,[107] therefore rendering it impossible to distinguish the various sources. Second, among coeval thinkers, Buber is the one who has probably exerted the most significant influence in respect to Jewish mysticism. It must be noted that from the first and the second edition of *Geist der Utopie*, among other changes, Bloch deeply reworked, displaced and presented the section *Symbol: Die Juden* under another title,[108] but added other quotes or references to the Jewish mystics. This suggests that Bloch tried to distance himself from Buber – both on a personal and on a politico-philosophical level – and looked for alternative if equally authoritative and profound sources for his understanding of Judaism. Having read Eisenmenger allowed Bloch to quote kabbalistic doctrines without them being filtered through the Hasidic tradition, handed over to his generation in Buber's account. At the same time, some of Buber's Hasidic tales have not been abandoned, but thoroughly reformulated and modified, mixed with other Jewish tales – one from Scholem himself, masked as an original kabbalistic one – and European folk stories, the whole of which has been presented as a unitary set of stories in *Spuren*. Buber's reinvention of Jewish mysticism, one may argue, represents one of the many goods that compose Bloch's heritage of the present. Third, a large chapter of *Geist der Utopie* – maintained and expanded in the second edition –, devoted to the encounter with the self, is in its vocabulary and aims inspired by a doctrine whose origin lies in the school of the Medieval mystic Abraham Abulafia, advocate of the prophetic kabbala and proponent of an individual, interiorised and

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[106] Dan, 78.
[107] See for example Altmann, 'The Gnostic Background of the Rabbinic Adam Legends'.
[108] The section is presented under the title *Das Gewissen des Unbedingten und das Bewußtsein des Unsichtbaren*. See Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1923, 287–99. Only in the third edition 1964 it was completely dropped. The section was republished, as it appears in the first edition, in: Bloch, *Durch die Wüste*, 122–47.

spiritualised account of messianism. Finally, the doctrine of the sparks of light, adopted from the Lurianic cosmogonic account, has been tweaked and adapted by Bloch to the various branches of his thought, thus demonstrating the extent to which his philosophy is imbued by an – atheistically appraised – account of messianism.

Since it is very plausible that some of the abovementioned mythologems have been handed down indirectly through the works of Christian mystics – most notably Meister Eckhart and Jakob Böhme –, it is now apt to look at the Christian sources that informed his philosophy of religion.

3. Christian sources

Despite his Jewish origins, Bloch's evident indebtedness to the Christian tradition has been impossible to overlook for modern commentators.[109] To Levinas's remark that he would have borrowed many of his religious contents from the Eastern European Jewish folklore, remark brought to his attention by an interviewer, Bloch promptly replied:

> Only a believing Jew, which I am not, can write something like that. My thought has deep roots in Christianity, which cannot be dismissed as either mythology or folk poetry. There is not a single non-Jewish author in the New Testament; all are Jews until St. John, the author of the Apocalypse.[110]

In this interview, Bloch stresses not only the centrality of the Christian tradition, but also the *continuum* between the Jewish and the early Christian theological development, up to the apocalyptical narratives of the first century CE. Rather than contrasting them, Bloch seeks to underline their affinity and to frame both the Christian and the Jewish imagination within the same eschatological picture, with their common striving towards the ultimate and the *pleroma* of redemption. Decisive in drawing Bloch's attention towards the mystical aspects of Christianity was the relationship with his first wife, the Baltic baroness Else Antonia von Stritzky. In Landmann's portrait,

> She was of a genuinely religious nature, retiring after supper to read the New Testament, self-sacrificing and forgiving like a Christian saint, even in her ethical stance. They met in a mysticism that is reflected in "Geist der Utopie" that arose during the time of that marriage.[111]

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[109] Cf. for example Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries*, 106.

[110] Bloch, *Tagträume vom aufrechten Gang*, 109–10: 'So etwas kann nur ein gläubiger Jude schreiben, der ich bicht bin. Mein Denken hat tiefe Wurzeln im Christentum, das ma nweder als Mythologie noch als Volksdichtung abtun kann. Im Neuen Testament kommt kein einziger nicht-jüdischer Autor vor; alle sind Juden bis zum heiligen Johannes, dem Verfasser der Apokalupse.'

[111] Landmann, 'Das Judentum bei Ernst Bloch und seine messianische Metaphysik', 163.

The notable influence Else had on Bloch's early fascination with Christian mystics was destined to last even after her untimely death in 1921. At that time, Bloch felt he could not write anymore, and only after an almost two-year break could resume his activity. Bloch's third wife and lifelong companion Karola wrote in her autobiography that she "learned how greatly Else's Christian piety had impressed Ernst, and that his first book, *Geist der Utopie*, owed much to her influence,"[112] thus confirming the deep mark that Else's religiosity left on his philosophical sensitivity.

Of Christian theology, however, Bloch was ever prone to absorb and draw close to heterodox and often straightforward heretical strains. The epigraph of his late *Atheismus im Christentum* indeed stated that "the best thing about religion is that it makes for heretics."[113] Bloch's attentiveness to the most progressive elements of religion induced him to praise, and even derive part of his conceptual toolbox from, some of the Christian theologians whose works and beliefs confined them at the margins of the Christian *magisterium*. *Geist der Utopie*'s years of gestation coincided to the period of most intense friendship with Georgy Lukacs. This latter, observes Löwy, "was responsible for initiating Bloch into the religious universe of Meister Eckhart, Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky – three decisive sources in Bloch's spiritual evolution."[114] Although slightly infused with an existentialistic overtone and an unusual focus on individual concerns for a Marxist thinker – both traits that show his loose affinity to Kierkegaard's philosophy –, Bloch's philosophical system is mostly indebted to Meister Eckhart's sermons, some ideas of which are recast in a deeply reworked fashion. Besides, the pantheism of the German mystic Jakob Böhme was also crucial in the development of Bloch's system. Lastly, the convergence and synergies of religious and political struggles found the most notable antecedent in the millenarist message of German *Bauernkrieg*'s leader Thomas Müntzer. A brief survey of their most striking ideas will help elucidate the main set of Christian sources that influenced Bloch's philosophy.

3.1. The Influence of Meister Eckhart

Pelletier has convincingly illustrated how, from the very early writings – some of which are articles dating back to 1905 or 1906 –, Bloch engaged with the religious imagination of the German tradition to find new ways to address issues he shared with his contemporaries. The question about the individual's will, the refusal of an abstract idealism and at the same time of

[112] Bloch, Aus meinem Leben, 44.
[113] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, viii; Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*: 'Es ist das beste an der Religion, daß sie Ketzer hervorruft.'
[114] Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 139; Bloch and Löwy, 'Interview with Ernst Bloch', 36–37.

a positivistic materialism, was pressing for him and for many of the authors belonging to the broad movement of the freethought.[115] In the attempt to devise a new account of the individual and of its relation to the world, the young Bloch resorted to some of Meister Eckhart's ideas, such as "the idea of God's birth in the human soul, and he reformulated it in non-theistic terms, through the phenomenological descriptions of inner experience which he found in authors such as William James, Theodor Lipps and Oswald Külpe."[116] It is notable that, some years before Bloch's publication of his early essays, Gustav Landauer worked on the translation into modern German of many of Eckhart's sermons, thus suggesting the fruitfulness of the engagement with the mystic's works on a political and philosophical ground. As Pelletier noted, however, it is not Landauer's translation but the more complete Büttner's edition[117] the one from which he quotes.[118]

Particularly relevant for the whole future development of Bloch's metaphysics were three ideas he drew from Eckhart: the birth of God from the soul of man, the notion of the divine spark and the eternal instant or *nunc stans*.

Already in his second publication, *Über das Problem Nietzsches*, appeared in 1906 on *Das Freie Wort*, Bloch refers to Eckhart's doctrine of the "transformation of man into God,"[119] wherein he seeks an effective account of the interiority of man to construct his individual-centred worldview.[120] The apotheosis described here derives from one of Eckhart's key sermons, the first of the cycle titled *On eternal Birth*, devoted to the unceasing rebirth and renewal of the divine. The mystic argues that the divine activity of perpetual (re)birth interests the human creature only insofar as it happens within it, and that God births his Son in the creature exactly in the same way he does in eternity.[121] He goes on by affirming that the place where this birth happens is the noblest and subtlest part of our soul, our mind (*mens*), that is "logos-like but remains hidden."[122] It is in the darkness of this unknown and silent recess of the human soul that God gives birth to His Son. At the bottom of human's soul there lays its most precious part, wherefrom God's essence may shine forth. Ungraspable by logical thought

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[115] Pelletier, 'La formation de la philosophie d'Ernst Bloch à partir de la mystique de Maître Eckhart', 99.
[116] Pelletier, 'On Ernst Bloch's Moral Theory', 37.
[117] Eckhart, Meister Eckeharts Schriften und Predigten in Zwei Bände.
[118] Pelletier, 'La formation de la philosophie d'Ernst Bloch à partir de la mystique de Maître Eckhart', 108–9; Boldyrev had erroneously suggested that Bloch might have used Landauer's edition. Cf. Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries*, 102; on Landauer's influence on Bloch and Lukàcs, cf. Wołkowicz, *Mystiker der Revolution*, 189–202.
[119] Bloch, 'Über das Problem Nietzsches', 76: 'Verwandlung des Menschen in Gott'.
[120] Pelletier, 'La formation de la philosophie d'Ernst Bloch à partir de la mystique de Maître Eckhart', 108; Bloch, 'Über das Problem Nietzsches', 76.
[121] Flasch, 'The Sermon Cycle on Eternal Birth', 61.
[122] Flasch, 61, 64.

and speech, unfixable in image, the soul is not familiar with itself. “But its unfamiliarity with itself and, relatedly, its imagelessness do not preclude it from knowing very well that it exists […] as an impulse to hunt after its own essence.”[123] And it is by following this instinct and retracting into itself that the human creature can pursue its own perfection, since the rebirth of God in the profoundest region of the soul is itself “the new beginning of the divine man.”[124] From the first of the four sermons of this cycle comes an extract often quoted by Bloch throughout his work:[125]

> There is a fine saying of one pagan master to another about this. He said, “I am aware of something in me which shines in my understanding; I can clearly perceive that it is something, but what it may be I cannot grasp. Yet I think if I could only seize it I should know all truth.” To which the other master replied, “Follow it boldly! For if you could seize it you would possess the sum total of all good and have eternal life!” St. Augustine spoke in the same sense: “I am aware of something within me that gleams and flashes before my soul; were this perfected and fully established in me, that would surely be eternal life!”[126]

Bloch draws from Eckhart the presentiment of the human *pleroma*, concurring with the Christian mystic that its actual origin is not alien to human nature and that is knowable in the form of a presentiment, a glimpse of the future perfection towards which any individual strives. He will recast this idea in the notion of the “darkness of the lived moment [*Dunkel des gelebten Augenblick*],” taking stock of the phenomenological studies developed by his contemporaries (particularly Cohen and his doctoral advisor Külpe) about the spontaneity of the human intellect, and at the same time rejecting a preestablished form of divine transcendence.[127] Intimately linked with the doctrine of divine birth in the soul is Eckhart’s image of the little spark, the “*scintilla animae*” or *Fünklein*, a divine source taking abode in the innermost corner of the human soul. In the endeavour to point to the exact location within us in which the birth of God can take place, Eckhart urges the faithful to withdraw from the worldly things and to reach the deep recesses of the soul: here, in the deepest obscurity, the divine shines in the form of a spark:

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[123] Flasch, 68.
[124] Flasch, 71.
[125] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1923, 246–47; Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, 149; Bloch, Zwischenwelten in der Philosophiegeschichte, 158–59; Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 94, 286, 332; Bloch, *Experimentum mundi*, 252.
[126] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 35; cf. Eckhart, *Meister Eckeharts Schriften und Predigten in Zwei Bände*, 32–44.
[127] Pelletier, ‘La formation de la philosophie d’Ernst Bloch à partir de la mystique de Maître Eckhart’, 122.

> Therefore I say, if a man turns away from self and from all created things, then – to the extent that you do this – you will attain to oneness and blessedness in your soul's spark, which time and place never touched. This spark is opposed to all creatures: it wants nothing but God, naked, just as He is.[128]

In what Pelletier aptly calls a "post-theistic frame,"[129] Bloch ensconces the suggestive notion of the *scintilla*, the spark, which finds its relevance within the scaffolding of his *Erkenntnistheorie.* The notion of the *scintilla* is notably featured in a text dating back to 1919 that would be later be (in a slightly altered form) included in the second edition of *Geist der Utopie*,[130] an essay entirely devoted to the category of the not-yet-conscious. In this text, Bloch pulls together the volitive and the cognitive aspects of the core of human individuality: the source for knowledge, that allows humans to devise new categories and encompass the multiplicity of reality, has at the same time a desiderative trait: the two are inextricable in their proleptic character. To express the volitive trait of the core of human consciousness, Bloch resorts to the mythologem of the spark:

> However, everything else that is intensely spiritual within us also has its own source of power, and this corresponds to our pure, unspoilt nature, the impulse of good, human, self-gathering, the will towards God and his kingdom, burning inextinguishably in human history and always compassing; scintilla, the uncreated spark, into which desire itself ultimately transforms, out of which its beclouded, prelude-like automatism bursts out, and grants the inner pulsating Eros the inflow, the actual undressing (not »masking«) to colours, travel, festivity, homesickness, homecoming, mysticism.[131]

This image will be reused in many of Bloch's works,[132] thus proving the lasting significance of such a fortunate mythologem. Eckhart also uses a scholastic term to indicate the specific location of man's apotheosis, naming it *synteresis*, a term whose specificity attracted Bloch's attention.[133] The *synteresis*, Pelletier suggests, "is the mystical consciousness, the point where

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[128] Eckhart, The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart, 310; cf. Eckhart, Meister Eckeharts Schriften und Predigten in Zwei Bände, 149–52.
[129] Pelletier, 'La formation de la philosophie d'Ernst Bloch à partir de la mystique de Maître Eckhart', 132.
[130] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1923, 243–44.
[131] Bloch, 'Über das noch nicht bewußte Wissen', 68: 'Ebenso aber hat auch alles andere intensiv Spirituale in uns eigene Kraftquelle, und dieser entspricht durchaus unsere reine, unverdorbene Natur, der Treib des Guten, Menschlichen, sich Versammelnden, der Wille zu Gott und seinem Reich, unauslöschbar in der Menschengeschichte brennend und immer wieder umgehend; scintilla, der ungeschaffene Funke, als welcher selbst die Begierde schließlich verwandelt, ihren trüben, vorspielhaften Automatismus sprengt und dem darin treibende Eros den Zugang, die eigentliche Entkleidung (nicht »Maskierung«) zu Farben, Reise, Festlichkeit, Heimweh, Heimkehr, Mystik ermöglicht.'
[132] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer Als Theologe Der Revolution*, 102; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1432, 1536, 1539; Bloch, *Zwischenwelten in der Philosophiegeschichte*, 152, 157; Bloch, *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie*, 37; Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 286.
[133] Bloch, *Zwischenwelten in der Philosophiegeschichte*, 154.

the human becomes divine and the divine human."[134] Bernard McGinn observes that the term, also used by Thomas Aquinas, refers to "the light of conscience which never dies out, even in the damned, and the term goes back to St. Jerome's commentary on Ezekiel."[135] Warner Allen explains that it points to "the intuitive and inward observation which belongs to reflexive consciousness and which […] discloses in the spiritual experience the immanent kingdom of God."[136] Eckhart associates to this term a double movement, animating the spark: "the masters say this light is so natural that it is always striving, it is called *synteresis*, which means to say a binding and a turning away from."[137] The double movement is one of self-purification ("turning away" from external impurities) and of presence to oneself ("binding" to one's own good). This notion will prove to be very influential for Bloch and may be thought as the mystical model and point of inspiration for Bloch's conception of a double movement of our inner consciousness. The *synteresis* is thus deeply reworked in Bloch, and its double movement expressed through a neologism: *Eingedenken*. As Pelletier points out, the term does not indicate a movement merely directed towards the past or a nostalgic recollection (as the root of the verb might suggest). On the contrary, it hints at "an effort of concentration, of diving into oneself and of abandon, of perceiving somehow what is hidden within us and within what has already occurred, the *homo absconditus* insofar as it coincides with our future destination."[138] The structural link between the innermost and obscurest part in ourselves, and the not yet realised being, our possible self-realisation, will constitute the lynchpin of Bloch's theoretical philosophy; the fact that the devising of it through the notion of *Eingedenken* finds its roots in Eckhart's scintilla and in his *synteresis* show how impactful Christian mystical readings have been for the construction of Bloch's whole philosophical system. Another proof is added by the passage of the first edition of *Thomas Münzer* (1921) where Bloch directly quotes Eckhart's sermon *On Accomplishment*. In this sermon, Eckhart deals with the temporality of the creation of God in the soul: the moment in which God is borne in the soul of man, he claims, must be understood as the "fullness of time" (referring to a passage in the Pauline letter to the Galatians, 4:4), the *pleroma* of mankind and the cosmos alike. He explains:

> If anyone had the skill and power to gather up time and all that has happened in six thousand years or that will happen till the end of time, into one present Now, *that* would

[134] Pelletier, 'La formation de la philosophie d'Ernst Bloch à partir de la mystique de Maître Eckhart', 129.
[135] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 22.
[136] Allen, *The Uncurtained Throne*, 112.
[137] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 193.
[138] Pelletier, 'La formation de la philosophie d'Ernst Bloch à partir de la mystique de Maître Eckhart', 129.

> be the "fullness of time." That is the Now of eternity, in which the soul knows all things in God new and fresh and present and as joyous as I have them now present.[139]

Bloch refers to this doctrine in the last part of his monography on Thomas Müntzer, when dealing with the heretic's teachings about the "Absolute man," namely about the work on one's self that each one must carry through in order to achieve faith and be 'reborn in Christ'. This work aims at the complete renovation on mankind and the world, and the moment in which it culminates it thought of through Eckhart's notion of the eternal instant, of the *nunc stans*. The mystical experience of the birth of God in the soul happens in a sphere detached from time and space, in the fullness of time. Bloch draws a parallel between Müntzer and Eckhart and quotes this latter:

> The soul in which God is to be born must drop away from time and time from her, she must soar aloft and stand gazing into this richness of God's: there there is breadth without breadth, expanseless expanse, and there the soul knows all things, and knows them perfectly.[140]

Bloch will make use of this metaphor, the suspended moment of plenitude that stands outside of space and time, the *nunc stans* of Christian mysticism, bestowing on it a clearly utopian overtone. In *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, it will become the antonomasia of the of the "wishful images of the fulfilled moment," the most striking images of the full realisation of the historical process's ultimate goal and will be paired with the Faustian "Stay awhile, you are so fair,"[141] pointing to the final goal of identity. Before this juxtaposition and the ensconcing of this notion within a Marxist framework, already in *Geist der Utopie* and in the coeval *Über das noch nicht bewusste Wissen,*[142] there are references to an ecstatic moment through which, bedazzled and amazed, we can experience the presentiment of plenitude. The theological, drawn from Medieval mysticism, undergoes a radical transformation, such that God is understood "as the problem of the radically new,"[143] experienced in the instant of utter amazement, in the moment of suspension from time and space.

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[139] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 178; cf. Eckhart, *Meister Eckeharts Schriften und Predigten in Zwei Bände*, 2.

[140] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 178; cf. Eckhart, *Meister Eckeharts Schriften und Predigten in Zwei Bänd*e, 3; Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, 273: 'Die Seele, in der Gott geboren werden soll, der muß die Zeit und sie muss der Zeit entfallen sein, sie muß sich emporschwingen und gasnz verstarrt stehen in diesem Reichtum Gottes, da ist Weite und Breite, die nicht weit noch breit.'

[141] 'Verweile doch, du bist so schön'. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1274, 1298–1303; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1504, 1534–40.

[142] Cf. Bloch, 'Über das noch nicht bewußte Wissen', 70–71.

[143] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 372: 'als dem Problem des radikal Neuen.'

Through these three examples, it has been possible to observe that the mystical notions developed by Eckhart in his German sermons have been adopted by Bloch starting with his early writings, sometimes as direct quotes, some others by coining new terms (or resorting to already formed neologisms) to express similar ideas. The vocabulary of Christian medieval mysticism already permeates the religious and philosophical essays of the young Bloch but will sediment into concepts – such as the *noch nicht bewußte Wissen*, the *Dunkel des gelebten Augenblick*, the *Eingedenken* – that will keep exerting a lasting influence throughout his entire work.

3.2. The Influence of Thomas Müntzer

While Eckhart's doctrines have been apprehended as a conceptual toolkit to devise a new *Erkenntnistheorie* – that will however inform the whole philosophical edifice –, the life and work of another Christian preacher has been of crucial importance for the development of Bloch's political-theological conceptual assemblage: Thomas Müntzer. While Eckhart provided Bloch with the conceptual tools to explore the recesses of the soul, to develop a notion of a utopian memory of the future, this very faculty finds in Müntzer the elected figure to remember – and celebrate. In his second publication, Bloch – possibly influenced again by a similar work by Landauer[144] – devotes his efforts to provide an "anarchist interpretation of the Anabaptist message."[145] The book, one of Bloch's only two monographies – the other being his later work on Hegel –, inserts the German Reformation preacher in a "productive scheme of remomoration,"[146] where Münzer stands out among a series of fringe religious figures to compose a tradition of theologically-inspired revolutionaries.[147] Within this latter, the reformation preacher stands out paradigmatically as "the rebel in Christo Thomas Münzer,"[148] thus transcending into a "superhistorical, transhistorical symbol"[149] of religious rebellion. The act of *Eingedenken*, initially intended as an individual sinking in ourselves to cling to our innermost core, becomes in this monography a collective effort to reach out to the most inspiring – albeit too often overlooked – agitators in European history, unearthing them to remind us of their utopian strivings, whose ultimate aspirations we share in the present.

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[144] On Landauer's influence on Bloch's reception of Thomas Müntzer and their different appraoch, see Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 125 ff.; cf. also Dubbels, 'Figuren des Messianischen', 377.

[145] Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 142.

[146] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer Als Theologe Der Revolution*, 14: 'produktive Schema des Eingedenken'.

[147] On Müntzer's relevance and Christian heretics as 'revolutionary anticipation,' see Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries*, 106–8.

[148] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer Als Theologe Der Revolution*, 15: 'der Rebell in Christo Thomas Münzer.'

[149] Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 203.

> But the Anabaptists of the true Reformation possessed the new infinity of *human hope*, and from Münzer to Paracelsus and Boehme they strived for nothing other than that all bad Earth and creatureliness, through the power of faith, may be turned into gold, into the interior, into bright Jerusalem, setting utopian alchemy over ready-made regimented astrology, shattering God with force, into love, into the nearest Kingdom of the spirit.[150]

In his reconstruction of a religiously inspired subversive tradition, the Anabaptists and their leader occupy a central position for their eschatological message;[151] in this, however, they are joined by renaissance alchemists and – moving across the centuries – "with Abbot Joachim's prophecies of the Third Reich, of the Messiah Septentrionalis, with Tauler, whose sermons were found among Münzer's estate, with Eckhart's Plotinian theory of sparks and biblical mysticism about the kingdom of God."[152] The line of development of this revolutionary tradition is brought to light so that the subversive elements in theology and mystics may be restored to their dignity even within a materialistic framework, not merely as precursors and antecedents of current struggles, but as still bearing their poignant emancipatory potential.[153] This potential shines through the apocalyptic overtone of Müntzer's sermons, particularly stressed throughout the book, to the point of affirming that "the arché of Thomas Münzer certainly aimed at no lesser goal than the unconditionality of Christ and of the Apocalypse."[154] If it is true that Müntzer finds its collocation inside the long line of Christian rebellion traced by Bloch across the centuries, encompassing abbot Joachim of Fiore, Eckhart, and Böhme, it must be noted that he is treated not only as a fecund source of mythologems, but as a figure of paramount importance in this tradition, wherein messianic motives are intertwined with chiliasm. In other words, Müntzer is presented, in Münster's words,

> as a unique catalyst endowed with messianic charisma, in which all those currents – astral myth, apocalyptic and utopian alchemy – flow together as in the figure of the prophet of a spiritual as well as earthly-political-social revolution, called upon to spread

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[150] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer Als Theologe Der Revolution*, 60–61: 'Doch das Täufertum der wahren Reformation besaß die neue Unendlichkeit der menschlichen Hoffnung, und es hat von Münzer bis Paracelsus und Böhme nach nichts getrachtet als daß durch Glaubenskraft alle schlechte Erde und Kreatürlichkeit in Gold, ins Inwendige, ins helle Jerusalem verwandelt werde, utopische Alchymie über fertige regimentshafte Astrologie setzend, Gott mit Gewalt zur Liebe, zum allernächsten Geisterreich zerbrechend.'

[151] Concerning this Christian tradition, see the lectures about mystics in Medieval Christianity: Bloch, *Zwischenwelten in der Philosophiegeschichte*, 135–63, spec. p. 148, 157, 163 about Müntzer.

[152] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer Als Theologe Der Revolution*, 102: 'mit des Abt Joachim Prophezierungen vom Dritten Reich, vom Messias Septentrionalis, mit Tauler, dessen Sermones ja noch unter Münzers Nachlaß gefunden wurden, mit Eckharts plotinischer Funkenlehre und biblischer Reich-Gottes-Mystik.'

[153] Cf. Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 206.

[154] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer Als Theologe Der Revolution*, 61: 'Die Arche Thomas Münzers erst recht nach keinem geringeren Ziel als nach den Unbedingtheiten Christi und der Apokalypse.'

> the legacy of the primitive Christian-communist utopias as well as the end-time prophecies of chiliasm and its sects.[155]

The Reformation preacher acts therefore as the prototype of the synergy of political and religious emancipatory actions and messages. To reconstruct the figure of the Allstedt preacher, Bloch mostly relied on the texts edited by Jordan und Danner,[156] at times also referring to an anthology curated by Enders[157] and a 18th century biography of the preacher.[158] From these editions, Bloch was able to glean not only the details of Müntzer's life course, but also some specific mythologems that obtain a central position in his preaching: the notions of the Son of Man, of mystical democracy and of the community of love.

Central in his atheist re-reading of the Christian tradition, the mythologem of Christ as the Son of Man (instead of the most common epithet the Son of God) is highlighted in many of Bloch's works that deal with the figure of Christ,[159] but among his early writings it is in connection with Münzter's preaching that comes most strikingly. Once again pulling together Eckhartian motives with the subversive teaching of the Allstedt preacher, Bloch treats the renovation of human soul – and the doctrine of the synteresis – linking the newly born God in man's soul to the figure of the Son of man, thus extirpating any reference to an otherworldly reference and clinging to the inner essence of human's soul:

> Precisely in the truest, most central sphere of Christian mysticism, then, the word shines forth in conscience, in a not acquiesced *synteresis*, in reason; even if the soul is no longer "working" here, the soul itself is not abandoned but, above all the irritability of the preparation, its higher being – hearkening to the content that has been spoken into it – gets mysteriously awake, stands in birth, and the born one – at the end of all "spontaneity" and fitting it within itself – is the Jewish king, Christ [born] anew, of the Son of man, the form of the absolute daydream, the immortal of God in the depths of the human soul itself and his Pleroma.[160]

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155 Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 209.
156 Müntzer, *Ausgetrückte emplössung des falschen Glaubens der ungetrewen Welt*.
157 Enders, *Aus dem Kampf der Schwärmer gegen Luther*.
158 Strobel and Monath und Kussler, *Leben, Schriften und Lehren Thomas Münzers*; for this and the previous references, I relied on Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 202.
159 See especially the chapter dedicated to the 'mystery of the Kingdom': Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 190–201; the theme of the Son of Man is also linked to the apotheosis in Müntzer's teachings: Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1407.
160 Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, 281. Punctuation slightly altered in the translation. The original reads: 'Gerade im echtesten, zentralsten Kreis christlicher Mystik also erglänzt das Wort im Gewissen, in der ungefallenen Synteresis, in der Vernunft; „wirkt" auch die Seele hier nicht mehr, so ist die Seele selber doch nicht verlassen, sondern über aller bereitenden Irritabilität wird ihr höheres, ihr dem eingesprochenen Inhalt entgegenhorendes Wesen geheimnisvoll wach, steht in Geburt, und der geboren wird, am Ende aller

This passage, present in the first and then taken off in the second edition of the book, presents the mythologem of the Son of Man as the perfectly fitting image of a renovated humanhood (of its finally gained fullness), whose essence is attained through the movement of rememoration. Closely preceding this passage, even more remarkably, Bloch lets the messianic overtone in Müntzer's preaching flare up, reflected in the image of a divine man, a *Gottmensch* already present and seething within us:

> Admittedly, in Münzer's case it is decided, albeit not reflected, to what extent the human being, the *inner divine man*, first emerged in Münzer's experience of arrival and grace; i.e. to what extent Münzer ended the fight against Adam and his egoity in favour of Christ as the purified, undeceivable, messianic humanity, but without abandoning Christ, as well as Adam, to an overwhelming heteronomous omnipotence per se.[161]

In short, the newly born son of God is drawn down to its earthly realm, it does not need God's omnipotence to be manifest, but only a humanity messianically oriented: what Müntzer puts forward, Bloch argues, is the superiority of the Son of Man to the Son of God. Although the divinity of the human creature, understood through this Christian mythologem, will be analysed in more detail in his late *Atheismus im Christentum* – where it is also discussed in wider terms[162] – the overmentioned passages demonstrate its seminal importance already from Bloch's early writings.

The presence of a divine element in mankind would be a merely aspect of our interiority, had it not been for the possibility of its external expression. Müntzer's life is a testimony of this attempt to conform the outer, social reality to the purity of the Christian message, apprehended and lived in our mystical experience. To the newly born Christ in the human soul can only correspond a social configuration deprived of exertion of power of man over man:

> He ordered the peasants to pool what was theirs, he shattered the brief dreams of democracy and empire, even nationalism was alien to him, the place of the mystical people's emperor was clearly Christ, a mystical world republic, theocracy and something deeper, he postulated the perfect community of goods, a primitive Christian essence, the elimination of all and every authority, the bringing back of the law to

„Spontaneität', und ihr in sich selbst entgegenkommt, ist der Juden König, von neuem Christus, des Menschen Sohn, Gestalt des absoluten Wachtraums, das Unsterbliche Gottes im Grund der Menschenseele selber und sein Pleroma.".

[161] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer Als Theologe Der Revolution*, 202, italics mine. 'freilich ist bei Münzer nun sinngemäß entschieden, doch nicht reflektiert, wiefern der Mensch, der innere Gottmensch in Münzers Ankunfts-, Gnadenerlebnis überhaupt erst aufging, wiefern also Münzer den Kampf gegen Adam und seine Egoität zugunsten Christi als der gereinigten, unbetrüglichen, messianischen Humanität beendete, ohne jedoch Christus nun ebenfalls, gleich Adam, einer uns überrennenden, heteronomen Omnipotenz per se preiszugeben.'

[162] Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 190–201.

> morality and preparation for Christ. […] The real and the beyond-the-real effectiveness were united here in the widest arc and placed at the head of the revolution.[163]

The delineation of a political space wherein no sovereignty takes place, no human authority is accepted, and property is shared in primitive communism clearly display Müntzer's anarchic drive: the primacy of the law is substituted by the primacy of morality, oriented towards the second coming of Christ – in other words: for the messianic times. This outline of the political form breaks its conventional understanding and encroaches onto what Bloch calls the "the metapolitical, even metareligious principle of all revolution: the dawn of the freedom of the children of God."[164] Imbued with Christian apocalypticism, the political-theological imagination can thus, following Müntzer's path, conceive of a mystical democracy through the "Christian ideal of a lawless and stateless pure community of love."[165] This last mythologem represents for the early Bloch the quintessential aspect of the progressive political-theological, overcoming religion and politics into a "meta-" that at the same time redraws their borders and rethinks them altogether, as it will be explored in detail in the following chapter.

3.3. The Influence of Jakob Böhme

Another Christian author who proved to be crucial for the formation of Bloch's philosophical system is the early modern mystic Jakob Böhme. This latter had already attracted the attention of Buber and has been in fact the subject of his doctoral dissertation (and prior to that, of a 1901 article appeared on the *Wiener Rundschau*),[166] thus proving once again Buber's influence on Bloch's thought. Buber's early works, especially those devoted to Judaism, were themselves in turn the object of Lukács's reflections, appeared in 1911 in an article, titled *Jewish Mysticism*, published in a Hungarian philosophical journal; interestingly, in this piece he compared the mysticism of the Baal-Schem to that of Meister Eckhart and Jakob Böhme.[167] Bloch's close friendship with Lukács during the gestational period of *Geist der Utopie* might

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[163] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, 98: 'Er hieß die Bauern das Ihre zusammenzulegen, er sprengte die kurzem Träume von Demokratie und Kaisertum, selbst Nationalismus war ihm fremd, and Stelle des mystischen Volkskaisers trat völlig deutlich Christus, mystische Weltrepublik, Theokratie und Tieferes, er postulierte vollkommene Gütergemeinschaft, urchristliches Wesen, Beseitigung aller und jeder Obrigkeit, Zurückrückung des Gesetzes auf Moralität und Christbereitung. […] Das wirklich und das überwirklich Wirksamste war hier im weitesten Bogen vereinigt, and den Kopf der Revolution gestellt.'

[164] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer Als Theologe Der Revolution*, 210: 'das metapolitische, ja metareligiöse Prinzip aller Revolution: den Anbruch der Freiheit der Kinder Gottes.'

[165] Bloch, 129: 'Das christliche Ideal einer rechts- und staatslosen reinen Liebesgemeinschaft.'

[166] 'Zur Geschichte Des Individuationsproblem (Nicolaus von Cues und Jakob Böhme)', in Buber, *Band 2.1 Mythos und Mystik*, 75–101; the work has been translated in English: Buber, 'On the History of the Problem of Individuation'; cf. 'Über Jakob Boehme', in Buber, *Band 2.1 Mythos und Mystik*, 70–74.

[167] Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 145.

explain the influence of the Christian mystic on Bloch's own ideas. Historian George Mosse in this regard observes that

> the similarity between Buber's rediscovery of the Hasidism and the contemporary German revival of mystics like Meister Eckhart and Jacob Böhme is too striking to be ignored. Germans also wanted to go beyond ›liberal‹ or ›orthodox‹ Protestantism to an earlier heritage which seemed more dynamic because it was less rationalistic, less fossilized. A mystic like Böhme had posited a definitive and emotional starting point, rooted in nature, for the ›overcoming‹ of the present world. Such German mystics seemed to intuit cosmic forces linked to the German Volk and to nature as well. The soul was seen as a bridge between these two regions, just as it formed the link between them and the ideology of the Youth Movement.[168]

The early 20th century *Zeitgeist* is reflected in the *Völkisch* character of Bloch's first writings, particularly receptive of which mystical themes and authors in their various declensions. Böhme was no exception and mythologems stemming from his works reappear, however altered and reworked, in Bloch's *Geist der Utopie*.

Central in many of Böhme's treatises is the notion of *Ungrund* (groundlessness), with which the mystic expresses the unfathomable divine source of all transformations and phenomena of the cosmos. Often juxtaposed to the concepts of *Chaos* and *Abgrund* (abyss), the *Ungrund* is the most apt concept that Böhme devises to describe God's ineffable nature, whereby the nothing and the all seem to merge in a *coincidentia oppositorum*.[169] Although rationally unknowable and essentially deprived of any qualification, the *Ungrund* is the abode of a seething will, a pulsing force that stands at the origin of any creatural entity.

The task of the true believer is that of attaining the knowledge of this ultimate divine source by uniting with it. The 'unio mystica,' as Böhme envisaged it, can be achieved through a movement of sinking into the deity, often metaphorically expressed through the image of a reflection in a mirror. As Münster observed, "in contemplation the 'I' attains knowledge and finally the attainment of the divine essence."[170] This image has been adopted in Bloch's writings with some tweaks. Dubbels explains that in Böhme's account, the

> immersion in the mirror stands for entering into the divine »groundlessness«, which transcends and dissolves all pictorial representation. In Bloch, the encounter with the

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[168] Mosse, *Germans and Jews*, 85.

[169] Böhme, 'De Electione Gratiae', 1955, para. I, 8; cf. Böhme, *De Electione Gratiae and Quaestiones Theosophicae*, 7–9.

[170] Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 134.

divine Ungrund becomes a self-encounter with the human Ungrund, the "excessiveness of human nature" [Maßlosen der Menschennatur][171]

In the final pages of *Geist der Utopie*, as Bloch seems to point to the attainment of the encounter with the self and the answer to the inconstruable question, he in fact resorts to the metaphor of the mirror to indicate this very encounter:

> Hence in conclusion: we ourselves advance, by thinking, suffering and longing, into our inner mirror. We disappear through the small painted door of this marvellous palace and can no longer be seen, in this world or in the other; the all-propelling, all-concealing moment has arrived and broken open; time stands still in the inner space of absolute unveiling, absolute present. Precisely that too was messianically meant by the Second Coming […][172]

From this passage not only the transition – and the parallel – from the groundlessness of Böhme's God to the darkness of the lived moment of Bloch's human soul neatly emerges, but also the nexus with the messianic imaginary becomes evident. The mystical experience standing at the acme of Böhme's doctrine of the union with the deity is drawn close to the depiction of a messianically conceived encounter with the human self. The mythologem of the early modern mystic has been appropriated, tweaked and embedded in a new frame, devoid of hypostatised notions of God but acknowledging the divine element within the human soul. The section of the book wherein the image of the mirror is included finds place in the long chapter *Karl Marx, der Tod und die Apokalypse*; Münster notes that the recurring usage of mythologems such as '*Licht'*, '*Finsternis*,' '*Satan*,' '*Luzifer*,' '*Geheimnis*' that takes place in this part of the book is probably indebted to Böhme's vocabulary as well, which in turn reposes on alchemic concepts.[173] Particularly interesting is to note the parallel between Bloch's and Böhme's dealing with the mythologem of '*Licht*,' light. This latter in Böhme's alchemic doctrine is associated to the positive quality of heat, a "life force"[174] that is also the force of the illumination [*Erleuchtung*] of its negative counterpart.[175] In Bloch the progressive illumination of the darkness of the lived moment brings about the *Selbstbegegnung*, the encounter with ourselves and the ultimate achievement of identity; instead of plunging and sinking in the

[171] Dubbels, *Figuren des Messianischen*, 162.
[172] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 277; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 344: 'Darum zum Ende: wir selben schreiten, indem wir das Leid und die Sehnsucht denken, in unseren inneren Spiegel hinein. Wir verschwinden in der kleiden, gemalten Tür des fabelhaften Palasts, und werden nicht mehr gesehen, weder in dieser noch in jeder Welt; der allbewegende, allverbergende Augenblick ist angelangt und aufgebrochen, die Zeit steht still, im Innenraum absoluter Enthüllung, Gegenwart. Auch eben das war mit der Wiederkehr Christi messianisch bedeutet.'
[173] Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 134.
[174] Cf. Böhme, 'De Electione Gratiae', 1955, chap. I.
[175] Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 133.

divine will, it is through a "creative work" taking place within the human subject that the illumination is to be attained. It becomes here a *Gegenerleuchtung*, a rebellion against the chase out of the paradise and the original sin, to lay claim to the identity with God, to finally achieve the plenitude of humanity that has not yet been achieved: Bloch presents

> the counter-enlightenment to what has to happen in us and in God as reversal, as a way to a holy language, to return, homecoming to paradise, to acceptance and fulfilment of all longing for godlikeness in the Omega, the finally made good Alpha.[176]

Again, it is possible to notice the picture of an apotheosis to signify the ultimate goal of the encounter with oneself: the progressive clearing and enlightening of the inner darkness brings forth the divine essence of the human subject. Lastly, this rebirth of the individual, this coming to light anew of the human subject is hinted to in the doctrine of the wondering of the souls, also quoted above with reference to the kabbalistic tradition. Böhme advances a doctrine of the rebirth of man as well, a redemptive process whereby the killing of his own egoity ensues an enlightenment of the old Adam through God's grace.[177] In Bloch, however, not only this doctrine is tinged with the kabbalistic if not Hindu notion of metempsychosis, but it is linked to the overcoming of the "contradiction between our short time and the inexperienceable time of history."[178]

These are the most striking examples of Böhme's mythologems as they reappear, tweaked and reworked, in Bloch's early writings. It must be noted that Böhme's oeuvre presents a general coherence with the Blochian syncretistic philosophy of religion, in so far as it is itself deeply influenced by renaissance alchemy; this latter is in turn indebted with many a kabbalistic notion, thus engendering a thick entanglement of trans-religious mythologems that fluctuate from one religious tradition to the other.[179] It is this nebula of Judeo-Christian mythologems, however re-read and interpreted by different theologians, that Bloch appropriates in his own fashion.

3.4. The Influence of Joachim of Fiore

Lastly, a crucial contribution to Bloch's philosophy, especially regarding his philosophy of history, came from the doctrines of the abovementioned Calabrian abbot Joachim of Fiore (1135 - 1202). Often associated with Thomas Müntzer and Jakob Böhme, Joachim of Fiore

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[176] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 379: 'die Gegenerleuchtung zu dem, was in uns und Gott geschehen muß als Umkehr, als Weg zur einen heiligen Sprache, zur Rückkehr, Heimkehr ins Paradies, zur Annahme und Erfüllung aller Sehnsucht nach Gottähnlichkeit im Omega, dem endlich gutgemachten Alpha.'

[177] Cf. Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 132.

[178] Münster, 133; cf. Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 327.

[179] On the influence of Kabbalah on Böhme's thought, cf. Wolfson, 'The Holy Cabala of Changes'.

gains his place in Bloch's heretic-subversive hagiography thanks to his chiliastic theology of history.[180] As Geoghegan observes, "Joachim's achievement was […] to resuscitate the radical utopianism of the Bible in his doctrine of the three kingdoms,"[181] a doctrine often referred or hinted to throughout Bloch's works. Medievalist Morton Bloomfield concisely stated that "Joachim's teachings were on two basic subjects: the nature of the Trinity and the meaning of history,"[182] and it is this latter aspect that attracted Bloch's (an many others' before him) attention. Joachim presented a tripartite account of history, that paralleled his account of trinitarian theology: "the period of the Old Testament was primarily the age of the Father, the period from the time of Jesus down to roughly Joachim's time was that of the Son, and the third age, which is a naturally completing period, would be that of the Holy Ghost."[183] The transition from one age to the other, each of which presents a precursor and an initiator, is turbulent and traumatic: "birth throes of each age are violent and give rise to antichrists."[184] Here the closeness with apocalypticism is clearly visible – and with this, a first possible reason for Bloch's appropriation of Joachim's doctrines. But the striking originality of the abbot's doctrines consisted not so much in his tripartite account of history – that had some notable antecedents in both Jewish and Christian disquisitions[185] – and not in a description of a mystical history of salvation for the individual soul, as in a progressive and collective process of amelioration that takes place on the realm of history and involves the whole humanity.[186] Bloch descried here the mythologem of an Advent of a new age, an age yet to come, collectively attained, reached through a traumatic event and filled with hopes of fraternity and justice. The figure of Joachim makes its most notable appearance in Bloch's works as he engaged in the struggle to re-claim a series of cultural (artistic and religious) materials from the Nazis in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*. In an essay firstly appeared in Moscow in 1937, Bloch puts forward a

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[180] As I have stated in Chapter I, it is commonly held that the doctrines of Joachim of Fiore exerted a notable influence on the father of 'historiosophy', August Ciezskowski. However, while it is certain that Cieszkowski adopted the motif of a tripartite account of history from Lessing, direct quotes from the medieval Abbot are lacking, making the direct influence of the latter on the construction of historiosophical narratives ultimately impossible to ascertain. Therefore, Bloch's adoption of Joachimite vocabulary and conceptual tools cannot be taken as a token of his proximity with historiosophy. Cf. Warwick and Marjorie, 'Joachim of Fiore in Eastern Europe', 333–35; Hepner, 'History and the Future', 329.

[181] Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch*, 91.

[182] Bloomfield, 'Joachim of Flora', 262.

[183] Bloomfield, 264.

[184] Bloomfield, 265.

[185] In the Christian tradition, the most notable antecedent is surely Augustine, who bequeathed the tripartition of history to Medieval theologians. Cf. Reeves, 'The Originality and Influence of Joachim of Fiore', 273; the three ages in history were first commented in the Babylonian Talmud, in the tratise Abodah Zarah, Chapt. 1, 9a: Epstein and Simon, *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, bk. 1. p. 29.

[186] For a comparison of Joachim of Fiore's doctrines with those of his contemporaries and a general assessment of his originality and legacy, cf. Reeves, 'The Originality and Influence of Joachim of Fiore'.

critique of the well-known notion of the *Third Reich*, an allusion to the claim that Nazi Germany was the successor to the Holy Roman Empire (*First Reich*) and to the German Empire (*Second Reich*). He shows that the notion of a third kingdom has a deeper and radically different origin, tracking it down to its religious-eschatological roots, and he rightly identifies Joachim as the cardinal figure who put forward such a powerful conception. Reconstructing this narrative not only allowed Bloch to snatch this mythologem from the Nazis' hands, but also – and perhaps more importantly – to overturn its political value so to propose, with Joachim, "a graduated development of history through the degrees of spiritual perfection,"[187] leading to the affirmation of a "progressive, unfinished humanity,"[188] coherently with his utopian anthropology. In this essay, Bloch relies on the study by Herbert Grundmann,[189] but he also quotes directly from Joachim's treatise *Concordia*,[190] thus showing direct knowledge of the abbot's works. Intimations of Joachim's doctrines, however, are already to be found in *Thomas Münzer*,[191] and even in the first edition of *Geist der Utopie*, where Bloch hints twice[192] at a Third Gospel, a "Tertium Testamentum." In this regard, Bonola observes that the notion of Third Gospel is actually a Blochian re-elaboration of some

> motives present in the doctrines of Joachim of Fiore, [notably the assertion that in the third epoch] the Holy Spirit will bring to mankind, through the *intelligentia spiritualis*, a direct and full knowledge of divine truth. […] However, in Joachim the expression does not appear, not even the concept of a Third Testament, albeit he speaks of an "evangelium aeternum", based on Ap 14:6, compared to which the 'evangelium quod est in littera' is to be considered temporary and not perpetual.[193]

The inaccuracy with which Bloch hints to Joachim's doctrines in *Geist der Utopie* might suggest that at the time of writing he had come across Joachim's doctrines through conversations and exchanges with other intellectuals but only later on did peruse the sources and the studies on the medieval abbot.

The lasting relevance of Joachim's doctrines in Bloch's philosophy is also proved by the echoes one can read in his mature *Prinzip Hoffnung,* wherein the abbot's *Lehre* is presented as the

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[187] Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 123; Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, 134: 'ein Stufegang der Geschichte durch die Grede der geistigen Vervollkommnung.'
[188] Ibid.: "der fortschreitenden, der unfertigen Menschheit."
[189] Grundmann, *Studien über Joachim von Floris*; cf. Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 123.
[190] Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 124; Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, 135.
[191] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, 102.
[192] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 325, 329.
[193] Bloch, *Gli Ebrei, un simbolo*, 133–34.

“most momentous social utopia in the Middle Ages.”[194] It is this peculiar politically charged and utopia-infused character of Joachim’s theology of history, one might conclude, that led Bloch to gather and value his doctrines. Goeghegan observers: “Bloch so frequently brackets together Joachim and Münzer because he does detect deep underlying similarities.”[195] As much Müntzer provided Bloch with the most striking religious-revolutionary ideas, as Joachim furnished his philosophy with a correspondingly utopian theology of history. If a new, radically other, age in history, can be prepared and is about to come; if the attainment of this age comes through the inevitable pangs of birth of a difficult transition we are currently witnessing; if nonetheless there are reasons to hope for the new age to come – then the call for the present cannot be but a mystical revolution, whereby the theological elements display all their emancipatory potential. Bloch’s ‘political mysticism’, perfectly embodied by Müntzer and Joachim, responds to his claim that the revolution and the abolition of the state are a necessary but not sufficient step to attain the fullness of the Marxist utopia. As Pelletier has aptly remarked, “the general satisfaction of physical needs is just the precondition for a second step, which is intellectually and socially more demanding: the collective search for the meaning of existence.”[196] Messianism and chiliasm are paramount examples of a synthesis of these two steps – and Bloch’s rediscovery of mythologems stemming from their multifarious traditions must be understood from this perspective.

4. Gnostic Elements

Beside the Jewish and Christian elements, one can find a third kind of religious images in Bloch’s works: Gnostic mythologems and doctrines are often juxtaposed to those stemming from other religious traditions. The task to locate and track down the origin of Bloch’s Gnosticism, however, proves to be even harder than the survey on other religious images, mainly for three reasons. First, Bloch does not indicate Gnostic sources in his early writings – with very few exceptions –, nor refers to readings in his letters; in fact, only later on, from the Thirties onwards, we can spot explicit references to modern scholars and to direct sources. Second, the very notion of Gnosticism is still a matter of discussion for many scholars and no definite agreement on a definition of Gnosticism seems to have been reached. Consequently, any attempt to locate Gnostic elements is subject to a further inquiry vis-à-vis the background against which this analysis is conducted. Third, Jewish mysticism, Kabbala, and Christian

[194] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 509; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 590: ‘Die folgenreichste Sozialutopie des Mittelalters.’
[195] Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch*, 92.
[196] Pelletier, ‘On Ernst Bloch’s Moral Theory’, 38.

Chiliasm are often already infused with Gnostic tropes or motives, so it is frequently impossible to neatly disentangle a purported 'pure' Christian or Jewish mythologem from the alleged Gnostic 'contamination'. As a result, several commentators have already observed that the "exact influence of this current—complex in itself—on the totality of Blochian thinking is difficult to pinpoint."[197]

Notwithstanding these reservations, it is possible to distinctly recognize some patterns in Bloch's thought that are clearly reflective of a Gnostic trend, and his use of some Gnostic imagery confirms this influence. As complex and hard to pinpoint as Gnosticism can be, scholars seem to agree at least on some general features of this set of doctrines. With this term a series of religious ideas, systems and practices is indicated, that coalesced around the 1st century CE and were competing with Judaism, the emerging Christianity and Hellenistic culture.[198] Religious studies scholars Moore and Turner suggest a broad definition of the term:

> One thing is clear, as even scholars who have advanced the cause of abandoning the term altogether have admitted: the binding thread connecting the disparate texts so often called 'Gnostic' is the idea that, although this world is the product, not of the highest God or One, but of a lower entity of lesser power, it is possible for humans to transcend this world through the insight (gnōsis) from which the divine human self originates, and can reassimilate itself to the highest God.[199]

In short, a sharp dualism (whereby to the evil God, the demiurge who created the world, is opposed the Unknown God, the one who saves it from the first), and a soteriological narrative presenting salvation based on knowledge are the two main traits of a variety of religious practices and doctrines that modern commentators have at various points in intellectual history comprised under the term 'Gnosticism'. Scholars of Bloch's works have not failed to recognise some traits in his philosophy that display an affinity with these ancient doctrines. As a matter of fact, Bloch explicitly used the term 'Gnosticism' [*Gnostizismus*] already in the first edition of *Geist der Utopie*, talking about a "a latent Gnosticism, an opposition of the good and enlightened to everything petty that is visible in the prophets and Jesus, yes even earlier, in the changing psychologies of Yahweh himself , the just and the hard — an antithesis that was by no means first created by Christianity, which was received outside of the Jews."[200] This passage

[197] Tacik, 'Ernst Bloch as a Non-Simultaneous Jewish Marxist', 2.
[198] Cf. Magris, 'Gnosticism from Its Origins to the Middle Ages', 3519.
[199] Moore and Turner, 'Gnosticism', 174.
[200] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 330: 'ein latenter Gnostizismus, eine bei den Propheten und Jesus, ja schon früher, an den wechselnden Psychologien Jahwes selber sichtbare Entgegensetzung des Guten und Erleuchteten gegen alles Kleinliche, Gerechte und Harte — eine Entgegensetzung, die keineswegs erst durch das außerjüdisch rezipierte Christentum erzeugt worden ist.'

proves that the core of these ancient doctrines was somehow thematised and appropriated, although only in passing, already in his early works. Commenting this passage, Dubbels aptly observes that in ascribing a "latent Gnosticism" (GdU1 330) to Judaism, Bloch "sees a relationship in particular between the Gnostic doctrine, according to which the end of the world process only deciphers the beginning, the Genesis, and Jewish messianism."[201] Terms referring to Gnosis occur in other parts of the book as well but are not of central importance for our understanding of this influence. What scholars have stressed, on the other hand, is that "Bloch presents himself as a Gnostic in the first place where he – e.g. in the chapter about the 'unkonstruierbare Frage' in *Geist der Utopie* – clearly shows to follow the Gnostic account of a redemption through knowledge."[202] A striking passage wherein Gnostic motives emerge with clarity stems in fact from the closing statement of this chapter, where Bloch expresses a radical form of rejection for the world as it is that betrays his dualism and his juvenile subscription to acosmist positions at once:

> This world is an error, and void; in the face of absolute truth it has only the right to be destroyed […] The unknowing around us is the final ground for the manifestation of this world, and for precisely this reason does knowing, the lightning flash of a future knowledge striking unerringly into our darkness and the inconstruable question, constitute at the same time the inevitably sufficient ground for the manifestation, for the arrival in the other world.[203]

If it is true that these few excerpts from his first book are testimony to the presence, although in vague form, of Gnostic patterns in Bloch's philosophy from an early stage, one must also bear in mind two things: first, that this form of radical acosmism and rejection of the worldly existence will be abandoned later on following his adoption of a Marxist standpoint; second, that Gnosticism is presented here as a trait or nuance of a more robust tradition, namely Jewish messianism, and not as a standalone religious creed. The emancipatory power of knowledge, however, is a trait that crosses through the entirety of the Blochian system and will be retained in his maturity. In this regard, Boldyrev has thus summarised the connection of this heretical doctrines with the Marxist tradition: "the very notion that knowledge is an instrument of

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[201] Dubbels, *Figuren des Messianischen*, 375.

[202] Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 128; Bloch, Geist der Utopie, 1923, 389.

[203] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 229; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 287: 'diese Welt ist ein Irrtum und nichtig, hat vor der absoluten Wahrheit kein anderes Recht als ihren Untergang […] Das Nichtwissen um uns ist der letzte Grund für die Erscheinung dieser Welt, und darum eben konstituiert das Wissen, der in unser Dunkel und die unkonstruierbare Frage genau einschlagende Blitz dereinstiger Erkenntnis zugleich den unausweichlich ausreichenden Grund für die Erscheinung, für das Angelangtsein in der Anderen Welt.'

transforming the world and redeeming it, the claim that to be saved one has to acquire a knowledge of some sort, constitutes the link between Gnosticism and Marxism."[204]

4.1. Conjectures on the Sources of Bloch's Gnostic Mythologems

To advance hypotheses about the possible sources Bloch initially derived his conceptions from, one can consider a later work, *Atheismus im Christentum*, where Bloch thematises specific mythologems, quotes primary sources and uses modern scholarly works on the subject of Gnosticism. This work prominently features several theologians belonging to the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (German protestant theologians associated with the university of Göttingen in the 1890s) – particularly Richard Reitzenstein and Wilhelm Bousset, but also, in a critical light, Rudolf Otto –, thus leading to the consideration that Bloch had a certain familiarity with this school. Even when focussing on Gnostic topics, however, Bloch often does not use their main works on Gnosis, but other, although well-known, publications. For example, Bousset's *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (1907),[205] his main research on the topic, is never quoted in *Atheismus im Christentum*, whereas his earlier study on Judaism (dated 1903)[206] as well as his well-known *Kyrios Christos* (1913)[207] are extensively used.[208] The same is true for Reitzenstein, the other great scholar of Gnosis in the school of Göttingen: neither his work on the Hermetic *Poimandres*[209] nor his study on the Mandaean mysteries[210] are featured in Bloch's late work, but he uses Reitzenstein's book on the Iranian religion[211] to base some considerations about an alleged Persian origin of the Gnostic cult.[212] Lastly, references to Rudolf Otto[213] just aim at a critique of his account of transcendence. So much for the Göttingen school. A notable scholar upon whose works Bloch has based some of his sections on Gnosis is the theologian Adolf von Harnack. Although his doctoral dissertation discussed the main sources for the understanding of Gnosis,[214] and his *Habilitationsschrift* was devoted to Apelles, a disciple of Marcion of Sinope,[215] it was only several decades later (in 1921) that he published

[204] Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries*, 94.
[205] Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*.
[206] Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*.
[207] Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*.
[208] For Bousset's study on Judaism, cf. Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 194, 210, 212–13; for Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*, cf. Bloch, 172–75.
[209] Reitzenstein, *Poimandres*.
[210] Reitzenstein, *Das Mandäische Buch des Herrn der Grösse und die Evangelienüberlieferung*.
[211] Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium*.
[212] Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 157.
[213] Bloch, 72, 73, 155; Bloch refers to Otto, *Das Heilige*.
[214] von Harnack, *Zur Quellenkritik Der Geschichte Des Gnostizismus*.
[215] von Harnack, "De Apellis gnosi monarchica."

perhaps the most influential study on Marcion of that age,[216] reappraising the figure of the Christian heretic. On this latter work Bloch heavily relies for his treatment of Marcionism, to which a central role is reserved in *Atheismus im Christentum*.[217] Several authors and works used in Bloch's 1968 book – and certainly those that are pertinent for Bloch's treatment of Gnostic elements – date back to a period comprised between 1900 and 1921. This would already hint to how he used and re-used the same scholarship over time, paying less attention to how updated it was than to how relevant the single works might have been for his own argument. But if one goes back to the first two editions of *Geist der Utopie* and looks for references to Marcion, another interesting fact emerges. Between the first (1918) and the second edition (1923) of the book, among the many changes on the text, there are some minor amendments on single words, one of which refers to the Christian Gnostic. Marcion's merit, initially indicated in his having conceived "God as history,"[218] thus presenting an innovative image of an evolving deity, in the second edition of *Geist der Utopie* is changed in "God as pure interiority."[219] In his commentary, Bonola suggests that this terminological – but semantically significant – modification in this brief assessment of Marcion's doctrines has likely been informed by the reading of von Harnack's work, published in 1921, indeed between the first and second edition of *Geist der Utopie* came out.[220] If this is true, one can find here another, more conspicuous clue that Bloch read and used this text already in the early 1920s, thus corroborating the conjecture about Bloch's re-use of sources he consulted decades before. If a book that was used in the 1920s to amend some details of *Geist der Utopie* on Marcion remains central in later productions, we cannot exclude that the same happened for the other authors quoted in *Atheismus im Christentum*, such as Bousset and Reitzenstein. Furthermore, in his later works, Bloch never considers what is for sure the most relevant archaeological find in the field of Gnosticism, namely: the Nag Hammadi library, discovered in upper Egypt in 1945. While it is true that most of the codices were edited and translated only after the Messina colloquium of 1966 – a watershed in the history of Gnosticism[221] –, some tractates were available as early as the mid-1950s. Despite all this, no mention of any of these tractates, and

[216] Harnack, *Marcion*, 1921.
[217] Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, chap. 35, p. 237 ff.
[218] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 330: 'Gott als Geschichte.'
[219] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1923, 297: 'Gott als reine Inwendigkeit.'
[220] Bloch, *Gli Ebrei, un simbolo*, 144; Harnack, *Marcion*, 1990, 3: 'This identifies one line to which Marcion belongs: he developed with utmost consistency the religion of inwardness. He culminates a five-hundred-year development in the internalizing of religion.'
[221] Bianchi, *The Origins of Gnosticism*.

not even of the discovery of the 'Gnostic Gospels'[222] appears in Bloch's text. This further confirms that, at the time of writing *Atheismum im Christentum*, Bloch was not concerned with the latest developments in the scholarship on ancient Gnosis – on the contrary, one might add, his references to theological debates on transcendence, sacred, etc. were all pointing back to decades before. The scarcity of direct references to Gnostic primary sources one can find in other Blochian works seems to confirm that he mostly relied on a handful of scholarly valid but dated works. One can find references to Valentinus and Basilides in the second and third edition of *Geist der Utopie*,[223] as well as in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*. In this latter work, the section on Gnosis is based on a work by Leisegang,[224] also quoted in *Atheismus im Christentum*,[225] wherein he takes a close look to Simon Magus's doctrines and to the book *Pistis Sophia*. From Leisegang Bloch gained useful material on the latter Gnostic treatise, as well as references to Hyppolitus's *Elenchos* [*Refutatio*].[226] In this regard, it is interesting to note that the incipit of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* presents a remarkable parallel in one of the Valentinian fragments handed down through Clemens of Alexandria, whom Bloch certainly read.[227] Valentinus's fragment reads: "who we were, and what we have become; where we were […] whither we are hastening; from what we are being released; what birth is, and what is rebirth."[228] And *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* opens with: "Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What are we waiting for? What awaits us?"[229] thus immediately setting the book on a Gnostic tone, as Christen pointed out.[230] The existentialistic overtone characterising the Gnostic religiosity seems to have been appropriated and reformulated into questions about the origin and destination of the single individual and of humankind in general, unavoidable queries for Blochian utopian philosophy. Lastly, Leisegang seems to be Bloch's source for another relevant Gnostic cult, the Ophites, to which Bloch extensively refers in both *Atheism im Christentum*[231] and *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*.[232] In sum, specific Gnostic

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[222] This is how religious historian Pagels refers to the codices of the Nag Hammadi library. Cf. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.
[223] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 194–95; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 245-46.
[224] Leisegang, *Die Gnosis*.
[225] Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 232.
[226] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1120; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1317.
[227] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 758–59; Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 200.
[228] Clemens Alexandrinus, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 78.2, quoted in Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, xix.
[229] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1: 'Wer sind wir? Wo kommen wir her? Wohin gehen wir? Was erwarten wir? Was erwartet uns?'
[230] Christen, Ernst Blochs Metaphysik der Materie, 60; cf. also Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 129.
[231] Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 231–37.
[232] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1268–70; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1497–98.

mythologems are most likely derived from a handful of secondary sources, most of which date back to the period 1900-1924, but a general Gnostic overtone can be sensed throughout the whole of Bloch's production.

4.2. Gnostic Motives in Bloch's Thought: the Serpent, Dualism, the Shards of Light

What has been said allows for some tentative considerations about the sources of Bloch's Gnosticism. In general, it seems likely that in the 1910s, when he composed the various parts of *Geist der Utopie*, his knowledge of Gnostic texts and corresponding secondary literature was rather limited. Only in the 1930s and 1940s Bloch dealt with the classical works on the subject and deepened his knowledge of Gnosticism, exploring the specificities of some particular cults and mythologems and thus assuming a more conscious and nuanced positioning. Despite a rather vague knowledge of Gnostic doctrines in the young Bloch, several motives ascribable to Gnosticism are already present in both *Geist der Utopie* and in *Thomas Münzer*. Among the many mythologems that populate Bloch's oeuvre, it is interesting to look at the figure of the Serpent, that in his early works are likely to have depended on Kabbalistic teachings,[233] whereas in his more mature works it will be explicitly connected to the Christian-Gnostic cult of the Ophites. Be it as it may, the reason to resort to such a powerful image remains rather clear. With a transvaluation of values, the well-known episode in Genesis wherein the serpent tempted Eve to draw from the tree of knowledge is presented with an opposite connotation. Whereas in the traditional reading the serpent's act is blameful in so far as it represents the embodiment of haughtiness, Bloch's Gnostic reappraisal on the contrary celebrates the daring attitude of the serpent and the human claim for knowledge. The serpent thus assumes the contours of a symbol of rebellion, a human insurrection against the oppression of the God of heaven – and with him against any form of dominion –, an insurgency empowered by knowledge. It is by knowing oneself and thus fully grasping one's essence that mankind re-acquires the capacity to come to its full realisation; and vice versa, the human endeavour to fully realise its own essence entails a form of enlightening. This Gnostic soteriological frame, placing knowledge (rather than grace) at the core of salvation and redemption is clearly evident already in Bloch's first book.[234] Be it filtered through medieval and Renaissance alchemic doctrines, through Kabbalistic texts or Christian heresy, the Gnostic account of salvation is a core feature of Bloch's philosophy of religion. In *Geist der Utopie* we read:

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[233] For the figure of the 'holy serpent' as a symbol of rebellion associated with the Messiah in Nathan of Gaza and Jacob Frank, see Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 74, 132; for the image of the serpent as a messianic symbol in Abulafia cf. Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills or the Serpent Gives Life*, 227.

[234] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 441.

> Because ignorance is the ultimate reason for the appearance of this world, and that is why knowledge, the lightning bolt of former knowledge that strikes our darkness and the inconstruable question, also constitutes the inevitably sufficient reason for the appearance, for having arrived in the other world.[235]

This passage brings the long chapter on the inconstruable question to a close with a strikingly clear indication: the world as it is must be overcome, its evils depend on the ignorance that still imbues the creation, and only the enlightening breakthrough of a flash of knowledge brings forth the overcoming of this world and the attainment of another one, a better one, the long-cherished utopia. Throughout this passage another feature comes to evidence: the striking opposition between good and evil, between light and darkness, that permeates the entirety of Bloch's works. This dualism, a Gnostic seal on Bloch's system of thought, is already there in *Geist der Utopie*, where it can be found in the references to Satan, to the *ritardando* of the world,[236] but will be expanded and thematised in *Atheismus im Christentum* from the religious point of view,[237] and before that in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* from a sheer theoretical standpoint (whereby it is articulated as an opposition between *absolute Nothing* and *absolute All*).[238] The numerous references of Marcion throughout his works are also to be explained in the light of this opposition. Landmann in fact observes that Bloch "discovered Marcion at an early age and placed him at the lead. Of course, he did not interpret Marcion in such a way that the Old Testament had to be separated from the New, but only in the sense that the existing world, which the Old Testament declares to be God-created and good, cannot yet be the perfect, redeemed one."[239] The Merit of the Gnostics, first and foremost of Marcion, would therefore be their understanding of this antithesis between the demiurge and the supreme divinity, and to bring this to the extreme consequences. Bonola notes that Marcion has also conceived "'God as history', i.e. the possibility of evolution within the divinity itself, as God in the making, to whom Bloch's entire philosophical perspective, if I understand correctly, is and will remain faithful. For this Marcion, despite his repudiation of the Old Testament, is closer to messianism than is the Christian *oeconomia salutis*."[240] The last relevant Gnostic mythologem Bloch uses ever and ever again is one that we have already encountered: the image of the shards of light

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[235] Bloch, 389: 'Denn dass Nichtwissen ist der letzte Grund für die Erscheinung dieser Welt, und darum eben konstituiert das Wissen, der in unser Dunkel und die unkonstruierbare Frage genau einschlagende Blitz dereinstiger Erkenntnis auch den unausweichlich ausreichenden Grund für die Erscheinung, für das Angelangtsein in der anderen Welt'.
[236] Bloch, 444; Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 277.
[237] Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, chap. 40.
[238] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 306–13; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 356–64.
[239] Landmann, 'Das Judentum bei Ernst Bloch und seine messianische Metaphysik', 167.
[240] Bonola, 'La nascita dell'utopia dallo spirito dell'ebraismo', 44–45.

(divine elements) scattered and entrapped within matter. Although not clear in its origin,[241] this image surely belongs to several Gnostic doctrines, as the example of Manicheism shows.[242] Before moving on to draw some conclusions on the presence of Gnostic tropes in Bloch's thought, it is necessary to make one last consideration. After the discussion of the sources, it has become clear that Gnosticism is undeniably interwoven with other doctrinal traditions. Whereas tracing a line of distinction between the origins of Jewish and Christian images is a relatively easy task, even when it comes to the assessment of unorthodox or heretical motives, the same does not apply to the demarcation of the origin of the Gnostic corpus from other religions. In part this depends on the fact that much of the Gnostic sources are Christian polemical treatises aimed at debunking their adversaries' doctrines; in part it depends on the – still debated – origin of the Jewish and Christian Gnosis itself, that too often is inextricable from the doctrinal history of the other religious traditions. A few examples showing this intertwining will suffice. First, as Altmann has shown, the rabbinic legends of Adam distinctly present Gnostic imagery.[243] Second, Scholem has brought to the attention of the presence of Gnostic teachings in the Hekhaloth literature (Jewish Merkabah mysticism).[244] Third, Scholem also opens to the possibility of a connection between the Ophites' Gnostic system and the theology of Sabbateanism,[245] and stresses the closeness of some points in Luria's cosmogonic doctrine with Basilides's one.[246] Fourth, moving on to the abovementioned Christian authors, besides Böhme's abovementioned debt to the Kabbalah,[247] his indebtedness to Gnostic doctrines has also being ascertained.[248] Fifth and last, an eclectic author such as Franz Joseph Molitor seems to consolidate all the aforementioned religious streams in his original account of Christian Kabbalah. Our attempt to distinguish the multiplicity of sources that Bloch has drawn from must therefore be considered in the light of the limitations that this feeble – if existent at all – line of demarcation between Gnosticism and other religious traditions entails. Moreover, this intertwining, this constant migration of images, tropes, mythologems from one tradition to the other indicates that a mutual contamination (or fertilization) exists at the very core of the mythological material Bloch deals with.

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[241] The derivation of this mythologem, differently adapted in Judaism, Christianity, Gnosticism, from the Stoic doctrine of the *Logos Spermatikos* has been suggested in Knipe, 'Fire'.
[242] Quispel, 'Gnosticism from Its Origins to the Middle Ages', 3513.
[243] Altmann, 'The Gnostic Background of the Rabbinic Adam Legends'.
[244] Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 65–74.
[245] Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 298.
[246] Scholem, 264.
[247] Cf. Wolfson, 'The Holy Cabala of Changes'.
[248] Gilly, 'Das Bekenntnis Zur Gnosis'; cf. also Iwersen, 'Gnosticism from the Middle Ages to the Present', 3525.

4.3. The Relevance of Gnostic Imagery in Bloch's Thought

Taking stock of all these remarks and despite the evident difficulties, it is possible to draw some conclusions on the presence of Gnostic elements in Bloch's work. It is safe to affirm that these latter, either in the form of specific images or of general pattern of thought are to be found across the whole Blochian philosophy. Yet, it is also clear that he did neither subscribe nor rely exclusively on one specific Gnostic system, but he rather employed several motives which are common to various doctrines. Besides, it must be stressed that Bloch did not embrace some of the paramount aspects of the Gnostic myth, so I deem it a misrepresentation of his though to primarily define it in Gnostic terms;[249] he rather puts forward a form of messianism infused with Gnostic hues. In this I am bound to follow other interpreters, such as Münster, Boldyrev, and Bonola. According to Münster, on the one hand the heretical mystical tradition was decisively weightier than the Gnostic one in Bloch's early works; on the other, Bloch's theoretical appropriation of religious mythologems from the Gnostic tradition excluded one of its main tenets, i.e., the strong dualism between God and matter.[250] Boldyrev shares this judgment, talking about a "gnostic style of thinking" that Bloch adopts without subscribing "to the gnostic mythology […] The gnostic myth, pompous and burdened by details, is insufficient for Bloch."[251] Glossing on Bloch's gnostic passages in the section *Symbol: die Juden*, Bonola also stressed the limitations of a "neo-marcionite interpretation of Bloch,"[252] – proposed by Taubes[253] and followed by Lellouche[254] – thus circumscribing the relevance of Marcionite Gnosis on his philosophy. To be sure, the extolling chapter entirely devoted to the Christian heretic in *Atheismus im Christentum* stands as proof of the high esteem that Marcion enjoyed in Bloch's thought. Nonetheless he is not accorded a central role in Bloch's dialectical treatment of atheism, but rather that of a corrective, a "simple signal-light" [*Signallicht*],[255] given the "abstract and often banal asceticism" [*abstrakten und so oft banalisierten Asketischen*][256] that tarnishes Marcion's preaching – and that Bloch is not willing to follow nor endorse. Let aside the disquisition on specific heresiologists and trying to ascertain the overall relevance that Gnostic sources enjoy in Bloch's utopian philosophy, one must consider them

[249] The only Blochian reader who seems to have advanced such a unilateral reading of Bloch is Coppellotti, the first translator of Bloch in Italian. Cf. Coppellotti, 'La gnosi peggiore (Die ärgste Gnosis)'.
[250] Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 129.
[251] Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries*, 96.
[252] Bloch, *Gli Ebrei, un simbolo*, 144.
[253] Taubes, 'Walter Benjamin - ein moderner Marcionit?'
[254] Lellouche, 'Les juifs dans l'utopie. Le jeune Bloch, du crypto-frankisme au nèo-marcionisme'.
[255] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, 179; Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 243.
[256] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, 176; Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 240.

in connection with the other aforementioned religious traditions, the Christian and the Jewish ones. In his selection and use of mythologems belonging to these latter, Bloch often opts for heretic or non-mainstream readings, interpretations, doctrines and images that either display a nearness with, or are directly informed by Gnosticism. In so doing, however, he does not embrace the complete rejection of materiality – and its inescapably connected ascetism – nor the characterisation of the God of exodus, the redeemer, as utterly transcendent, as 'alien'. On these two points, Bloch's philosophical system follows a rather opposite articulation, revolving around a renovated and thorough concept of matter – at the core of the historical process – and stressing the innermost divine/quasi-divine power dwelling in humankind, at the bottom of humans' soul, as Eckhardt would put it.

All in all, Bloch's multifarious collection of religious images and motives revolves around the main axis of messianism: mythologems are selected in so far as they display a future-oriented, hope-infused, radically open aspect and are coherent with the wait and active preparation of a political, social, moral and spiritual revolution at once. Around this lynchpin, Bloch accretes his philosophy of religion through a syncretistic agglutination of mythologems that are selected to functionally fit his system of utopian philosophy. Gnostic mythologems are no exception: they compose a fundamental corollary to his messianism, yet only a corollary, not the key for his philosophical appropriation of religious images. What Bloch's philosophy of religion appears to us after this discussion is, in Münster's terms, a "materialistic-religious syncretism."[257] The originality of Bloch's handling of religious images, and what distinguishes his thought from a re-instantiation of old-fashion metaphysics, lies in the way he selects, extrapolates and combines these images, all of which are somewhat loaded with emancipatory potential. Some clearly recall forms of political liberation, pertaining to the revolutionary and rebellious accounts of political theology. But there are other, no less important, forms of emancipation that Bloch is eager to point to and support: the realisation of the *homo absconditus*, the full unfolding of human potentiality is a further but essential step towards the complete disalienation of humankind.

This appropriation of elements belonging to the religious imaginary depends on a specific understanding of the sphere of politics. Moreover, this appropriation assumes the shape and contours of an operation of inheritance. Underlying these two aspects of Bloch's utopian philosophy is the all-embracing principle of hope. It is now necessary to turn our gaze to these building blocks of the utopian philosophy: the notions of politics, inheritance and hope as a

[257] Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 65.

principle. Only after this analytic discussion, one can venture further into the dialectization (put into dialectics) of religious mythologems (the peculiar dynamic of religious imagery found in Bloch's works and its specific function) to draw some conclusions about the specificities of Bloch's messianism.

Chapter III. The Theoretical Scaffolding of Bloch's Practical Philosophy

After having given an account of the ferment experienced by the German-Jewish intellectuals in the first two decades of the last century and having analytically displayed the multifarious sources of Bloch's religious imagery – hinting at its possible (or certain) sources –, we now need to turn our sight to the main theoretical pillars that sustain Blochian philosophy. Given the evident political connotation of messianic references, as seen with the emergence and establishment of the concept, it is necessary to clarify the semantic value of the 'political' in Bloch, defining its boundaries with respect to the 'meta-political' and the 'pre-political'. I will show that Bloch's reshaping of religious elements finds its proper space at the borders, so to say, of the 'political,' and only by means of what in his philosophy is referred to as an act of 'inheritance', religious elements are still valuable in a self-proclaimed atheist philosophy. With the distinction between two movements of 'inheritance' (separation and re-composition), the propensity to systematic thought in Bloch's philosophy will emerge. Core to Bloch's system, the notion of '*Prinzip*' deserves a closer look, to which the last part of the chapter is devoted. It will become clear that inherited religious materials serve Bloch's philosophy as the figurative counterpart of the principle, obtaining a central role in his system.

1. Bloch's Concept of the 'Political'

A widely recognizable characteristic of messianism, as has been shown in Chapter I, is its emergence out of a socio-political conjuncture negatively marked by a form of distress that can even reach a desperate direness, and calls for either an intervention into, or an escape from the hardships of, the experienced reality. Be this as it may, a strong dissatisfaction with the *status quo* leads to an accentuation of antagonism, to an emphasis on the intrinsic polemical traits of the messianic trope. Armed with this stress, messianic imagery happens to be conjured against the current configuration of power to destitute it. Besides that, it is also invoked to devise an imaginary but still possible future scenario, an utterly new landscape of liberated humanity. For this reason, Bloch's utopian spirit or his principle of hope find in messianism the primary religious framework they can be referred to. It is the fundamental axis of Bloch's philosophy of religion, and all the other elements are correctives or complements to this main trend.

At the beginning of Bloch's philosophy lays the instance of the negative, the *Nicht*, which is at the same time the extreme proximity of our conscience to ourselves[1] (or: the 'darkness of the lived moment')[2] and the state of dearth, of lack, which is dialectically overturned in the desiderative push to exit the aforementioned state itself. In this latter meaning, the negativity which characterizes the origin can also be referred to the social, economic and political adversities in which the subject finds itself – such as the material political situation in which Bloch operated. A lack of justice and a dearth of freedom and equality are themselves immediately a call to respond and rectify the wrongs of the present; in this regard, they define the conditions at the starting point of the political endeavour. Within the multiple forms of political work, which is always informed by the dichotomy theory-praxis, philosophical or, more broadly, intellectual production plays the crucial role of providing an accurate reading of the situation and identifying the responsibilities of the various actors on stage. Bloch's essays of the 1910s are no exception; for example, in *Die Blühende Spiesser* (1911) denouncing the meanness of the petty bourgeoisie at the time of Imperial Germany, depicting Wilhelm "half as crowned salesman, half as actor of power;"[3] or condemning the stupidity of WWI, "the break-out of the most primitive impulses to power,"[4] in *Die undiskutierbare Krieg* (1914/15); and even after the war, in *Jugend, Hindenburg und Republik* (1919), Bloch decries the "stupid *hybris*"[5] of Hindenburg during WWI, but bitterly observes the incomprehensibility of the German youth, so prone to welcome him as new president; in the same essay, the Social Democratic party is also anathematized, seen just as another hindrance to the realization of a socialist society, depicted in terms of an "ecumene of the spirit" or "Creator Spiritus."[6] Bloch's efforts will continue with the absolute condemnation of Nazism, but after WWII even the DDR is not spared criticism – while the constant denouncement of the iniquities of capitalism imbues almost every political text he ever wrote. The negativity of the present, the *Nicht*, is often understood politically, but the existentialist tune that not seldom accompanies it and the religious references, which are to be found even in an essay on the new-born Weimar Republic, pose the question of the boundaries of the political sphere in Bloch writings.

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[1] Bloch, *Experimentum mundi*, 69.
[2] Bloch, Philosophische Aufsätze zur objektiven Phantasie, 158; Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. II, pp. 295-298; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 343–49.
[3] Bloch, *Politische Messungen, Pestzeit, Vormärz*, 15: 'halb als gekrönter Geschäftsreisender, halb als Schauspieler der Macht.'
[4] Bloch, 22: 'Ausbruch des primitisten Triebst nach Macht.'
[5] Bloch, 64: 'stupiden Hybris.'
[6] Bloch, 70: 'Ökumene des Geistes,' 'Creator spiritus.'

It is possible to approach the problem of the 'political' in Bloch by the observation of what he discards, opposes and sets as polemical adversary in his works. It will not be surprising, at this point, to notice the deep interconnectedness of the political and theological spheres. While in the essays preceding the publication of his first book, Bloch already addressed several political issues, it is in *Geist der Utopie* that the connection of mysticism, existential analysis, artistic production and politics comes to its first degree of maturation. One of the expressions of this intertwining is the concept of a *ritardando*, a delaying hindrance which prevents humans to achieve their utopic goals and which is charged with a devilish connotation. Towards the conclusion of the book, at the last section, *The countenance of the Will*, Bloch proposes the ultimate goal he envisaged for human life, an inner encounter with our Self and a correspondent outer expression of it in a renovated social world. To designate this last achievement, he summons once again the Christian imaginary of the apocalypse and the *Parousia*:

> precisely that too was messianically meant by the Second Coming, and in an explosion it flies at the outside, the put-in-the-way, Satan the Demon of Death, the encrusted *ritardando* of this world, everything that is not of us or even obstruct us, of the plural Singular who hopes for himself, of our heavenly glory; while inside, in the Gothic sanctum of the Self-Encounter, this entire, spacious and apparently so very real world will itself one day just hang on the wall like the image of some innocuous memory.[7]

The Satanic element, the last refractory force which opposes both the attainment of the Self – of our 'countenance' – and the parallel and consequent realization of a just and free society – the 'Kingdom' –, bears the epithet of *ritardando*, Latin for 'delaying.' The implicit reference here is to an ancient concept, developed within the Christian tradition of the Church and whose first appearance dates back to the Pauline letters. In 2 Thessalonians 2: 6-7, Paul uses the term κατέχων ("the one who withholds"), to designate an entity (something or someone) that – within the frame of Christian eschatology – prevents the manifestation of the Antichrist and therefore impedes the transition to the 'latter times,' to the apocalypse and to the Kingdom of God. In Bloch's eschatological messianism, the apocalypse – the disintegration of the current unjust world – is necessary and desirable to welcome the awaited Kingdom of freedom and the instauration of a new society. What is then the κατέχων in Bloch's reading? A convincing

[7] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 277; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 344: 'Auch eben das war mit dem Widerkehr Christi messianisch bedeutet, und in Explosion fliegt auf das draußen, in den Weg gestelltes, Satan der Todesdämon, das Krustenhafte Ritardando der Welt, alles, was nicht von uns, von dem vielen Einzelnen, sich Erhoffenden, von unserer himmlischen Herrlichkeit ist oder sie gar behindert; indes drinnen, in der gotischen Stube der Selbstbegegnung, diese ganze weite und scheinbar so sehr reale Welt dereinst nur selber wie ein Bild unschädlicher Erinnerung and den Wänden hängt.'

account of it is that which has been famously given by Carl Schmitt in *Nomos of the Earth*: "The Christian empire was not eternal. It always had its own end and that of the present eon in view. Nevertheless, it was capable of being a historical power. The decisive historical concept of this continuity was that of the restrainer, *katechon*."[8] This latter, the *ritardando* of Bloch, corresponds to nothing but a "belief that a restrainer holds back the end of the world provides the only bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events and a tremendous historical monolith like that of the Christian empire of the Germanic kings."[9] In short, the κατέχων is praised by Schmitt, a reactionary Catholic, as the successful commingling of a theological doctrine and its political implementation, which in this case was to be found in the celebrated – and longed for – Christian Empire. Although the book was published only in 1950, this topic was already fermenting far earlier, in 1922, as he addressed the question of *political theology*.[10] There seems to be an evident equivalence of the Schmittian κατέχων to the Blochian *ritardando*, with the sole difference that while the former advocates for a great return to the vertical hierarchies of the Medieval Christian Empire, lest its absence determines the falling apart of any form of political order – the supreme threat of Western Civilization –, the latter embraces the destruction of any hindrance as the only means for the advent of a newly established socio-political order. In both cases, the *ritardando* embodies the quintessence of the political sphere, either to be solidly reaffirmed or to be wiped out with the apocalypse.

Nonetheless, an observation should be made to better understand the opposition of these two stances and the general cultural and political climate of the 1910s and 1920s in Germany. While these thinkers are fiercely opposed to each other with regards to the conservation of a hierarchical structure of the society and gleaned elements from theological doctrines to back their respectively opposite positions, they are both antagonists to the construct of the modern liberal state as it has been envisaged by the theorists of the *Rechtstaat* and the proponents of legal positivism. The former doctrine, with a tradition dating back at least to the French and German Enlightenment, has at its core the self-limitation of the power or dominion (*Herrschaft*) of the state and the consequent safeguarding of the rights of the individual. An "irreducibly liberal and statist concept,"[11] the *Rechtstaat* affirms the principles of constitutionalism and a general primacy of the law over the discretion of the individuals, and

[8] Schmitt, The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum, 59.
[9] Schmitt, 60.
[10] Schmitt, *Political Theology*.
[11] Raynaud, 'Rule of Law', 912.

the autonomy of administrative law. In its 'social' variant, it was advanced, among others, by jurist and SPD politician Hermann Heller who, as a member of the *Hofgeismarer Kreis of Jungsozialisten*, opposed the *Rechtstaat* on the one hand to the "empty nomocracy"[12] of Hans Kelsen's legal positivism and on the other hand to the proponents of the dictatorship in Germany, within a historical context where the rising of fascist regimes in Europe was threatening the basic democratic tenets. Despite the relative affinities of political leanings – both belonged to the liberal tradition –, the formalist conception of Kelsen's positivism was contrary to the *Rechtstaat* doctrine, which it claimed to propose a pleonasm, since "a state not governed by law is unthinkable."[13] Kelsen in fact stated the identity of state and law, with the law thought as perfectly 'pure' – here to be intended in a Kantian sense – and constituting a system of jurisprudence which was therefore as much rationally constructed as devoid of content. Both the rule of law and legal positivism were sharply criticized by Schmitt, who considered liberal theories as an attempt to neutralize or de-politicize a theory of law. The extreme was for Schmitt that of Kelsen, who even attempted to get rid of the concept of sovereignty[14] – an attempt to which Schmitt responded with the diametrically opposed affirmation of the centrality of sovereignty, understood as the ability to "decide on the state of exception."[15] Against any formalism, Schmitt stressed the discretion of the sovereign decision as the quintessential element of a political system, based not on a supposed legitimacy but rather on the affirmation of *Herrschaft*, upon which the law depends, rather than being its limitation. The state apparatus built on this conception of power is, in Schmitt's view, the sole guarantee for the conservation of order, which is implemented by the Hobbesian complementarity of protection and obedience. It is worth noticing that, while describing the so-called "crystal of Hobbes", Schmitt observes that Hobbes' reiterated proclamation "Jesus is the Christ", an affirmation of the truth of public faith – which is then interpreted by those who have the *auctoritas* and are therefore able to command and be obeyed – can be placed at the top side of his political system, which is consequently "open to transcendence."[16] The transcendence here, as will be clarified in the following section, means the openness of the system to a foundation which is not immanent to the given set of norms. This means that not only the formalistic reductions of the law fail in acknowledging the need for this transcendent

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[12] Heller, 'Rechtsstaat or Dictatorship?', 132.
[13] Kelsen, *Pure Theory of Law*, 312.
[14] Kelsen, Das Problem Der Souveränität Und Die Theorie Des Völkerrechts.
[15] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.
[16] Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, 2008, n. 53.

foundation, hence slipping in aporetic constructs, but also that a political theology is perfectly fitting to understand the groundings of modern politics. At this point, Schmitt's juxtaposition of the state and what for him is the much needed κατέχων – of a modern political construct and a theological notion – does not seem too far-fetched.

It is possible to affirm that these three distinct doctrines of the law (*Rechtstaat*, legal positivism and theory of dictatorship), co-existent and contending for their primacy in the Weimar Republic, all ultimately belong to the wide conception of modern political science, whose main tenets have been firstly proposed by Hobbes himself. All these three doctrines as a matter of fact discuss the nature and legitimacy of *Herrschaft*, but this latter is understood not as an exertion of power "of man over man" – whereby there is a natural predisposition to obey or command –, but rather as the sovereignty of the state and its institutions down on all individuals, conceived (for the first time) as equal in rights and free in their decision to be subjected to the rule of the state.[17] To sum up, sovereignty belongs to the people and the people consists of individuals, all equal in their rights, but the exertion of sovereignty itself is delegated to a representative, be it the parliament or a dictator. It seems that this succinct but all-including definition of the 'political' is the one that Bloch has implicitly in mind when he rejects all these political doctrines – in this sense, a rejection of politics as such –, to which, particularly in *Geist der Utopie* and in *Thomas Münzer*, he opposes his concrete utopia.

In a work written after he came back from his exile in the USA, *Naturrecht und menschliche Würde*, Bloch confronts the problem of the value of the doctrines of natural law and dedicates some space to Schmitt's and Kelsen's doctrines. Although it is a relatively late work, published in 1961, it is useful to refer to the reflections it contains, since they are systematizations of early intuitions of the young Bloch. In this book, Schmitt's political doctrine is not spared the harshest critique, being attributed the epithet of "perfect fascist anti-natural law."[18] Schmitt's position is opposed not only because his decisionism replaces even the pale formality of late bourgeois natural law, letting any possible bulwark against the brutality of the (fascist) state crumble; but also because the very core of his philosophy of law, his "concept of the political" relies on the distinction between friend and enemy – and with it to the potentiality of war: the "real possibility of physical killing."[19] In short, politics as such is for Schmitt ultimately grounded on war. Bloch radically denies this claim; we have already seen his stances against the interventionist positions of many intellectuals at the outbreak of WWI. To be sure, it is not

[17] cf. Duso, 'Il potere e la nascita dei concetti politici moderni'.
[18] Bloch, Naturrecht und menschliche Würde, chap. 18.
[19] Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, 2008, 33.

the use of violence that he rejects. In fact, as he pointed out in a brief article published on the 17th August 1918 on the Swiss journal *Freie Zeitung*, the fight against injustice (*Kampf*) is an integral component of political life: “the fight, the sacrifice of the current generation, bears fruit in so far as in later years, especially the generations to come may not inevitably experience the same misery again.”[20] Only by these extreme means it is possible to attain “the only possible constructive horizon for future peace, the social renewal of the world.”[21] It is rather the war (*Krieg*) – the “ruthlessly crushing force of the state developed into military organization”[22] – what must be totally rejected. As the *Kern* of politics, Bloch poses not the war but rather the struggle for the utopian realization of peace and human dignity. This radically other foundation of politics leads Bloch to a theoretical rejection of the other two aforementioned liberal doctrines of law as well. To their statist stance, Bloch opposes the Marxist stance that the state as an institution shall eventually be extinguished. Moreover, the safeguard of private property as a fundamental right, which liberal doctrines of law do not renunciate, is denounced as the attempt of maintaining the privilege of ruling classes. With the retrospective sight of his 1961 book, the doctrine of legal positivism, although firmly liberal, is criticized for clinging to the arid primacy of pure law, abstracted from the content of the obligation itself. To this absolute legalism Bloch opposed the “sense of justice”[23] as the grounding pillar of the edifice of a legal philosophy. Kelsen’s “pure law”, a formalistic account of jurisprudence, is also completely at odds with Bloch’s stance in favour of a form of partiality in each branch of knowledge. One can compare Kelsen’s telling statement: “the function of the science of law is not the evaluation of its subject, but its value-free description”[24] with Bloch’s considerations on neutrality and partiality from a 1951 essay: “Thinking must be and always has been partisan [...] On the contrary, the belief that it is impartial has particularly partisan roots. It is precisely one of the secrets of the rule of bourgeois power to present itself as neutral.” [25] In so far as, for the proponents of legal positivism, a system of norms lays at the grounding core of political life, and this latter is determined by “value-free” descriptions, Bloch’s accent on partiality – an

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[20] Bloch, *Kampf, nicht Krieg*, 316: ‘Der Kampf, das Opfer des jetzigen Geschlechts, geht ja gerade darauf, daß es in späteren Jahren, daß vor allem die kommenden Geschlechter nicht das gleiche Elend unweigerlich wieder erleben mögen.’

[21] Bloch, 315: ‘Der einzig möglichen Bauhorizont künftigen Friedens, sozialer Erneuerung der Welt.’

[22] Bloch, 316: ‘die rücksichtslos auspressende Kraft des zur Militärorganisation gewordenen Staates’.

[23] Cf. Bloch, Naturrecht und menschliche Würde, 11 ff.

[24] Kelsen, Pure Theory of Law, 68.

[25] Bloch, *Philosophische Aufsätze zur objektiven Phantasie*, 330–31: ‘Das Denken muß parteilich sein und ist es immer gewesen […] Im Gegenteil, der Glaube, unparteilich zu sein, hat besonders parteiische Wurzeln […] Es gehört gerate zu den Herrschaftsgeheimnissen der bürgerlichen Mach, sich als neutral hinzustellen.’

inclination "that belongs to the real front of the object world,"[26] which is for him proper objectivity – is an opposition in principle to their conception of the 'political' itself.

In short, Bloch's account of politics stands out as a steadfast opposition to the main doctrines of law which were debated at the time of the Weimar Republic. He firmly opposes the Schmittian account of dictatorship and its concept of the 'political' based on the possibility of war;[27] at the same time, Bloch rejects the liberal doctrines of *Rechtsstaat* and legal positivism, denouncing their formalism and supposed neutrality as surreptitiously backing the interests of the bourgeoise class, when not directly assessing them as a form of "irrationalism.[28] In so doing, Bloch perfectly embodies the role of the *pariah*, "radical[ly] questioning […] the societal values that devalued his otherness"[29]. From the marginality into which he – along with his generation of German Jewish intellectuals – was forced to retreat, Bloch embraced and reactivated several Marxist principles in his redefinition of the political sphere, not least an eagerness for the revolution and the extinction of the state. Both these latter stances are re-thought in a 'romantic anti-capitalist' way, setting forth the political goal in the *form* of the community, radically different from that of the state. And while the state was the only conceivable structure within which the 'political' can be construed, according to the main doctrines of law, in rejecting the state form Bloch renounces to the 'political' as such. His attention is rather devoted to the fringes of politics, *in se* external to the 'political' *strictu sensu*. While politics must be rejected in toto, the same does not hold for its foundation and even more so for its overcoming. It is in this sense that the connection of messianic motives and revolutionary politics should be read, at least insofar as the former refer to a principle of communal life or to a utopian depiction of a future society. In 1921, Bloch published his second work, devoted to the figure of Thomas Müntzer. This book, imbued with the enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution, ennobled the person of the early-modern Christian heretic preacher in order to inspire the current generation of socialists in their struggles. The bold encouragement drawn from the preacher's sermons reaches its peak in merging the revolutionary and apocalyptical strivings, pointing towards a sphere that lies beyond the 'political' as it is customarily conceived:

> This religious world smokes the dawn of the apocalypse, and it is precisely at the apocalypse that it gains its ultimate dimension, its absolute truth, the metapolitical, even

[26] Bloch, 339: '[...] die Partelichkeit, welche der wirklichen Front der Objektwelt zugehört.'
[27] Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, 2008, 28.
[28] Bloch, Naturrecht und menschliche Würde, chap. 18.
[29] Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 36; Cf. also Arendt, The Jew as Pariah, 144.

> meta-religious principle of all revolution: the advent of the freedom of the children of God.[30]

This principle is used here to designate the absolute otherness of the political form that ought to be aimed at, a specific form of the communal life which finds its place "beyond law and state"[31] – namely: in the community. It is clearly a different principle the one emerging here and placing itself over against the 'political'. The meta-political principle comes to signify the utopian space of the community, which takes the place of the ultimate goal in every struggle and retrospectively defines the orientation of any meaningful political activity. The refusal of bourgeois politics and the embracing of apocalyptic motives go hand in hand and define the theological-political attitude of the early Bloch. The battle towards a radically different form of life, however, needs to be sustained by a momentous thrust, an impulse that determines the endeavour to operate the desired personal and social change. This potent drive, which is presupposed in any activity, constitutes thus a pre-political element, marked by the affect of hope. In the second edition of *Geist der Utopie* (1923), Bloch for the first time deals with a topic which will become almost a constant in his future production: the relation of Marxism and religion. In this frame, he explicitly poses three religious elements (three *mythologems*) at the basis of any political and cultural effort:

> Within such a functional correlation of disburdening and spirit, Marxism and religion, united in the will of the Kingdom, flows the ultimate master system of all tributaries: the Soul, the Messiah and the Apocalypse, which represents the act of awakening in totality, provide the final impulses to do and to know, form the *a priori* of all politics and culture.[32]

In the systematisation of these youthful intuitions provided in his *Prinzip Hoffnung*, Bloch will specify that religion is a form of hope not yet entirely self-understood. Still, it is this hope at a germinal stage, this early disposition, the one that allows humans to embark on the expedition towards the revolutionary goal. It must be noted that the pre- and the meta-political elements do not stand alone at all. On the contrary, it is precisely their interwoven nature that accounts

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[30] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer*, 210: 'Dieser Glaubenswelt raucht rein das Morgenrot der Apokalypse entgegen, und genau an der Apokalypse gewinnt sie ihr letztes Maß, ihre absolute Wahrheit, das metapolitische, ja metareligiöse Prinzip aller Revolution: den Anbruch der Freiheit der Kinder Gottes.'

[31] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, 179: 'einer rechts- und staatslosen reinen Liebesgemeinschaft.'

[32] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 278; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 346: 'In solcher Funktionsbeziehung zwischen Entlastung und Geist, Marxismus und Religion, geeint im Willen zum Reich, fließt sämtlichen Nebenströmen ihr letzthinniges Hauptsystem: die Seele, der Messias, die Apokalypse, als welche den Akt des Erwachens in Totalität darstellt, geben die letzten Tat- und Erkenntnisimpulse, bilden das Apriori aller Politik und Kultur.'

for the theoretical scaffolding that keeps Bloch's philosophy together and builds his political edifice. In Bloch's words:

The Omega of the Where To explains itself not with reference to a primally been Alpha, supposedly most real of all, of the Where From, of the origin, but on the contrary: this origin explains itself first with reference to the Novum of the end, indeed, as an origin still essentially unrealized in itself, it first enters reality with this Ultimum.[33]

In regards to the fringes of the 'political', the Where To – or meta-political element – assumes the value of the communal form of living, freed from alienation and oppression and the constraints of the state; the Where From – or pre-political element – consists in the potent thrust humans are capable of. This latter, however, is not the primal element, but is nourished by the hope for the attainment of the Ultimum – in this context: the "freedom of the children of God", or: the end of alienation. To sum up, Bloch's confrontation with the major doctrines of law debated at the time of the Weimar's Republic can be synthetized in an utter rejection of the 'political' in a restrictive meaning. Opposite and complementary to it, the exploration of the fringes of the 'political', the pre-political thrust and the meta-political utopian form, seem to be a paramount concern in Bloch's philosophy and represent the spaces where religious elements – especially his revised messianism – are mobilized.

Weaving together the threads of the pre- and the meta-political, hope is manifest as the pivotal principle of the whole system of Bloch's philosophy, and finds expression most noteworthy in his materialism and his philosophy of religion. His original account of matter, whereby this latter is determined by the self-shaping movement and the attainment of form without an external demiurgical agent, although of central importance in the overall economy of his thought, cannot find a proper discussion here. Bloch's usage of religious constructs, on the other hand, needs to be addressed properly if one is to understand the relevance of messianism in his philosophy. As Wayne Hudson pointed out, "Bloch's originality is to interpret the counter-factual excess of religion as secretly wise, and as potentially constitutive of theory-praxis."[34] The investigation of this potentiality requires an enquiry into one of the most original theoretical devices Bloch developed throughout his whole production, namely the notion of *inheritance*.

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[33] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 204; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 235: 'Das Omega des Wohin erläutert sich nicht an einem urgewesenen, angeblich allerrealsten Alpha des Woher, des Ursprungs, sondern konträr: dieser Ursprung erläutert sich erst am Novum des Endes, ja er tritt als ein an sich noch wesentlich unverwirklichter erst mit diesem Ultimum in Realität.'

[34] Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*, 184.

2. The Need for an 'Inheritance'

Within the frame of the sociology of knowledge, cultural material comprises values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions that are shared by a more or less extended group of individuals and contribute to mould their social identity. Among sociologists, Durkheim was the first to propose to subsume all these resources under a single concept, the 'collective consciousness', which operates as a unifying force in a determinate society.[35] Some decades later, Halbwachs, one of Durkheim's students, addressed the problem of the relation between the identity of a determinate society and its cultural tenets from a diachronic perspective. In an essay firstly published in 1925, he devised the concept of 'collective memory' to describe the handing over of the cultural material from one generation to the following one.[36] Jan Assmann has noted the similarities between the theorizations of Halbwachs and art historian Aby Warburg who during the same period constructed the concept of 'social memory'. Intending memory as a form of contemporized past, it is possible to investigate its relation on the one hand with cultural constructs (in their objectified form, e.g.: a text, a manuscript, an artwork) and on the other with the societal form that a determinate group of people assumes. Assmann schematically summarises: "Halbwachs thematizes the nexus between memory and group, Warburg the one between memory and the language of cultural forms."[37] Using the concept of 'cultural memory', the relation of these three elements – memory, society and culture – are at stake. Assmann explains:

> The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose "cultivation" serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity […] Which past becomes evident in that heritage and which values emerge in its identificatory appropriation tells us much about the constitution and tendencies of a society.[38]

While both Halbwachs and Warburg credit Durkheim for his preliminary investigations in these interwoven elements – the term 'social memory' made its appearance in Durkheim's 1923 Kreutzlingen lecture[39] – it was their development of this idea that helped question the monolithic description of a society's culture, and direct the attention towards the processes of

[35] Durkheim, The Division of Labour in Society.
[36] Halbwachs, Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire.
[37] Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', 129.
[38] Assmann, 132–33.
[39] Assmann, 125, note 1.

its historical development. Cultural heritage can be seen as built up from a series of everyday communications, a continuous exchange of information amongst members of a society. This subjective and psychological perspective accounts for the share of memories one individual comes to receive and hand over to someone younger – as it is the case with oral history. Halbwachs' collective memory is thus composed. It is possible, however, to take into account the cultural objects which mirror these memories by solidifying them in texts, artifacts and artworks; these latter, considered in their own right, form a collective legacy coming from the past and ready to be re-appropriated.

The crystallization of tenets, beliefs and values in objectified culture started becoming a matter of interest for Bloch since the late 1920s, when he developed the concept of 'inheritance' with reference to the cultural material each generation finds available to utilise and refer to. The kind of legacy Bloch has in mind is constituted of artistic, religious, scientific and philosophical references, which in turn exert their influence on values and beliefs of a determinate group of people, spatially and chronologically determined. While Durkheim's 'collective consciousness' indicates a shared understanding of social norms, Bloch's 'inheritance' rather comprises the literary, artistic and religious elements which lay behind this set of social norms, both reflecting and shaping them and their correspondent behaviour. Of striking importance in Bloch's 'inheritance' is the fact that it can (and should) be partially appropriated and is liable to be reworked and originally reshaped. In this sense he was no different from Halbwachs in his belief that "No memory can preserve the past. What remains is only that "which society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference."''[40] But while for Halbwachs – and for cultural memory studies scholars who posthumously drew upon its concepts[41] – one of the main aims of this reconstruction is that of avoiding the repetition of past mistakes, thus escaping the condemnation to relive the past, Bloch's re-appropriated inheritance is directed to the reawakening of the emancipatory potential of forgotten, neglected or overlooked elements (whose relevance often seems to have faded) coming from or belonging to the past. The concept of inheritance made its appearance in his *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (1935) and is used not so much with a descriptive value as with a normative one, to directly intervene in the present moment. The book, published in 1935, is a collection of essays mostly directed at the question why the NSPD has risen and seized power in Germany, with a focus on the imaginary which stood at the background of the Nazi enterprise. Vincent Geoghegan, a Bloch

[40] Assmann, 130; cf. Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*.
[41] cf. Harth, The Invention of Cultural Memory, Preface.

scholar, has pointed out the peculiar take of Bloch on the issue: as in Marxist analysis three consecutive stages of emergence, maturity and collapse of the modes of production can be observed, when it comes to the handing over of cultural heritage, a three-staged process of rise, flourishing and decline of epochs is recognizable. Now,

> The most palpable and energetic development of this heritage occurs with the revolutionary rise of a class, when there is a process of wholesale appropriation, transformation and further creation of potent symbolism and imagery. The great cultural efflorescence at the time of the French Revolution is deemed to be a case point. The resulting surplus is in turn available to the new revolutionary class – the proletariat. […] In the period of decline, dominant ideologies fall apart, and the new (together with the new within the old) emerges from the wreckage.[42]

This very process of emergence stands as the main focus of Bloch's *Erbschaft* whereby not only some of the cultural references of the Nazis are carefully examined, but also an alternative appropriation and re-reading of the same elements is devised. In other words, the available cultural material of an epoch is always liable of multiple appropriations – and the selection, interpretation and dissemination of it via the various media (newspapers, journals, posters, artworks, radio, cinema, etc.) are the concrete actions of a real cultural battle, where a coherent, convincing and potent imaginary is at stake. Nonetheless, this direct intervention in the cultural conflict of the late years of the Weimar Republic was not the only aim of the book, especially considering that towards the early 1930s it started to be evident for leftist intellectuals that their defeat was imminent and this outcome difficult to overturn. Despite this, Bloch claimed that a mindful scrutiny of these processes in a period of decline could still yield some good results. As he stated in a late interview:

> I attempted in Erbschaft then, to point up and capitalise on those things from our own time from which one can learn, not just for propaganda purposes. I was particularly interested in what has been abandoned. Above all, no thought has been given to the fact that a heritage can be taken not only from periods of revolutionary ascendancy (hence the word Inheritance ['Erbshaft'] in the title – the expression comes from Engels, 'cultural heritage' ['Kulturerbe'], and it is not philistine in origin), and not only from cultural 'golden ages', but that we can and must become the inheritors of periods of so called decadence.[43]

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[42] Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch*, 50.
[43] Phelan, 'Ernst Bloch's "Golden Twenties"', 100; Cf. the original in Bloch and Traub, 'Gespräch über Ungleichzeitigkeit', 5–6.

The task, if not the categorical imperative of becoming inheritors can be fulfilled by the double movement which composes the act of inheritance itself: a diabolic movement and a movement of *montage*. In the 1934 preface to his *Erbschaft*, an overtly Marxist text, Bloch stresses the possibility of dialectically utilising portions of the bourgeoisie's heritage, provided that the acquisition and use of that material be *diabolisch*, diabolical. The same preface, perhaps the text where the concept of inheritance is described in the clearest, although concise, form, concludes with a task expressed in metaphorical language: the Marxist ought to enter the bourgeois' land – or, better, to embark themselves on the same ship, the ship of transition and passage to the next epoch. The self-assigned task of the book is that of making sure that this be the very last journey of the bourgeoisie, the last time this ship sets out.[44] In this context, again Bloch stresses the adverb *diabolisch* to describe the only attitude of the Marxist in embarking on this ship. Looking at the etymology of the word (diabolic, from ancient Greek διαβάλλω; from δια-, "through", and βάλλω, "I throw": strictly, "I slander, I calumniate"; loosely, "I cut through, I divide, I separate"), the attitude Bloch suggested to keep comes to stand in a new light. In dealing with the cultural material we might decide to inherit, one should always separate, within the whole *corpus*, what ought from what ought not be acquired. This separation of the single element from the mass of material in which it is embedded and obfuscated, soiled or tarnished (and thus made ineffective) is the first and crucial movement of the process of inheritance. The division produced in the cultural material allows us to find relevant shards even in traditions which are not usually considered 'progressive' or 'revolutionary', thus preventing the complete disposal of some significant contents. In the case of religious elements, Bloch suggests removing the mythological shell, the exterior casing in which the potential is lodged: there is the need to get rid of the myth so that, through an enlightening movement, the potentiality of the real content can be unleashed. Sometimes, this movement may involve a reading of some contents against the grain, as is the case with heretical interpretations of Biblical texts and images, a reading which can be seen as defaming or even perverting the original meaning – and in this sense altogether diabolical.

This first movement, however, is not sufficient to fulfil the task of inheritance: a creative re-assembly of the selected fragments is necessary. The extracted and salvaged elements are not recovered in the place they were before: this is why *inheritance* is not a conservative or merely restorative approach to cultural history. In fact, these elements are displaced and rearranged so as to compose a new configuration. The creativity of the philosopher (his 'objective phantasy',

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[44] Bloch, Erbschaft dieser Zeit, Vorwort.

in Bloch's terms) or of whatever subject acts in history, allows them to devise a completely new scenario, where every recouped element is found in a different place, finally displaying its full potential. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Bloch's main concern was that of curbing the rising influence of the Hitlerian supporters by confiscating, so to say, what the Nazis had previously purloined from ancient traditions and cast into the new forms of the third Reich and of the propaganda of *Blut und Boden*, blood and soil. Bloch claims, for instance, that this fervour and attachment to old customs and lifestyles can be found in 'romantic anticapitalism' – here he uses a Lukacsian formulation –, an attitude imbued with a sense of nostalgia. This sight directed to the past, far off from a merely restorative impulse, could be symptomatic of a sense of longing for a completely different life; this feeling could be – as Bloch stated already in his *Geist der Utopie* – a nostalgia for the "Land that we all are:"[45] it is not restorative as such and must be re-appropriated, together with all the imagery that it carries with. In short, there is a utopian element in this longing for a different life which should be snatched from the fist of the Nazis and used for the progressive purpose of building a society different from the capitalist one. The reorganization of the cultural heritage takes necessarily the form of a *montage*, very like that of photography or of cinema. It is not by chance that the third part of his *Erbschaft* is devoted to the inspection of "Upper middle-class, objectivity and montage"[46] and the duty of the Marxist, the duty of the worker as well as of the intellectual, is that of "pillaging the ancient and insert it into the montage of the new"[47]. An analysis of the layout of German cities is set out amongst a discussion about expressionism and various essays about theatre, surrealism and philosophy – all *loci* where the composition of the material plays a crucial role. Bloch believed it possible to abstain from trivial practices of montage, rather intending with it – as Germanist McBride pointed out – an "analytical, mediated practice that refunctionalized the fragments from the old order in interim constructions charged with critical insight—a practice inaugurated by Expressionism and surrealism and explicitly theorized by Bertolt Brecht"[48].

Broadening the picture and leaving the specific focus on Weimar Germany and its debates on aesthetics, the process of inheritance finds application to a variety of different cultural contents, not least to the cumbersome but fruitful millenarian Jewish and Christian traditions. Tales, myths, narratives, images belonging to various religious movements pertaining to the Judeo-Christian strand are fragments that can be extrapolated and re-assembled in a different shape,

[45] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 202; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 255: 'Land, das wir alle sind'.
[46] Bloch, Erbschaft dieser Zeit, 207–409.
[47] Bloch, 208–12.
[48] McBride, 'Conclusion', 179.

without losing their original power, on the contrary: expressing it better. Anson Rabinbach noted that "The heritage of the scientific epoch is not merely the extinction of the authentic ethos of religion, but rather the possibility of its secularization, and precisely because religion is otherworldly, the power of myth and utopia can be restored to this world with hope as the recurrent principle."[49] At this point, however, a distinction should be drawn between secularization and inheritance.

2.1 Secularization

The term secularization, which originally meant the return of a member of the clergy to the lay life, as it is well known, during the 17th century started to signify the appropriation of ecclesiastical demesnes and goods by members of the civil society. During the 19th century up until today, it indicates at large the process of divestment of power of the Church, both in terms of a loss of legal rights or a diminished cultural influence. The analysis of this process has yielded a variety of interpretations, some of them in utter contrast with each other. One of the most relevant thinkers who addressed the issue of secularization with specific regard to the developments of modern philosophy was Karl Löwith. His main thesis was that the philosophy of history devised by German Classical Idealism, as well as the idea of progress found in the enlightenment are both secularised forms of a theology of history and more specifically of Christian eschatology.[50] Since the Marxist philosophy of history is built on the Hegelian dialectics, Marxism as such would also be, in a derivative form, a secularization of the Christian aim towards the salvation of humankind. Löwith is sharply – although briefly – criticized by Bloch in a chapter of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, where he reads Löwith's thesis as a form of genealogy according to which Marxism would be unmasked as a form of plagiarism of the Judeo-Christian messianic doctrines – and therefore deprived of vigour and value.[51] Another relevant account of secularization is the one provided by Max Weber in his well-known analysis of the capitalist tenets. In his view, the puritan ascesis – one of the characteristic features of Calvinist ethics – is secularised in the capitalistic morality of labour, whose spirit reflects all the austere tenets of Protestantism.[52] At the background of this reading there was the conviction that Western society was undergoing an inevitable and progressive process of "disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung der Welt*).[53] This concept, borrowed from

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[49] Rabinbach, 'Unclaimed Heritage', 9–10.
[50] Cf. Löwith, Meaning in History.
[51] Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1602–28.
[52] Cf. Weber, Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus.
[53] Cf. Weber, Geistige Arbeit als Beruf.

Schiller,[54] was used to describe the unidirectional and universal tendency of modern societies to refuse magical and mythological explanations of reality and embrace scientific rationality. The increasing intellectualization of the society implies, as Weber puts it, “the knowledge or the belief that […] there are in principle no mysterious, unpredictable powers at play, that – in principle – one can master all things by reckoning. But that means: the disenchantment of the world.”[55] The transition from an irrational culture, where magic and divination rule, to a rational one, where modern science is entrusted with the task of explaining reality, has affected theology as well. Rudolf Bultmann provides a significant example of an attempt to maintain the value of theology while at the same time embracing modernity and its process of rationalisation. In his view, Christian revelation should not be intended as directed at an external object, as bearing a vision of the world, but rather as referred to the existential life of the believer. Were it related to an explanation of worldly affairs – were it to be understood as objective –, it would be but a meaningless myth, outdone by rational explanations.[56] Stripped from these objective references, the message of revelation must rather be read as the unfolding of the inner self to the individual themselves, the opening up of their own hidden interiority and the disclosure of the possibility of an authentic life. This view necessarily entails a renunciation of myth not only as “iron-cast connection” of things in the world, but also as an eschatological and rebellious tale aimed at the “cosmic end of times.”[57] At any rate, the only reasonable approach to faith in modern times, Bultmann argues, embraces the scientific view of the world and operates a de-mythologization (*Entmythologisierung*) of religion. These three accounts of secularization – philosophical, as in Löwith; sociological, as in Weber; theological, as in Bultmann – although different in their aims and in their understanding of the role and vitality of religion in modern societies, are all convergent on the claim that a progressive rationalisation of western culture is inevitably leading magic, fantastic and irrational elements – in a word, the ‘mysterious’ – to lose their appeal and therefore to gradually disappear. Secularization, in this sense, implies that religion will either die out or be deprived of any irrational element.

2.2 Bloch’s *Montage*: Subversion and not Secularization of Myth

Bloch’s account of inheritance showcases at least two differences with the process of secularization. In the first place, the rationalisation of religious and mythological contents is

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[54] Jenkins, ‘Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment’, 11.
[55] Weber, *Geistige Arbeit als Beruf*, 16, my translation.
[56] Cf. Bultmann, ‘Neues Testament und Mythologie’.
[57] Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 69–72.

decried by Bloch as an atrophy of the subversive forces that myths of rebellion and insurrection potentially bear. This emerges with much clarity in a chapter of *Atheismus im Christentum* tellingly titled "Discernment of Myths". Bloch argues that a double distinction should be traced within myths. Noting that "not all that comes to us as fable is equally remote,"[58] he briefly contrasts fairy tales on the one hand, to sagas and myths, on the other, stressing the popular character of the former, concerned with the people, as opposed to the latter, decidedly celebratory of the rulers. If the fairy tale has managed to salvage a mythical element, however, this means that a discrimination within myth itself must be sought. To mark it, Bloch resorts to the paradigmatic figures of Zeus, the ruler of all gods, and Prometheus, the defying Titan who dared to steal fire from Mount Olympus: within mythical lore itself, one can – and should – attentively trace "a distinction between the gigantic, dominating element and those factors which, to say the least, would be more proper to a palace rebellion."[59] When a myth of this second sort is inherited, the potency and suggestion of the imaginative and fantastic elements does not get lost, as it would do were it rationalised and secularised. In other words, an inherited myth retains the power and the inspirational character of the ancient tales, thus enabling their inherent wishes to be reactivated and realized. As Bloch puts it:

> If all of this were to be treated equally as myth, and so thrown out of lock, stock and barrel, the Bible's many non-conformists would become meaningless, too; and their position is far from being obscure. On the contrary, they are light-bearers. This holds good right from the time of the serpent, that arch-myth of a "different" sort: the sort which is in fact more congenial to the cloud-blanket of the heteronomous than many present-day demythologizers, with their *Existenz,* would like to think. It holds good even if it is commonly said of this serpent and its thoroughly pre-scientific myth, that it is, so to speak, the larva of the goddess Reason.[60]

The retaining of mystery which comes with mythological narrations better fits the authenticity and vigour of the desire of a different and better world often envisaged in myths. This mysterious element is also uplifted in Bloch's "critical attitude, and not a pre-scientific one,

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[58] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, 24; Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 64: 'Ist uns doch nicht alles gleich fern, was als Fabel noch herüberklingt.'

[59] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, 25; Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 65: 'muß zwischen Dominierend-Riesenhaftem und dem mindestens Palastrebellischen darin unterschieden werden.'

[60] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, 26; Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 66: 'Würde all das, in Bausch und Bogen, gleichfalls als Mythos entmythologisiert, also hinausgeworfen, dann verlören freilich auch die vielen Nonkonformismen in der Bibel ihren Sinn, ihren gerade nicht obskuren, vielmehr lichtträgerischen. Eben von der Schlange her, diesem Erzmythos von der anderen Art, dem Wolkendunst des Heteronomen unangenehmer, als es vielen Entmythologisierern von heutzutage und ihrer »Existenz« lieb ist. Und das, obwohl von dieser Paradiesschlange und ihrem durchaus noch vorwissenschaftlichen Mythos immer wieder das Wort gilt: sie sei glaichsam die Raupe der Göttin Vernunft..'

towards anti-mythical suspicion itself."[61] A second distinction is in fact traced with the help of another figure of Greek mythology: Orpheus. If Zeus stands for the dominion of the ruling class and Prometheus for the rebelliousness of the people, Orpheus is brought into play to indicate the qualitative side of nature which science, informed by mathematical methods, all too often tends to discard as non-objective and therefore non-reliable. The 'orphic' side of myth is therefore salvaged in all those accounts of nature whereby feelings of beauty and nobility, rather than being cast off the frame, contribute to the general system; such is the case, most notably, of the Romantic philosophy of nature. "The question here is not of giving the death-blow to fantasy as such, but of destroying and saving the myth in a single dialectical process, by shedding light upon it. What is really swept away is real superstition."[62] An *Aufhebung* of mythical material is implicitly suggested here: inheritance, while negating the superstitious aspect of myth – dethroning the 'Zeuses' –, dialectically rekindles the flame of Prometheus and illuminates the 'orphic,' dream-like qualities of the world. Opposite to the secularizing approach to ancient lore, Bloch's take on it leads to enliven their pictorial and fantastic visions so that a more vivid image may appear.

2.3 Bloch's *Montage* as Myth-making

In second place, the processes of secularization and inheritance are intrinsically different with regard to their actualization. Whereas the former consists in the transferral or the displacement of the mythical or religious content into a different sphere (be it the ethical, the political or the scientific one) where it is stripped of the fantastic elements and sheathed with the casing of rationality, the latter exerts a fragmentation of mythical elements, which are subsequently recomposed in a different fashion. This new montage, far from being a rationalisation of myth, is rather a rearranged tale whereby old components match new ones so to build another narrative. Given the variety of literary genres with witch Bloch was concerned at various points in his production, one may wonder why myth acquires a special prominence among all others, which, as it has been just shown, are not at all negligible in his writings. The rearranged tale, if it is able to retain all the power of the original myths, will be equally mighty and correspondingly universal.

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[61] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, 26; Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 66: 'noch gegen das antimythische Mißtrauen schlechthin auf ganz und gar nicht vorwissenschaftliche Weise.'

[62] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, 27; Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 67: 'Nicht auf Phantasiemord schlechthinkommt es hier an, sondern auf ein dialektisches Zugleich von Zerrstörung, Rettung des Mythos durch Licht. Mit wirklicher Entfernung des wirklichen Aberglaubens.'

To understand this, one can briefly turn the sight towards Martin Buber's statement at the opening of his *The Legend of the Baal Shem*, arguably a book that has been of paramount importance in reviving the non-rationalistic side of Judaism at the beginning of the 20th century and surely crucial for the awakening of Bloch's attention to folk stories, particularly evident in his *Spuren*. Buber seems to mix literary genres, or rather to blur the lines between legend and myth; he writes: "The legend is the myth of I and Thou, of the caller and the called, the finite which enters into the infinite and the infinite which has need of the finite."[63] This book, allegedly a collection of legends, is in fact – Buber seems to maintain – something else, something more. He tries to bridge the gap between the episodical and fragmentary, though extremely significant, realm of the legend and the universal realm of myth. He is suggesting that the collection of legends around the figure of the Baal-Shem, the founder of the mystical movement of Hassidism, is not intended as a mere list of appealing and interesting stories, but, if read in its thoroughness – if, namely, one looks at them through the four pillars of the life of the Hasidim –, it delivers a message that spans beyond the boundaries of literature: it is the embodiment of the dialogue of I and Thou, it is the myth of the call of the Infinite and its necessary response on the side of the finite. Now, this looks precisely what Bloch is doing with the folktales collected in *Spuren*. From a collection of short stories and folk tales to an (often explicit and commented) link to the utopian elements and the not-yet that we can find through them. He is, in this sense, constructing a utopian myth out of a series of folk stories. But what is the value of this myth and why does he need a myth? Legends are usually concerned with one single hero and their incredible feats, folk stories often place a character of more humble origin and tell us of their peripeteia, whereas myth's scope is arguably wider. Folklore studies and comparative religion scholar Lauri Honko, in his tentative definition of myth, writes that "Myths vary greatly, of course, as to their *content* but one link that ties them together is encountered in the fact that, in general, myths contain information about decisive, creative events in the beginning of time."[64] Differently from other literary genres – all of which consist of some kind of narrative –, myth tells something decisive for the entire world of the listener or reader. In other words, there's a claim in mythology: that of conveying some universal and crucial message, be it related to human conduct, to the origin of the cosmos, or the ultimate destiny of mankind or a people. In no other genre we find a comparable breadth or scope. The process of inheritance can be variously actualized: it can draw elements from folktales or

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[63] Buber, The Legend of the Baal-Shem.
[64] Honko, 'The Problem of Defining Myth', 17.

feuilletons and combine them in a new story, while at the same time bestowing upon this latter the wide scope of myth, or it can dissect and select material from a narrative which is already mythical; in both cases, what is told in the new tale is not a series of facts merely belonging to an indefinite past: they have a crucial value in the present.

The fragmentation and montage which take place during the process of inheritance is even better explained, in contrast to all secularizing movements, if one turns their sight to the study of classical philologist and mythology scholar Károly Kerényi. In describing the peculiar substance of mythology, he states that it consists in "an immemorial and traditional body of material contained in tales about gods and god-like beings, heroic battles and journeys to the Underworld – "mythologem" is the best Greek word for them – tales already well known, but not unamenable to further reshaping."[65] A mythologem is the minimum recognisable element of a complex mythological material, an element which undergoes continuous processes of revisiting, moulding and re-organising while maintaining the same primordial narrative scheme. Two observation are of relevance here. In first instance, Kerényi notes that what is peculiar to myth is its aetiological aspect, the fact that it is often related to the cause or origin – in one word, it has a foundational value. But he also clarifies: "Mythology does not actually indicate 'causes', αἰτία. It does this, (is 'aetiological') only to the extent that, as taught by Aristotle, (*Metaphysica*, Λ 2, 1013a), the αἰτία are ἀρχαί, beginnings or first principles."[66] This specification is of utter importance, and can be retained also for the Blochian usage of mythologems. In second instance, when it comes to clarify the nature of the mythologem itself, Kerényi shows his debt to the psychological studies of his co-writer, Carl Gustav Jung. The two formulated the hypothesis that the ἀρχή displayed in the mythologem works the same way as an archetypal model, which is successively enriched by elements pertaining a specific culture, and through the merging of archetype and cultural features, specific myths emerge. This general understanding inevitably skews the picture towards a bombastic characterization of myth whereby its alleged primordiality is all the more stressed:

> They form the ground or foundation of the world, since everything rests on them. They are the ἀρχαὶ to which everything individual and particular goes back and out of which it is made, whilst they remain ageless, inexhaustible, invincible in timeless

[65] Jung and Kerényi, Introduction to a Science of Mythology. The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis, 2.
[66] Jung and Kerényi, 6–7.

> primordiality, in a past that proves imperishable because of his eternally repeated rebirths.[67]

Considering that Jung's archetype is defined as "innate psychic structure" (in this akin to an instinct), "a virtual image" or, more generally, they are referred to as "*a priori* categories [that] have by nature a collective character [...] They are, in a sense, the deposits of all our ancestral experience,"[68] it is clear that a decisive link to the past is to be found. The ancestral experience Jung talks about when referring to structures of the human mind has its parallel in the primary mythologem described by Kerényi, solely perceived in the mystical experience of finding oneself "face to face with the absolute"[69] and out of which "a torrent of mythological pictures streams out."[70] The purported originary character of mythologems, stemming out of an ancestral past in which it has been sedimented, makes it fixed and ossified. In Bloch's inheritance, the material he deals with is precisely constituted by mythologems, but their archaic traits are turned upside down. In fact, his philosophical system gains its orientation not so much from a supposedly starting point in the past as with, on the contrary, an ultimate utopian goal in the future. As per the passage quoted above, Bloch stated that rather than moving from a fixed starting point which fatalistically determines present and future situations, the origin has in the (not yet attained) end its own explanation. While the mythologems Bloch retrieves from ancient myths and Biblical books are selected for their numinous might and pristine effulgence, this very qualities are conferred to them not by their aboriginal genesis, but by the ever repeating allusion to something that has not been achieved yet: from all Blochian mythologems a utopian radiance trickles forth. This is particularly true for elements gained from Judeo-Christian messianism, where this utopian luminosity is primarily and most clearly detected.

One last reference – and one last differentiation – may be of help to draw the frame within which the process of inheritance finds its actualization, a reference whose significance lays in the double bond Bloch has with a late antique religious tradition. Philosopher Hans Jonas noted, in regards to Gnostic mythmaking, that

> [...] in the Hellenistic environment Gnosticism acted as a source of new myth-creation. But it must be noted that this new mythology, despite some genuinely 'first' creations, was a secondary one in that it supervened upon an older mythological tradition and

[67] Jung and Kerényi, 9.

[68] Jung, The Collected Works of C.G. Jung. Vol 7: Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, para. 300.

[69] Jung and Kerényi, Introduction to a Science of Mythology. The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis, 30.

[70] Jung and Kerényi, 4.

> constructed its new object-system out of the consciously reinterpreted elements of a complex heritage[71]

Bloch's usage of mythologems is in this sense kindred to the Gnostics' one: it consists in a secondary, derivative, myth-creation. This parallel is all the more striking given the fact that he not only adopted an approach to pre-existing mythical material similar to that of the Gnostics, but several mythologems which are to be found in his writings – arguably some of the most relevant ones – are *themselves* Gnostic creations. There is nonetheless a substantial difference in the way Bloch's inheritance works, namely: it is an atheist inheritance. Now, how is it possible to 'inherit' theogonic and cosmogonic mythologems with an atheists approach? The answer lies in the relation of the myth maker to the myth they elaborate. In the case of the Gnostics, as well as for all ancient mythmakers, the relation is one of belief. The doctrine, be it humanly elaborated and devised as it may, is still believed by the adherents to the cult and it is thought to be representative of the actual creed of the adepts. As Bloch makes clear in his *magnum opus*, inheritance of the Biblical myth requires an atheist appropriation of its mythologems, whereby with 'atheism' is meant not so much a general devaluation of religious tenets in consequence of the rationally discovered non-existence of anything 'spiritual,' as the negation of the hypostatization of God as the *entissimum*, the supreme transcendent being which rules the world from on high. Then, waving together the threads of atheism, messianism and utopia, Bloch clarifies at the same time the future-oriented nature of his mythologems – whose content is always directed towards the yet to be realised utopia – and their intrinsic atheist nature: his myth making does not instantiate a new form of religiosity, nor it represents the cancelling out of any value of religion, but actualizes the inheritance of the progressive side of religion itself.

> The existence of God, indeed God at all as a special being is superstition; belief is solely that in a messianic kingdom of God - without God. Atheism is therefore so far from being the enemy of religious utopia that it constitutes its precondition: *without atheism messianism has no place*. Religion is superstition wherever it is not what in terms of its valid intention-content it has increasingly come to mean in its historical manifestations: the most unconditional utopia, utopia of the absolute.[72]

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[71] Jonas, The Gnostic Religion. The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity., 262.

[72] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1200; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1413: 'Dasein Gottes, ja Gott überhaupt als eigene Wesenheit ist Aberglaube; Glaube ist einzig der an ein messianisches Reich Gottes – ohne Gott. Atheismus ist folglich so wenig der Feind religiöser Utopie, das er deren Voraussetzung bildet: ohne Atheismus hat Messianismus keinen Platz. Religion ist Aberglaube, wo sie nicht da ist, was sie ihrem gültigen Intentionsinhalt nach ihren historischen Erscheinungen wachsen bedeuten konnte: unbedingteste Utopie, Utopie des Unbedingten.'

It is now evident that at the core of all inherited mythologems messianism shines forth – and this just confirms that messianism furnishes the primary framework underpinning Bloch's philosophy of (inherited) religion, to which all the other complementary components may provide an attribute without substituting its substance. The whole process of inheritance fits inside the utopian project only in so far as it is messianically oriented; it can be so, however, solely to the extent that the mythologem is not devoutly venerated, but, spoiled from superstitious bigotry, is apprehended from an atheist perspective. This engenders the coming to an end of religion as such, with its earthly institutions and metaphysical deceptions, but with the awareness that "the end of religion is thus, in this knowledge, as comprehended hope in totality, not simply no religion but - in the convolutions of Marxism the inheriting of it, meta-religious knowledge-conscience of the final Where To, What For problem: ens perfectissimum."[73] Conversely, any attempt at inheriting mythological material find its justification in the messianic nature of the singular mythologem, or in the messianic torsion applied to it.

2.4 What is Truly Expressed in Blochian Mythologems: a *Principle*

At this point it is possible to offer a summary of the whole process. Rather than cancelling the relation to the mythical material, substituting a scientific worldview for naïve credence – as the process of secularization would have it –, Blochian inheritance adapts definite mythologems to philosophy, establishing another kind of relation. In first place, he dissects the mythological matter and secludes single mythologems which show a progressive and rebellious tone. Be it evident – and in this case the mythologem is taken as it is – or latent – which requires an expressionist effort in twisting it and making it sprout –, the revolutionary force embedded in the mythologem is fitted into a new narrative. This latter has nothing to do with the search of an originary past, but gains momentum from its mythologems to devise a utopian future. In so doing, it abandons the psychological belief in the actual reality of the immediate content of the mythical image or narration, but salvages its 'archaic' value, its value as an ἀρχή. The mythologem becomes an expression not of a belief, but rather of a principle. The multifarious images, doctrines and visions interspersed in Bloch's writings, far from being a mere rhetorical device, are indicators of a principle, they are its figurative counterparts. Summoning Apollo, the Serpent or the Messiah, Bloch does not ask his reader to adhere to their reality, be it material

[73] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1201; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1414: 'Und das Ende der Religion ist so, in diesem Wissen, als begriffener Hoffnung in Totalität, nicht einfach keine Religion, sondern – in der Weiterungen des Marxismus – Erbe an ihr, meta-religiöses Wissen-Gewissen des letzten Wohin-, Wozu-Problems: Ens Perfectissimum.'

or fictional, but conveys the nature of the principle into these mythologems; or better, he lets the leading principle of hope burst forth through these mythologems and thus find figurative expression. Within this frame, the Judeo-Christian tradition comes to be the pre-eminent source of material by reason of the messianic trope shared by both religions:

> And if the maxim that where hope is, religion is, is true, then Christianity, with its powerful starting point and its rich history of heresy, operates as if an essential nature of religion had finally come forth here. Namely that of being *not static, apologetic myth, but humane eschatological, explosively posited messianism*. It is only here - stripped of illusion, god-hypostases, taboo of the masters - that the *only inherited substratum capable of significance in religion lives: that of being hope in totality*, explosive hope.[74]

A close sight on the way Bloch apprehended theological and mythological elements from various traditions has answered the question concerning his original appropriation of religious imagery, but has left another query unsolved. What does it mean that the end of religion is comprehended hope? How are we to understand hope as the operating *principle* in messianic lore and in Blochian philosophy tout court? This interrogation, left unanswered at the end of the previous section as well, needs now to be addressed by surveying the architectonic arrangement of Blochian philosophy. Only by doing this, an expounding of the pre-political thrust and the meta-political form within which messianic elements are re-assembled will be finally possible.

3. The Systematization of Bloch's Messianism

3.1. Building the System

To understand the pivotal position that mythologems occupy in Blochian thought, it is useful to summarise the main axes of his systematic philosophy, paying attention to the inner tensions that run throughout it. The centrality of the principle in its capacity to confer coherence to the inception of the various branches – whose nature sometimes betrays their disparate sources – in a unified philosophy of hope will subsequently become clearer.

3.1.1. The Path Towards Systematicity

The germs of Bloch's philosophy of hope are already to be found in his first published book, *Geist der Utopie*. Although not fully developed in the Marxist fashion that will characterise the

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[74] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1193; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1404: 'Und wenn der Satz gilt: wo Hoffnung ist, ist Religion, dann wirkt das Christentum, mit seinem kräftigen Starpunkt und seiner reichen Ketzergeschichte, als wäre hier ein Wesen der Religion endlich hervorgekommen. Nämlich nicht statischer, darin apologetischer Mythos, sondern human-eschatologischer, darin sprengend gesetzter Messianismus. Erst darin lebt – von Illusion, Gotthypostase, gar Herrentabu abgelöst – das in Religion einzig bedeutbare Erbsubstrat: Hoffnung in Totalität zu sein, und zwar sprengende.'

works of his maturity, the main lynchpin of the whole of his utopian philosophy not only is already firmly established in this early work, but also explicitly calls for a systematic treatment, which would come only later. The first edition of the book contains in fact a short programmatic passage wherein Bloch presents a provisional but rather ambitious blueprint for an all-encompassing philosophical project, a blueprint of nothing less than a "system of theoretical messianism."[75] This passage is located in a chapter – deeply re-worked for the second edition, in which large part of it have been left out – entirely devoted to his time's intellectual atmosphere,[76] at the end of which a section titled "Beschluß, Programm und Problem" [resolution, programme and problem] finds its place. The chapter aims at describing the context in which German philosophers find themselves towards the end of the first world war, in the attempt to come to a synthesis between "interiority and system," gathering together the new and disruptive contributions of *Lebensphilosophie*, Nietzscheanism and phenomenology. As the title of the section suggests, the series of precipitating events of the time – and particularly the October 1917 Revolution in Russia – calls for firmness and decision, and a philosophy capable of such resoluteness. The chapter's incipit reads "it wants to become different around us,"[77] suggesting the palpable need for change in the German culture, by contrasting the defaming bellicose Prussian aura surrounding the German émigrés in Switzerland (Bloch was writing while in exile) to the still unexpressed possibilities offered by Marxism. A historical glimpse towards the feats of Alexander the Great serves as an invitation to turn the sight eastwards and gain inspiration from the advent of communism after the October revolution. The appropriation of the Jewish identity – finally with "Stolz" [Pride] –, marked by an opposition to the world, an urge towards righteousness and an orientation towards a "not yet existing messianic goal over the world,"[78] bridges the text to the concluding part of the section. Here, in a sub-section bearing the enigmatic title "over the motoric-fantastic theory of knowledge of this proclamation,"[79] Bloch's philosophical programme is finally presented. Despite the declared theoretical framework suggested by the traditionally philosophical term 'Erkenntnistheorie', the whole section is animated by a political and ethical preoccupation, well expressed by a question posed at the beginning of the first two indents: "How does that affect what is now? Because we want to act and go on independently. [...] But how does that

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[75] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 337: 'System des theoretischen Messianismus.'
[76] Bloch, 235–342.
[77] Bloch, 295: 'Es will um uns anders werden.'
[78] Bloch, 322: 'noch nicht daseiendes messianisches Ziel über die Welt.'
[79] Bloch, 332–42: 'Zur motorisch-phantastischen Erkenntnistheorie dieser Proklamation.'

affect where I stand ‘now’? When and why can what I demand, what I am, be true, to what extent do the powers of nomothetic thinking reach into life?”[80] This need for truth is clearly not only a detached theoretical interest for objectivity, but stems directly and intimately from the core of the ‘I’, of the knowing and acting subject. Its are the concerns, troubles and desires which lead to pose the question of truth – of the ‘second truth,’ neatly distinguished from the “the evidence of the positivist logic of facts, but without simplistically rejecting this latter.”[81] Bloch therefore expounds the philosophical work needed to clarify and deal with the future-like element – the second truth – that positivist scientific thought can but miss. The closeness to life, the almost palpable urgency for a philosophy that nourishes the living and knowing subject, together with the acknowledgement of the necessity of a well-crafted theoretical scaffolding, are driven together towards the devising of a new system, programmatically exposed. It is worth citing the passage in full:

> So it goes out into the narrows, in the width, in the depth, through the ‘theory of life’, the 'theory of the world structure’, the ‘philosophy of history’, the ‘philosophy of the state’, the ‘system of aesthetics’, the ‘Logic of Philosophy’, the ‘Ethics and Metaphysics of Inwardness’ through to this point, in these seven works (but logic is only the place of collection of the methodology of the spheres and no sphere of its own), to such a point that in these six upturns of our self, in these specific self-encounters and ever unconcealing processes of objectivization, in these six great knocking-outs of our Head and ultimately uproaring of mythical energies and objects of the end, of the beginning of the end – the „system of theoretical messianism“ is made ripe for attack, for the prophets, for practical messianism, is perfectly at hand.[82]

From the end of this passage there clearly emerges the intimate connection that Bloch tries to establish between a theory of knowledge and a prescriptive moral and political philosophy. Furthermore, the progression into the six mentioned stages of the system corresponds to the emergence and shaping of the individual subject – the knocking-out of the *Haupt*, the Head.

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[80] Bloch, 332, 334: ‘Wie wirkt das ein, das, jetzt ist? Denn wir wollen handelnd und selbsttätig vorgehen. […] Wie aber wirkt das ein, wo ich “jetzt” stehe? Wann und wieso kann das, was ich fordere nach dem, was ich bin, wahr sein, wieweit reichen die Kräfte des Gesetzgebenden denkens in das Leben herein?’

[81] Dubbels, ‘Figuren des Messianischen’, 151.

[82] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 336–37: ‘So geht es hinaus, ins Enge, ins Weite, ins Tiefe, durch die „Theorie des Lebens“, die „Theorie des Weltbaus“, die „Philosophie der Geschichte“, die „Philosophie des Staates“, das „System der Aesthetik“, die „Logik der Philosophie“, die „Ethik und Metaphysik der Innerlichkeit“ hindurch, bis derart, in diesem sieben Werken (aber die Logik ist nur der Sammelort des Methodischen des Sphären und Keine eigene Sphäre), bis in dieser sechs Empordrehungen also unserer selbst, in diesem spezifischen Selbstbegegnungen und immer hüllenloseren Objektivierungsprozessen, in diesen sechs großen Herausschlagungen unseres Haupts und schließlichen Aufrührung der mythischen Energien und Gegenstände des Endes, des Anfang und des Endes – das „System des theoretischen Messianismus“: sturmreif zu machen, für die Propheten, für den praktischen Messianismus, vollendet vorliegt.’

This programmatic passage stresses therefore several kinds of connection: first, between a theoretical and a practical philosophy, both ultimately encompassed by the overarching notion of messianism; second, between the process of subjectivation – which in *Geist der Utopie* takes the name of an encounter with the self, a *Selbstbegegnung* – and the organic (even encyclopaedic, if one considers his later *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*) disposition of the various branches of knowledge; finally, the construction of the subject, the discovery, shaping and encounter with the self, is and can in fact be realised only through a constant process of objectification, an expression of the subjective will into the world, thus correspondently moulded. In the weaving together of these different lines of development, Bloch adds, a tumultuous agitation of mythical energies is also to be expected. This apparently secondary detail is particularly telling because it straightforwardly points to the aim of this mobilisation of mythical imagery, which is proclaimed in the last statement of this quotation: allowing the re-subjectified "I" to be ready for battling, equipped for political action, in the spirit of the Jewish prophets. The compressed form in which this blueprint is put forward does not give justice to the more complex implications of the usage of messianic imagery, which are here presented in a schematic way, but allows the reader to grasp the general intention –the *Ahnung* – of Blochian philosophy. It is a practical philosophy, whereby the devising of a theoretical framework pivoting around messianic hope is never heedless of the need for its translation into a practical – moral and political – philosophy that serves as an instrument for action. It must be noted that the 'mythical energies' stirring the edifice of Bloch's system do belong to the end (of times), or better, to the "beginning of the end:" a distinct eschatological orientation – reminiscent of Jewish apocalyticism – should innervate all the spheres of the system, in its strain towards the second truth, the truth of the authentic individual and of the finally not more alienated world.

The very germinal phase of Bloch's philosophy did not prevent some of his closest readers from finding in *Geist der* Utopie, if not the system itself, at least an "introduction to a bigger system of theoretical messianism"[83] as his friend Margarete Susman would put it.[84] The intention to keep working on a systematic philosophy has also been reasserted in a letter to Max Scheler (dated 3rd September 1919) in which Bloch stated: "Presently I am working at my 'system of messianism.'"[85] However, in this case the partitioning appears to be different, including some of the articles Bloch already had published in *Die Argonauten* or in the *Weißen*

[83] Voßkamp, 'Wie können die Dinge vollendet werden', 296.
[84] cf. Dubbels, 'Figuren des Messianischen', 151.
[85] Bloch, *Briefe, 1903-1975*, vol. I, p. 253: 'Gegenwärtig arbeite ich an meinem »System des Messianismus«.'

Blätter[86] as parts of the work and appearing to be a less ambitious speculative enterprise but a more realistic publishing project. The attempts to devise an all-encompassing systematic philosophy is not alien from messianic thinkers; on the contrary, as the aforementioned case of Hoene-Wroński already showed, when the very term 'messianism' surfaced the European intellectual debates in the 1830s, it did so in a purportedly systematic fashion. What appears to be unavoidable, however, is the series of contrasts and tensions that millennia of variously intertwined messianic doctrines bequeathed to modern European philosophy. Bloch's adoption of messianic imagery and tropes in his philosophy makes no exception, confronting the reader not only with a multifarious combination of influences and an expressionist, sometimes visionary phrasing, but also with a paradoxical logic that stems from the very core of its system. As it has been already noted, the most complete account of the various branches of Bloch's system is comprised in his *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, the *summa* of his whole work and the ultimate attempt at a systematic philosophy. It is not by chance that the encyclopaedic treatment of utopian philosophy, together with all the tensions that span throughout his thought, finds its place in a work devoted to the exploration of a 'principle', which – as will soon be clarified – acts at the same time as a catalyst and as a synthesis. The tensions stemming from the paradoxical logic that informs Bloch's philosophy can be described as ontological, historical and metaphysical – and these spheres are all weaved together and solved in the principle of hope.

3.1.2. Fundamental Ontology

The "briefest formulation of the main idea of Bloch's philosophy"[87] is perhaps the *Noch-Nicht Sein*, not-yet being, the fundamental ontological structure to which the entire edifice of his philosophy is fastened. Although intimately connected to the modal category of possibility, 'not-yet being' is a formulation that aims at indicating the ontological significance of the region of being located between the currently present being and what can or could possibly be. Since "all themes of Blochian philosophy refer to the not-yet,"[88] the articulation of his system into a philosophy of history and a metaphysics stems from here as well. One of Bloch's main claims in the sphere of fundamental ontology is to be found at the end of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, whereby its connections to the other branches of his thought are made evident:

[86] Ibid.
[87] Siebers, 'Bloch-Wörterbuch', 403.
[88] Siebers, 406.

> The Authentic or essence is not something existing in finished form such as water, air, fire, even the invisible cosmic idea or whatever these real-Fixa were called when they were made absolute or hypostatized. The Authentic or essence is that *which is not yet, which in the core of things drives towards itself, which awaits its genesis in the tendency-latency of process*; it is itself only now founded, objective-real – hope.[89]

What is immediately striking, is that the active role of the not-yet is remarkably stated as the first characterisation of it, being it a driving force or, more generally of a *Streben*, placing this concept along the list of the concepts of will, an impulse towards realisation.[90] It is not, however, a merely subjective or anthropological notion, on the contrary, it is inherent in being itself, it is being's main feature, namely that of coming to itself, of realising its own potentiality; it is a principle of motion and becoming. This feature is then reverberated into an account of history whereby the usual chronological orientation of origin and end of a process are subverted, depriving the 'origin' of the primacy traditionally credited to it and recasting it on the 'end'. The intricateness and the reversal of origin and end, previously referred to in the treatment of *alpha* and *omega*, implies a conception of the historical that draws its meaning and organisation not from a supposedly first origin, but rather from the final goal, which is latent, not(-yet) visible, but nonetheless capable of hauling and steering, so to say, the process towards its successful completion, by means of a tendency. The not-yet, in its historical and processual side, is "therefore a mode of futurity"[91] that need be intimately correlated to a final moment in time wherein all the striving and tension can and will be relieved in the accomplishment of the final identity of being with itself: the latent side of being, that which is not-yet, is eventually made to surface and the final goal is met at last. Up until that future moment, however, being is *in fieri*, stirred at its very core by this tendency but manifestly including a lack, a hollow place, an interstice, which is at the same time the cause for its motion and the gap to be overcome. As such, being is always being-possibile, and "the relationship of striving in which this being-in-possibility exists is entelechy".[92] The ontology of not-yet being has therefore metaphysical implications with regards to the account of the constituents of reality.

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[89] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1373; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1625: 'Das Eigentliche oder Wesen ist nichts fertig Vorhandenes wie Wasser, wie Luft, wie Feuer, gar wie unsichtbare All-Idee, oder wie immer diese Real-Fixa verabsolutiert oder hypostasiert lauteten. Das Eigentliche oder Wesen ist dasjenige, was noch nicht ist, was im Kern der Dinge nach sich selbst treibt, was in der Tendenz-Latenz des Prozesses seine Genesis erwartet; es ist selber erst fundierte, objektiv-reale – Hoffnung.'
[90] Cf. Siebers, 'Bloch-Wörterbuch', 405.
[91] Siebers, 406.
[92] Siebers, 404.

3.1.3. Excursus: Theology and the Problem of Materialism

Bloch's philosophy is doubtless materialistic. His materialism, however, is of a peculiar kind, since it tries to incorporate the Aristotelian notion of *entelechy*, which in turn includes a notion of finality, thus re-instating an element that has been long (at least since the 17th century) stripped out of scientific discourse and patently rejected by materialistic thinkers. The term *entelecheia,* most notably presented in Aristotle's *Physics*,[93] "may apply either to an actualizing (the *process* by which something is actualised) or to an actuality (the *state* of being actual resulting from such a process)."[94] Bloch's usage of this term, which finds its proper historical-philosophical collocation within the treatment of the matter-form relationship, serves to convey the notion of a function operating within matter and conferring matter a determinate form. Again, the form moulding matter is not-yet actual; nonetheless, the entelechy within it can be described as an activity which brings about the perfection of matter into a form and is therefore already present: its ontological status is that of the not-yet being. Bloch's appropriation of the notion leads him to refer to it in terms of a "self-realising form"[95] or even as the "active Totum of the matter,"[96] thus steering away from the proper Aristotelian usage and embracing a wider, perhaps more generous understanding of the matter-form relationship. Bloch in fact takes the cue from the Averroistic interpretation of Aristotelian notions, according to which "Development […] is 'eductio formarom ex materia,' with the 'dator formarum' in the universe itself. Thus creation appears – with the erasure of all dualism – solely as self-movement, self-fertilization of the matter of God; this matter contains the potentiality and simultaneously that potency immanent in it which makes an extra-worldly mover superfluous."[97] In short, his philosophy of history and his materialism both repose upon a peculiar form of teleology, a non-fixed teleology which maintains an orientation towards a final goal – always entailed by the not-yet – but rejecting an essentialistic conception of the goal itself, being the "authentic" or "essence" clearly distinguished from a 'real-*fixum*'. This difficult synthesis finds its historical correlate in the end as the real origin of the process and its metaphysical counterpart in the self-forming matter. Implied in all these tensions that animate Blochian philosophy is the presence of theological elements that act as a paradoxical counterpart to his materialism.

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[93] Aristotle, *Physics*, bk. III, 1–2 (201a 6, 201a10-11, 201a16, 201b5).

[94] Kostman, 'Aristotle's Definition of Change', 3.

[95] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 235; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 271: 'selbst verwirklichende Form.'

[96] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 229; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 263: 'wirkenden Totum der Sache.'

[97] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 236; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 272: 'Entwicklung […] ist »eductio formarum ex materia« mit dem »dator formarum« im Weltall selbst. So erscheint die Schöpfung – mit Wegfall jedes Dualismus – einzig als Selbstbegegnung, Selbstbefruchtung der Gottmaterie; in ihr ist die Potentialität und zugleich jene ihr immanente Potenz, welche einen außerweltlichen Beweger überflüssig macht.'

In fact, the ontological and metaphysical stance Bloch adopted to build his system finds its parallel in his selection and appropriation of theological elements. In this regard, it is particularly striking to observe Bloch's appreciation for some doctrines of creation of Gnostic derivation, such as the Marcionite and the Valentinian one. In the Marcionite system, the God of creation – the 'demiurge' that is represented in the Old Testament, responsible for the cosmogenic process – is set in contrast with the God of the New Testament, a new and alien God of "pure goodness and mercy and without wrath or judgment,"[98] revealed by Jesus for our salvation. Marcion's stark dualism and his depreciation of the world, as well as the idea that the creation of the world is the work of an evil demiurge to which the true and alien God stands in opposition bring him close to the position expressed in other Gnostic systems, most notably in the Valentinian one.[99] As I have shown in the previous chapter, both theologians are presented in a good light in Bloch's works, especially in *Atheismus im Christentum*.

Considering the extolling of these Christian heretics, it seems to be somewhat difficult to reconcile Bloch's treatment of their doctrines of creation – imbued with their anti-cosmism – with his purported materialism, derived from a Marxist standpoint. Does not the rejection of the created cosmos – no matter whether in its original religious fashion or in its inherited version – invalidate any attempt to ground a materialistic worldview? Is not this antagonistic attitude towards the world at odds with the vitalistic account of matter that Bloch draws from Averroes and Giordano Bruno?

Bloch's metaphysics of matter – and the conceptual framework he utilizes to frame it – has been investigated against the backdrop of his (seemingly partial) adoption of Gnostic anti-cosmic doctrines. In this line, Bielik-Robson has detected traces of a 'persistent Marcionism' even in the Blochian account of matter itself, an observation that, if proven true, might jeopardize Bloch's attempt to subscribe to a genuine form of Marxist materialism.[100]

A closer look at the construction of Bloch's account of matter might reveal its idiosyncratic character, its origin and its link to the other constituents of Bloch's philosophical system. In his book on materialism, Bloch reconstructs a philosophical tradition that, stemming from the works of Aristotle, approaches the problem of matter by stressing its link with the modal category of possibility and at the same time foregrounding the active potentiality of the material substratum. He labels this tradition 'Aristotelian Left' and devotes to this set of thinkers an essay that has been added as a close to the book. In extreme synthesis, "the orientation of the

[98] Wilken, 'Marcion', 5701.
[99] Cf. Cross and Livingstone, 'Valentinus'.
[100] Cf. Bielik-Robson, 'Will There Be Nothing Rather Than Something?'.

Aristotelian Left emerges via the reconstruction of the matter-form relationship as one that clearly grasps matter as an active force—not just as something mechanically inert."[101] In order to obtain such an account of matter, Bloch draws on the philosophical reflections of medieval Aristotelian thinkers – especially Avicenna, Averroes and Avicebron, up to the early modern reformulations of Renaissance philosophers such as Giordano Bruno. These thinkers developed the original Aristotelian presentation of the problem, whereby matter is conceived as passive potentiality, a plasticity which receives its form from the external "potency, an act within an event, and this all the way up to the fully immaterial act of the unmoved mover, God."[102] Medieval Arab philosophers maintained the distinction between matter and form, but bestowed an active role already to the former, to the point that it came to be understood as a subject, thus not in need of an external agent anymore, so as to conceive the autarchy of the material principle: "for Avicenna, and even more so for Averroës, the effective Act-Being of worldly entelechies remained thoroughly self-creating, in its potentiality-potency matter."[103] The Aristotelian distinction of potency and act – whereby to matter was exclusively attributed the former – is now entirely condensed inside the material substratum. The latter appears not as a mere inert stuff, but as self-shaping and self-moving. Later on – Bloch observes – Renaissance thinker Giordano Bruno takes on this conception, intensifying the autonomy of the material principle even more, so as to provide a pantheistic worldview wherein the material principle appears to be interchangeable with what he calls a 'world power' or the 'world soul,'[104] a sort of vitalistic principle of motion imbuing the entirety of the material world. Regarding Bruno, Bloch observes:

> All the more are these forms themselves contained from within in matter, as in the material world-soul or animated matter: matter alone aspires to form, without being caused by an otherworldly formal and final principle – matter is here the only source of form-shaping.[105]

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[101] Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, 23; Bloch, *Das Materialismusproblem, seine Geschichte und Substanz*, 501: "Also läuft die Aristotelische Linksrichtung, über die Umbildung der Stoff-Form-Beziehung, deutlich einer las aktiv begriffenen – und nicht nur mechanistisch begriffenen – Materie zu."

[102] Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, 20; Bloch, *Das Materialismusproblem, seine Geschichte und Substanz*, 499: 'Potenz, ist Aktus im Geschehen; bis hinauf zum völlig stofffreien Aktus: dem unbewegten Allbeweger Gott.'

[103] Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, 26; Bloch, *Das Materialismusproblem, seine Geschichte und Substanz*, 506: 'bei Avicenna und wie sehr erst bei Averroës bleibt das wirkende Akt-Sein der weltlichen Entelechien durchaus selbstschöpferisch erhalten, in ihrer Potentialität-Potenz Materie'.

[104] Cf. Bloch, *Das Materialismusproblem, seine Geschichte und Substanz*, 171: 'Weltkraft, Weltseele'.

[105] Bloch, 171: 'Erst recht sind dieser Formen selber vor innen her in der Materie enthalten, als in der materiellen Weltseele oder beseelten Materie: der Stoff allein strebt zur Gestaltung auf, ohne Verursachung durch ein ihm jenseitiges Form- und Zweckprinzip, – die Materie ist hier die einzige Quelle der Formwirkung.'

In his last published work, *Experimentum mundi*, Bloch proceeds to take stock of these historical-philosophical studies, conferring systematicity to these theses and organically embedding them in his own *Kategorienlehre.* Maintaining the idea of a self-shaping and self-moving matter, he describes this inner intensive force that animates the material substance from within through the conceptual dyad of *Tendenz* and *Latenz*, coherently with his ontology of not-yet-being. The latter posits the current presence of a hiatus between the fact of existence (the *Dass,* the 'that-ground') and the ultimate attainment of the essence (the *Was*, the 'what-content'): the subject as well as the object (the I and the world) are already factually here, without having attained their full (utopian) realisation: the essence or form, although already intimated and so to say announced, has not yet come to completion. There is therefore a tension spanning from the *Dass* to the *Was*, from existence to essence, which Bloch calls '*Tendenz*'. The tendency describes the "objective quality of being of intense kind (a 'drive'), which has a logical element at its core, although this is still undefined;"[106] the tendency operates within the material substratum as "the intensive pole in the tension between that-ground and what-content."[107] This drive, however, has itself its own precondition in what is still hidden inside matter and has not been brought to light yet. The "utopian foundation of the tendency"[108] takes the name of *Latenz* due to its hidden character. Bloch explains:

> Latency is the condition in which the tendency has the strange pre-existence of its direction and its anticipation; in other words, latency is the way in which the not-yet-being goal content asserts itself in the tendency. [109]

The utopian goal, not-yet realised, nonetheless drives the material substratum to its self-completion from within. We can observe here Bloch's appropriation of Avicenna's and Bruno's notion of self-forming matter and its embedding in his categorial doctrine presented in *Experimentum mundi*, coherent with his fundamental ontology of not-yet-being. While the usage of the notion of tendency is not a novelty for materialistic thinkers, however, that of latency strikes as quite exceptional. Zeilinger notes that "the actualisation of the old concept of latency is not only unusual for a philosophical approach of the 20th century, but especially for a materialist position that Bloch decidedly claims for himself."[110] In his magnum opus, Bloch

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[106] Zeilinger, 'Bloch-Wörterbuch', 31 August 2012, 555.
[107] Zeilinger, 563.
[108] Bloch, *Experimentum mundi*, 147: 'das utopisch Fundierende der Tendenz.'
[109] Bloch, 147–48: 'Latenz ist die Beschaffenheit, worin die Tendenz die seltsame Vorexistenz ihrer Richtung und ihrer Vorwegnahme hat; mit anderen Worten: Latenz ist die Weise, womit der noch nicht seiende Zielinhalt sich in der Tendenz geltend macht.'
[110] Zeilinger, 'Bloch-Wörterbuch', 31 August 2012, 234.

refers to the latency as “the correlate of the not yet realized objective-real possibilities in the world.”[111] If both concepts refer to the unrealised essence (the what) and describe the tension that animates the material world towards its attainment, why does Bloch feel the need of a second concept? To answer this question, it is worth noticing a significative difference between the two notions of *Tendenz* and *Latenz*. Again following Zeilinger, we observe that “while the concept of tendency has an essentially temporal dimension, latency is extra-temporal.”[112] This means that the latency is not subjected to the swaying and oscillations of the actualised world, but, similarly to a compass, firmly indicates the direction of any endeavour towards the realisation of the ultimate goal. Without this element, the tension that animates the material subject would be but contingent on one or another temporal condition; the notion of *Latenz* instead provides the system with a firm anchor to the (unrealised) goal: the latency is tightly related to the notion of totality, the end goal. Bloch is thus able to put forward an ‘open system’, a coherent and cohesive set of different parts that nonetheless is constantly redefining its own internal structure, a system that keeps building and rebuilding its components to adapt to new conditions without going astray, without losing sight of the final goal. In his book on Hegel, Bloch describes his systematic philosophy with these words:

> System is utopian-concrete Totum. The invariability of direction constitutes its rigour, the world without alienation a determining Principium = Ultimum, the representation of the tendency and latency of this world its plan of construction. The open system thus possible, indeed the only possible open system, is purposefully held together by the utopian totality of substance as subject, of the subject as substance in one. Only this is the whole of matter, and it is a whole that is incessantly communicating itself to the process, but also a still utopian, concrete-utopian whole, All, Totum.[113]

In order to maintain matter’s orientation towards the realisation of its own utopian form – the end goal that Bloch calls *Ultimum* – Bloch has resorted to the categorial dyad of tendency and latency, the former animating the temporal and historical stirrings of the material subject, the latter – not yet visible and not yet fully defined – expressing the extra-historical, constant side of the utopian goal.

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[111] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 623; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 727: ‘das Korrelat der noch nicht verwirklichten objektiv-realen Möglichkeiten in der Welt.’

[112] Zeilinger, ‘Bloch-Wörterbuch’, 31 August 2012, 239.

[113] Bloch, *Subjekt - Objekt*, 470: ‘System ist utopisch-konkretes Totum. Invariable der Richtung macht seine Strenge aus, Welt ohne Entfremdungsein bestimmendes Principium = Ultimum, Darstellung der Tendenz und Latenz dieser Welt seinen Bauplan. Das derart mögliche, ja einzig mögliche offene System ist zielhaft zusammengehalten vonder utopischen Totalität der Substanz als Subjekt, des Subjekts als Substanz in Einem. Das erst ist das Ganze der Materie, und es ist einzwar unablässig dem Prozeß sich mitteilendes, doch ebenso ein noch utopisches, konkret-utopisches Ganze, Alles, Totum.’

The inclusion of the latter and its characterisation as extra-historical may however raise the suspicion of a surreptitious idealism, a remnant of the 'pneumatic' core that Gnostic doctrines saw as trapped in the material world. Bloch's staunch refusal of any form of mechanistic materialism – when read together with his extolling of Gnostic acosmism – would be a testimony to his adversity to the material world, to the point of ultimately rejecting matter *in toto* despite his own declared materialism.

Let us reformulate the problem once more. Since his subscription of a Marxist standpoint, Bloch has unflinchingly declared his philosophy to be materialistic, a position that he never retracted. On the other hand, his thought presents a series of mythologems, some of which present an explicit refusal of materiality, conceived as either erroneous and illusory or straightforwardly evil. Most notably, Gnostic systems present the material world as the cage out of which mankind ought to escape to attain salvation, aided by an alien God. Bloch's commending of those theologies raises the suspicion that his declared materialism could in fact hide an incapacity of dealing with the material aspects of reality. This suspicion is further reinforced by the presence of the notion of latency in his doctrine of categories, a notion that has historically been used by non-materialist thinkers and that is passible of being interpreted idealistically. In short, while Bloch commits to a materialist metaphysics, "he also wants to retain the antagonistic elements of discontinuity, crisis and breakthrough, which are based on the Gnostic doctrine of Exodus out of created matter."[114]

This difficulty, however poignant, is based on the assumption that Bloch's need to maintain a defying and opposing stance towards the world as it is – a world he doubtlessly portrays as marked by alienation and injustice – would inevitably lead him to oppose the material world from outside; in other words, the assumption that the only way to oppose *this* world and its materiality would be the destruction of matter *tout court*, paired with the adoption of an idealist standpoint, a utopia that is inevitably otherworldly.

There are two observations that may shed some light on Bloch's solution to this *impasse*. The first can be read directly from his text on the Aristotelian Left, where he concludes the essay stating the work that still has to be done for those who are to take stock of the medieval philosophers' account of matter and develop it further into a practical philosophy unsatiated with the *status quo*. At the close of the essay, he writes:

[114] Bielik-Robson, 'Will There Be Nothing Rather Than Something?', 50.

> Rather, the problem facing the left Aristotelians, still unsatisfied, remains more pressing than ever: how, in material events and their forms, transformations do not to lose the Topos, in which colours as well as the qualities of things do not become corrupted, in which life, consciousness, the path of human history, and its creations have a place against and within this enormous inorganic background. This [happens] with the one Arc: Utopia-Matter; which is so little a paradox that the dynamei-on matter [can] first imply a total concrete-utopian content, still latently held and founded.[115]

The problem of materialism, Bloch suggests, far from being resolved, calls for people to think and concretely develop new ways of approaching the material world, so that this may maintain the vivacity and liveliness of the self-shaping material substratum. This task, which Bloch implicitly assigns to his own philosophy, entails an attitude towards the world that is at the same time antagonistic and sympathetic. The development of a utopian account of matter (the 'arc', the link connecting the two), rather that throwing away the material in the name of a purified – either spiritual, pneumatic or idealist – construction of the end goal, sits inside the material world and aims at transforming it from within. In other words, Bloch's utopian philosophy in the last instance reposes on a wager, on the hope that one can act *against* and *within* this ill-constructed world, to straighten the wrongs and end its alienation. There are two ideological sources for the wrongs of this world, Bloch seems to suggest. On the one hand, the positing of a divine or metaphysical hypostasis acting from on high and imposing its will and its forms – the Aristotelian unmoved mover, or the monotheistic creator God –; on the other hand, the belief that matter cannot but be inert, passive, and thus ultimately impotent with regards to its own shaping. This leads us to the second observation, in reference to the categorical apparatus Bloch developed to back his metaphysical materialism. The category of *Latenz* serves to correct the two ideological distortions, preventing his philosophy from slipping into either a mechanistic account of the material world or into the postulate of a heteronomous force. While latency, Bloch recalls, "is not from this world as a mechanically manufactured one, it is certainly not from the other world, crystallized as a mythologically finished one."[116] As Zeilinger has aptly observed, "latency ensures that the best is not

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[115] Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, 66–67, italics mine. Translation slightly modified. Bloch, *Das Materialismusproblem, seine Geschichte und Substanz*, 545: 'Statt dessen gilt mehr als je das Problem, das unabgegoltene, der linken Aristoteliker: im materiellen Geschehen und seinem Gestalten, Umgestalten des Topos nicht zu verlieren, worin auch die Farben, die Qualitäten der Dinge nicht untergehen, worin Leben, Bewußtsein, menschlicher Geschichtsgang und seine Werke Platz haben, vor dem und in dem riesigen anorganischen Hintergrund. Das mit dem einen Bogen: Utopie-Materie; ist er doch so wenig Paradox, daß das Dynamei on Materie den ganzen konkret-utopischen Inhalt erst impliziert, noch latent hält und fundiert.'

[116] Bloch, *Experimentum mundi*, 147: 'denn sie ist, wenn sie nicht von dieser Welt ist, als einer mechanisch fertigen, so erst recht nicht von jener, als einer mythologische fertigen, auskristallisierten.'

forgotten,"[117] while at the same time avoiding an external hypostasis. It must be noted that this refusal of the substantiality of transcendent entities implies not only a repudiation of the traditional Christian or Jewish theological accounts of God (the Creator), but also the Gnostic constructs of an alien God (of Exodus) opposing the former. No external hypostasis is admittable: this is the gist of Bloch's metaphysical atheism.

This bring us back to Bloch's fundamental ontology: by affirming that the true essence is that which is not yet – positing the ontology of not-yet-being – Bloch endeavours to keep together the *refusal* of the world as it is and the possibility of *changing* the world (*this* world) towards its utopian realisation. His work is thus *against* and *within* the world, as much in his ontology and metaphysics as in his ethics and political philosophy. The notion of a self-moving and self-shaping matter, in fact, fits into Bloch's ethical and political need to reject any external heteronomous power, while at the same time refusing to accept any form of *datum* as the ultimate realisation of the potentiality inscribed in being. This refusal entails a specific movement of transcending, which nonetheless does not admit a superior and superimposed power but finds on the historical and temporal level its proper terrain, a material space kept open by its ontological constitution as 'not-yet':

> Matter is latent in these opennesses according to the direction of their objective-real hope-contents: as the end of self-alienation and objectivity encumbered with alien material, as matter of Things For Us. On the path towards this, the objective surpassing of what currently exists in history and world occurs: this transcending without transcendence, which is called process and is accelerated on earth so forcefully by human work.[118]

The ever-moving and self-forming matter, the historical process oriented towards its end-goal, the ontological negativity of the 'not-yet' are all weaved together through a non-fixed teleology that admits a final goal without crystallising it in a stiffened essence, through the entelechy which stirs and acts from within matter, effectively – although latently – marking its tendency. Bloch's ontology, philosophy of history and metaphysics thus confront us with a paradoxical core, where the disparate origin and the multifarious nature of the variety of conceptual tools devised and employed in his philosophy seem to collide. These logical frictions, which would

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[117] Zeilinger, 'Bloch-Wörterbuch', 31 August 2012, 241.

[118] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 210; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 241: 'In diesen Offenheiten ist Materie nach Richtung ihrer objektiv-realen Hoffnungsinhalte latent: als Ende der Selbstentfremdung und der mit Fremden behaften Objektivität, als Materie der Dinge für uns. Auf dem weg dazu hin geschieht das objektive Übersteigen des Vorhandenen in Geschichte und Welt: dies transzendenzlose Transzendieren, welches Prozeß heißt und durch die menschliche Arbeit so gewaltig auf der Erde beschleunigt wird.'

commonly be referred to as contradiction – if traditional logic must be followed – need be addressed and the contrasting elements which come to an opposition are in need of a solution. Instead of working towards an amalgamation of different sources or a dissipation of their tensions, Bloch seeks a solution in the discharge of the eruptive energy bursting forth from these sometimes dialectically opposed elements. In Bloch's so to say philosophical chemistry, the instability of these co-existing elements is exploited in the expectation of engendering a powerful – and emancipatory – reaction chain, whose ultimate outcome, however explosive, is (and cannot but remain) still unknown.

As it was clear from the first statements in the first edition of *Geist der Utopie*, Bloch's systematisation of messianism, is at its core a practical philosophy based on the embodiment of hope in the form of risk, informed hope, *docta spes*, but never certain of the final outcome. Hope acts therefore as a principle for every theoretical and practical wager on the possibility of fulfilling the identity content of the 'not-yet'. This hope has been historically crystallised perhaps in the most vivid forms in the "mythical images and objects of the end," which messianically set the process in motion and orient it towards its ultimate goal, towards its redemption.

3.2 The *Prinzip*

Having clarified the practical nature of Blochian philosophy and having stressed the risk entailed by the characterisation of the *Prinzip* with its hope content, it is now apt to distinguish it from other readings and other forms of the *principium*, most notably from Heidegger's discussion of the principle of reason.

The term principle – from *primus* "first" + root of *capere* "to take" – indicates something that stands as first in a succession (spatial or temporal), and accordingly something out of which something else ensues, derives, proceeds or evolves. It is possible to distinguish between a logical value (*principium cognoscendi*, a concept or proposition from which it is possible to proceed to the following one) and an ontological value of the term (*principium essendi*, something out of which another thing is derived in its reality).

Bloch and Heidegger, both interested in a combination of logical and ontological, both discard the opposition and the clear-cut distinction of the two realms, although on very different bases. First, let us deal with Heidegger's investigation into the notion of principle. Heidegger's philosophy seeks to determine the sense of being and does so through a research into the actual

manifestations (facticity) of beings, looking for the fundamental basis of their being.[119] From the existent beings to the being of their existence, from the ontic to the ontological level, from the multitude of beings to their fundament:[120] this latter is the form that the old quest for the ultimate principle takes in Heideggerian thought, a principle that comes before any distinction of thought into practical and theoretical and renders both branches of knowledge possible.[121] The logical cannot be merely method, detached from the content, nor the ontological can be referred to the sheer essence of beings: there must be a *logos* that gathers and sustains each and every being and this must be their ultimate fundament, their ground, their principle.[122] It is in this fundament that glimmers the sense of being of all beings. During the post-war period, while in search for post-metaphysical ways of thinking, Leibniz's notion of the principle of sufficient reason (*der Satz vom Grund)*, more than any other account of principle, attracted Heidegger's attention, due to the peculiar intertwining of reason (*ratione*), causation and ground. To Leibniz's treatment of the principle Heidegger devotes a lecture – given in 1956 and published the following year – which would however depart from the Leibnizian argument and point towards the hidden recesses of the sense of being. How should we aim to grasp the very meaning of this principle, which strikes us as of decisive importance and compels us with its cogency to find the abode of thinking in its vicinity? Leibniz's "*principium reddendae rationis sufficientis*" demands any research to ask the reason, the 'why', which lies beneath or behind – and thus justifies – whatsoever fact or being one is taking into consideration. Scouting for rationally reckonable 'causes' is one way the seek for the sufficient reason can take – it is the way of modern scientific reasoning, that often rather hinders the pursuit of truth by its manipulative attitude. A conspicuous part of the lecture is therefore devoted to an *Auseinendersetzung* with those forms of calculative and technological thinking against which the late Heidegger's ontology often polemically engages.[123] Those accustomed to Heidegger's line of argument will not find surprising that, as a response to the calculative reduction of thought, he eventually resorts to poetical thinking to counterbalance and correct the direction of the investigation into the nature of the principle of ground. It is in this context that some of

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[119] Cf. Dreyfus and Wrathall, 'Martin Heidegger: An Introduction to His Thought, Work and Life'. On 'facticity', cf. Heidegger, *Ontology — The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, paras 3, 6, 18.
[120] On the 'ontological difference', cf. Kovacs, 'The Ontological Difference in Heidegger's "Grundbegriffe"'; Nicholson, 'The Ontological Difference'.
[121] With regards to the relation between 'principle', 'ground' and 'fundament', see De Kuyer, 'The Problem of Ground in the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger'.
[122] On 'logos' as 'gathering' cf. Heidegger, 'Logos (Heraclitus, Fragment B 50)'; Rand, 'The Political Truth of Heidegger's "Logos"', 441.
[123] On this topic, cf. Blitz, 'Understanding Heidegger on Technology', pp. 71-76.

Goethe's lines are summoned to better determine the query about the *reason* – the *why* – aimed at in the principle: "Yet research [*Forschung*] untiringly strives and struggles / For the law, the ground, *why* and *how*."[124] Albeit this formulation suggests, in Heidegger's reading of Goethe, precisely the primary character of modern scientific research, enthralled by its dangerously calculative or representational attitude, the same lines also hints to a different and more apt approach to the nature of the principle of ground. In fact, following another Goethean verse, which reads: "How? When? Where? – The gods remain silent! / You hold to [*halten sich an*] *because* and ask not *why*?"[125] Heidegger intimates a threefold specification of the question around the reason, about the *why*. The investigation around the principle of ground has thus developed into the inquiry about the nature of the question 'why?' which finds articulation into a specification of temporal ('when?') and spatial ('where?') laws ('how?') – and this resembles our ordinary approach, tarnished by calculative thought. But Heidegger invites to pay heed to Goethe's saying instead, to focus on the 'because', the '*Weil'* – which, he notes, "is the shortened word for "as long as" [*dieweilen*],"[126] namely: an expression of duration. In other words, what Heidegger suggests, is that to avoid the dangerous shortcomings of calculative thought, we ought to look at the principle of ground – in its search for reasons and foundations [*Grunden*] – in a form of permanence and continuity, characteristics traditionally ascribed to being itself: "To rest, to last, to endure, is, however, the old meaning of the word "to be" [sein]."[127] Here the most prominent meaning Heidegger attaches to the term *principium* comes to the fore in its clarity: this principle holds a primary importance because it is the most original, the deepest, the foundation of everything else – not a merely logical kind of primacy, but rather an ontological one. Thus he describes the features of the fundament: "The ground is that upon which everything rests, what is always there for every being as its support. The because names this supporting presence before which we simply stop. The 'because' points into the essence of ground."[128] Heidegger's reading of the principle of ground reveals a *principium essendi*, intimately connected to the meaning of being as such, with three main characteristics: first, it is the foundation, of everything else, the support for every object – and therefore for every proposition which aims at objectivity; second, it remains still, immovable, constant,

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[124] Heidegger, 'The Principle of Ground', 215; cf. Goethe, *Chinesisch-deutsche Jahres- und Tageszeiten*, X.
[125] Heidegger, 'The Principle of Ground', 219.
[126] Heidegger, 219.
[127] Heidegger, 220.
[128] Heidegger, 219.

unchanging; third, it has ultimately an ontological value in so far as it makes ‘being’ resound in ‘fundament’.

3.3 Bloch’s *Prinzip*

This account of ‘principle’ can be directly compared with Bloch’s almost diametrically opposed one. To be sure, both thinkers deem the notion of ‘principle’ one of the worthiest of thought[129], one that without doubt has value, that is axiomatic. For Bloch, however, the principle – and particularly the principle of hope – accounts for the mature and inherited form of the liveliest and most inspiring mythologems gathered from the religious tradition: the principle enacts in fact a subversion of myth and mythologems, inherited into a political philosophy as its transcendental basis: the principle becomes the pre-political of politics. In so doing, the *Prinzip* comes to occupy a pivotal position within the wide Blochian philosophical encyclopaedia, directly innervating the various branches of his philosophy. In fact, the principle holds an *apriori* validity for the theoretical as well as for the practical sections of the system: Bloch’s *Erkenntnistheorie* and his materialistic cosmology, his Marxist political philosophy and his inheritance of religious motives, his aesthetics and his ethics, all are ultimately dependent on the Principle of hope, which – it could be argued – holds a position comparable to that of the Kantian *Ich denke* in his analytical section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. As much the longing for systematicity in Bloch’s thought is evident already in his early writings – as it has been shown – as the centrality of the principle is stated in his first book, *Geist der Utopie.* Although not explicitly referred as ‘principle’, in the second edition of the book Bloch makes mention of a brief series of mythologems (the soul, the messiah, the apocalypse) which will be eventually inherited in later conceptualisations as the principle of hope. Bloch weaves them together and makes a synthesis of them.

In the passage already quoted above, Bloch conjures three mythologems (the Messiah, the soul, the apocalypse) and weaves them together, making them the synthesis of the otherwise disparate strains of Marxism and religious inheritance.[130] These three mythologems are of paramount importance for three reasons: first, they embody a striving towards completeness; second, they are the basis of action and knowledge; third, they are the *apriori* of politics and culture.

Following these three aspects, deeply intertwined with one another, it is possible to better describe Bloch’s account of principle. According to the last one, the principle is an *apriori*.

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[129] Cf. Heidegger, 222.

[130] Cf. above, p. 139.

Reading this term in its Kantian connotation, this means that the principle is a transcendental element – in this specific case, however, it is the utmost transcendental, the highest point of the system, providing unification for all its branches. In his *Tübingen Einleitung in die Philosophie*, a late text comprising the exposition of some theoretical aspects of his thought – particularly his ontology of not-yet being –, Bloch presents hope, the content of the principle, as the '*Urrätsel'*, an originary mystery, and thus portrays its features: "Driving in its not-having, pleased in its becoming, active hope is committed to the land that is at least called anti-nothing. Since the beginning of history, his Everything lies nowhere but in the working intention towards it." [131] Hope, if it is 'active' – not merely wishful thinking –, works as a principle of human action. It does not indicate the content (the essence) of what ought to be hoped for, but points towards the direction of the accomplishment of the ultimate goal, which is not immediately knowable. What human knowledge can attain, however, is the series of possible and actual disappointments of hope, its failures or its betrayals: it is avoiding these – diverting from the dangerous lines of escape that eventually lead to the 'nothing' – that the principle, like a compass, orients the agent towards the historical attainment of the 'Everything', of completeness (of humans and of the world alike) that is not yet known nor realised. An action, generally described, needs an agent, an intended end and its actualisation.[132] 'Hope' as a principle provides the agent with the knowledge that what is intended is indeed possible, although not automatically granted. In other words: 'hope' nourishes the intention of the agent to act towards a given end. Furthermore, the principle of hope always refers a particular given end to the ultimate will for completeness, to the ultimate goal, in which it finds the utmost value. By attributing value to this goal and by informing the agent about the possibility – never the certainty – of its attainment, 'hope' works as the principle of any human action – it works as the transcendental of ethics, setting the condition of possibility of every human enterprise, no matter if on the personal or the collective (political) level. To the knowledge that the intention is not naively constructed, an actual possibility in the object corresponds. The objective correlate to human action is matter – the universal constituent of the world; and to hope as an affect of the acting subject there corresponds a property of the thing that is to be realised. The material counterpart to human's subjective hope is embedded in matter itself, in the very substance of the world, where the concrete possibility for change and betterment finds

[131] Bloch, *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie*, 277: 'Im Nicht-Haben treibend, am Werden beglückt, ist die tätige Hoffnung dem Land verschworen, das mindestens Anti-Nichts heißt. Sein Alles liegt seit Anfang der Geschichte nirgends als in der arbeitenden Intention darauf hin.'
[132] Cf. Hornsby, 'Action'.

abode. To be sure, the possibility of realising the intended goal is pictured in the agent's imagination – in their capacity to imagine the realisation of the thing –, but it is also objectively determined by the hidden tendency of matter itself. Mankind is not a subject acting onto a passive object, it is on the contrary one with the material process, of which it represents the main impulse striving towards realisation, along with many others already straining towards the goal. In a synthetic – if juvenile (Bloch was 17) – formulation, Bloch presents this close relation between the capacity to picture an intended and longed for object, and the very essence of the object itself, through the notion of objective phantasy: "The essence of force is spirit and impulse unto cheerful creative forming, *the thing in itself is the objective phantasy.*"[133] In this short and anapodictic statement, Bloch suggests that it is within the thing in itself, within the intended and longed for essence yet to be realised, that the agent's phantasy – their capacity of prefiguration – finds an objective correlate. 'Hope', rather than merely informing the agent's intentions, finds its *raison d'etre* deep down into the materiality of the thing whose essence ought to be realised. The act of the subject, then, is that of shaping and creating it – of realising it – in the joyful expression of their spiritual forces. The principle of hope works here as a true constituent of the world, not just of the primary affective character of mankind. In *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Bloch's mature work dedicated to expounding the multifarious aspects of the principle, he indicates the validity of the principle in the material world, not deterministically foreclosed but always open to contingent reconfigurations. The *quid* of what is hoped for, although not yet known or given in advance, determines the direction of the tendencies inherent in matter itself: 'hope' is presented as a cosmological principle, inherent in the material constitution of the world. The principle of hope furnishes the condition of possibility to conceive a materialistic worldview whereby matter is passible of change and transformation in a non-deterministic way: it is a cosmological transcendental. This constitution of matter, open to transformation, allows and calls for an intervention of humankind to aim at the goal – here expressed as the end of self-alienation – throughout the historical process. In this excerpt, however, it becomes clear that the Blochian principle is not only an *a priori*, not only a transcendental – a condition of possibility for what can empirically take place; it is also what sets in motion the "objective surpassing of what currently exists in history and world" – which surpassing Bloch names 'transcending without transcendence.'

[133] Bloch, *Philosophische Aufsätze zur objektiven Phantasie*, 133: "Das Wesen der Kraft ist Geist und Drang zum heiteren, schaffenden Gestalten, das Ding an sich ist die Objektive Phantasie" .

With this notion, anther value of Bloch's principle comes to the fore – and together with it, his way of weaving together inherited religion and Marxist materialism. Hope, in other words, is not only the prerequisite to get a truthful structuring of anthropological and cosmological discourse – not only the condition of possibility to think about humankind and the world – but also, on another level, the source of motion of every meaningful attempt to transform and realise humankind and the world alike. By attributing specific weight to the goal, by determining the subjective and objective real possibility of its attainment, 'hope' creates that – so to say – gravity field wherein the agent, attracted to the goal, through their movements and operations, transforms – sometimes even subverts – the hurdles and limitation encountered in the world to attain the intended object. This intra-historical process consists of an act of going beyond the *datum*, beyond the current configuration of reality towards a new and more fitting one to accommodate a world with no alienation. It is an act of transcending, but it is not guided or predetermined by a superimposed transcendent entity to steer the process and conduct the agent throughout it. To qualify the means of this transcending act, Bloch resorts to messianic mythologems and inherits them, placing them onto an historical plane of political action. The principle, taken in this form, expresses the inherited messianic force that thrusts towards the realisation of the Kingdom (mythologically expressed: the Kingdom of God; inherited into the 'Kingdom of Freedom'). The relevance of this momentous force is clear from Bloch's early writings, particularly when in the first edition of *Geist der Utopie* he presents the reader with the "jüdische Weltgefühl" that appealed to an entire generation of German-Jewish thinkers. When he lists the characteristics of the feeling towards the world of the Jews oh his generation, in fact, the series culminates in "visions of otherworldly magnitude" [*überweltengroßen Visionen*] wherein the acme is "the as much motoric as pregnant historical, non-pictorial, preternatural being-oriented towards a not yet existing messianic goal over the world."[134]Albeit it will take the name of 'principle of hope' only in future works, the orientation towards a hoped-for goal is already presented in this book as one of the driving forces. It is characterised as 'motoric', so it is a principle of motion: it prompts the process to start and develop. Bloch depiction of this orientation as *unbildlich* and *unnaturhaft* should not be mistaken for an appeal to a form of extramundane *primum movens*: it is non-pictorial because it cannot yet be fully figured but only pre-figured as it has not reached the stage of its complete realisation (the agent does not possess the knowledge of the *quid* of the intended goal yet); it is preternatural not so

[134] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 322: 'ebensowohl motorische[s] als pregnant historische[s], unbildliche[s], unnaturhafte[s] Gerichtetsein auf ein noch nicht daseiendes messianisches Ziel über der Welt'.

much because it corresponds to some sort of magic – although, as it will be explained in a following section, there is here a form of theurgy – as because it is not reducible to the mechanistic realm of causes and effects that constitute the naturalistic worldview.

It is now also possible to answer the question why messianism, among many other sets of mythologems, is elevated to the point of becoming the linchpin of Bloch's inheritance of religion. His philosophy's ultimate principle – hope – demands a not-yet definite entelechy, a final goal which is susceptible to change, and not pre-given and foreclosed; without the axiomatic weight of this final goal, in fact, any historical, personal or collective, endeavour, is simply inconceivable. Why would any agent perform an action if they did not see any value in its outcome? And why would they engage in any enterprise, if they did not think at it as possibly successful? And why, finally, would they strive to attain a goal if the world was a mere set of deterministically conceived causes and effects? The best prefiguration, although in mythological fashion, of a form of hope which works as an anthropological and cosmological principle according to which human action is oriented towards a valuable goal, whose attainability is materialistically provable (although not taken for granted), is for Bloch a messianic one. In the longing, the wait and the preparation for the advent of the Messiah, in the prefiguration of messianic times and in the subversion of the world-order that it entails, messianism provides humankind with the most powerful images of hope ever conceived. A Marxist materialist as Bloch is, however, would not be able to admit a form of providence – assistance from the on-high – guiding the process: that would precisely limit the freedom of the agent that they are longing for in their attempt to fully realise their goal (negatively posed: the end of alienation). In his system, guided by the principle of hope that informs any of its branches, there is no space for transcendence – there is, nonetheless, room for a transcending movement, which is demanded and actually implied by the principle itself, a movement whose description is often tinged by neoromantic atmosphere. In Bloch's inheritance of messianic mythologems, and in reworking and connecting them in a fine web of cultural references, a novel metaphysics is conceived, that does not admit transcendent entities but conceives a *surplus*, thinking seriously its *μετα-*, its capacity to overcome, surpass and transform the given. This capacity to move beyond is brought to evidence with particular effectiveness in its artistic and generally aesthetic representations. In *Geist der Utopie*, Bloch devotes one of the central sections of the book to the phenomenon of the utmost amazement, the moment in which one experiences that the realm of perceivable object hides a latent and deeper realm that exceeds the plane of sheer inert matter and is passible of being perceived in presentiment:

> What is felt, meant here is the same every time: our life, our future, the just lived moment and the lighting of its darkness, its all-containing latency, in the most immediate amazement of all. Our moral-mystical concern and our self-ascertainment in itself is meant; some surplus based on nothing extrinsic, the surplus of the *moral-mystical existence-meaning in itself*, is proper to every such experience and especially to every creative concentration of symbol-intentional profundity.[135]

Artistic activity is also subjected to the very same principle that orients anthropology and cosmology. The intention of artistic creation points towards a symbol, a unification (ultimately, of humankind to that which is alien to it), and in so doing directly addresses human behaviour and human actions: the morality of every single choice is at stake here. The same principle that orients human action also informs the reverberation of such actions in artistic representation, maintaining the same cardinal value. What exceeded the plane of mechanistic materialism there, here is a subtle form of amazement that invests all of being, it is a *surplus* [*Überschuss*] of meaning that pertains to human life and links it to his future possible developments, to its becoming and eventually fully realising itself. This neoromantic depiction of the experience of marvel is one, to be sure indirect, inheritance of religious motives, as Bloch intimates in the same passage, some lines further down:

> That gives them their tremendous promiscuity with respect to time, space, and terminus; that marvels on through these constructs in a philosophical lyricism of the final border standing above every discipline, spiritually *kat exochen*, arch-immanent and thus metareligiously superior, exterior, even to the formations of faith, to the other world.[136]

Artistic creation, Bloch seems to suggest, is the form of spiritual experience per excellence – in this following the dicta of *Blaue Reiter* artists and intellectuals[137] – whose value is 'metareligious'. This latter word expresses the extinguished conventional form of religion and its inheritance in more developed form of spirituality which do not require the belief in a deity, conceived as an otherworldly entity.[138] The utmost amazement sparked by the beauty of a work

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[135] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 194, translation slightly altered. Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 244–45: 'Gefühlt, gemeint ist hier jedesmal dasselbe, unser Leben, unsere Zukunft, der gerade gelebte Augenblick und die Lichtung seines Dunkels, seiner alles enthaltenden Latenz im allerunmittelbarsten Erstaunen. Unsere moralisch-mystische Sorge und Selbstvergewisserung an sich ist gemeint; irgend ein Überschuß, durch nichts äußerlich begründet, der Überschüß moralisch-mystischer Existenzbedeutung an sich eignet allen solchen Erlebnissen und nun gar erst allen schöpferischen Konzentrierungen symbolintentionaler Tiefe.'

[136] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 194; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 245: 'Das gibt ihnen ihre ungeheuerliche Promiskuität gegen Zeit, Raum und Terminus, wundert ihn durch dieser Gebilde, in einem philosophischen Lyrismus letzter Grenze, der über allen Disziplinen steht, seelenhaft katexochen, erzimmanent und so selbst noch dem Gestaltungen des Glaubens, der anderen Welt metareligiös überlegen, entlegen.'

[137] Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular; On this subject, cf. Latini, Il possibile e il marginale.

[138] Cunico, 'Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) : messianismo ateo come meta-religione'.

of art takes the place of the fear and trembling in front of the numinous – only, this time, without the fear: there is no almighty presence to be afraid of – only the spectacle of the manifold and astonishing potentialities of mankind and the world. These moments of amazement allow humans to foretell something, which is not liable of being rationally grasped as an intuition nor as a mere idea, allows to venture into the realm of what is not yet there and calls for its realisation, permits to prefigure the ultimate content of hope. This latter, the highest principle of Bloch's philosophical system, has thus proven to occupy the capital position even in his utopian aesthetics.

It is now possible to compare the different features of Bloch's and Heidegger's account of principle. While it is true that for both thinkers, the investigation into the nature of the *Prinzip* is deemed of utmost importance and both reject the distinction of *principium essendi* and *principum cognoscendi*, there are remarkable differences that place their accounts on opposite sides. Heidegger thinks of the *Prinzip* in terms of the ultimate foundation, *Grund*, for whatever exists and therefore for the validity of every proposition *on* what exists. Heidegger is looking primarily for an ontological principle that could grant access to the sense of being. Bloch's search, on the contrary, does not content itself with a new ontology – although his ontology of not-yet being presents a new investigation into being as such –, but endeavours to make use of the ontological findings towards a practical philosophy. Secondarily, Heidegger moves from this conception of the fundament of being to the hint that this basis that is sought after must be still, immovable, constant. Bloch, on the other hand, devises a principle that is first and foremost a principle of motion, when considered in its material and objective regards, and a principle of action (a *principium actionis*), when laid at the basis of human actions. There is no immovable ground for Bloch; on the contrary, contingencies are always changing and the hoped-for contend must be continually re-thought. What is constant – the only thing – is the direction towards the attainment of the goal, a direction which is nonetheless only negatively determined through the rejection of possible failures and betrayals of the principle. Both Heidegger and Bloch display a form of neoromantic attitude in their turning their sight to a variety of forms of art. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that when they deal with such a paramount figure of German literature as Goethe, they linger on quite opposite aspects of his production. Whereas Heidegger evokes Goethe's verses for suggesting a sense of immobility, reminding of the archaic meaning of the verb *Weilen*, "The fiddle stops, the dancer rests [weilt],"[139] Bloch's references to Goethe are mostly directed to the character of Faust, presented

[139] Heidegger, 'The Principle of Ground', 220.

as a ‘leading figure’ (an embodiment of the principle) in his *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*. Of Faust Bloch highlights his unflinching determination and desire, the will and the ascending movement, as well as the dimension of the “thrill” – all features that make of Faust a manifesto of human’s sprit to venture, experiment and transform.

We can now finally take stock of the presentation of the principle of hope as the inheritance of religion and answer the question of the meaning of Bloch’s claim that eschatological messianism is the inheritable the substratum of explosive hope in totality.

3.4 The Principle of Hope as the Keystone of Bloch’s Practical Philosophy

The principle of hope, as Bloch presents it in his philosophical system, is assigned the double task of being a synthesis of the various branches of the system and a catalyst of the various latent tendencies towards the attainment of the ultimate goal. Its synthesizing work consists not of an amalgamation of different and somewhat contrasting elements of Bloch’s philosophy – most notably: of Marxism and religion, of atheism and Christianity –, but in a combination of the most progressive aspects of each element so to trigger a powerful and emancipatory reaction-chain. The tensions that animate and stretch the system are not resolved in a mediation of opposites – Bloch’s philosophy is not one of a Confucian-like doctrine of the mean –, but in the reciprocal contamination of the most reactive sides of the selected elements that compose the system. Bloch’s philosophy presents 1. ontological, 2. historical, and 3. metaphysical tensions, exposing it to the allegation of presenting irresolvable antinomies. 1. His ontology paradoxically suggests that the very essence of beings, their *quid*, is that which is not-yet – “the Essence […] has not yet appeared”[140] –, adjusting the determination of the attributes of beings in accordance with historical time, on the one hand, and the category of possibility on the other. In this context, the principle of hope confers a future-oriented and a prefigurative character to the determination of the *quid* of its content, therefore allowing for a time- and possibility-informed notion of being such as the not-yet-being. 2. Bloch’s philosophical system is also innervated by the tension between history and eschatology, between the need for realisation and the need for completeness: the intended goal ought to be the ultimate one, lest the historical process falls short of the goal – the attainment of the “utopian Totum […] that homeland of identity”[141] –; at the same time, the attainment of the goal must be feasible, otherwise the historical process finds itself frustrated in a never-ending vacuous activity: “nothing is more

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[140] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 194; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 223: ‘Das Wesen [...] ist noch nicht erschienen.’

[141] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 209; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 241: ‘das utopische Totum [...] Heimat der Identität.’

repugnant to utopian conscience itself than utopia with unlimited travel; endless striving is vertigo, hell."[142] The principle of hope pulls together these two needs by ensuring that any action is at the same time feasible in the *hic at nunc* of historical time, without ever losing sight of the eschatologically-driven pursuit of the ultimate goal, wherein the utmost value is to be found. 3. Finally, a metaphysical tension also endangers the cohesion of Bloch's system: his account of matter demands the renunciation of an external, demiurge-like entity or force that moulds matter from above – which would but reintroduce a form of transcendence in his materialism – but at the same time does not admit a dry mechanistic materialism with no space for contingency – and therefore no crevice for possibility. Again, the principle of hope, in its metaphysical implications, sets the conditions to conceive a self-moving and "self-creating matter,"[143] endowed with agency, thus providing the basis for a utopian-informed dialectical materialism:

> The real open world is that of *dialectical materialism*, which is not carrying any mechanistic eggshells. It is as powerfully removed as mechanical materialism from the idealisms of reason as creator, of spirit as demiurge, from bible-bashing and hypostases of the other world, but also from the statics in the particular, above all in the whole of the world, which mechanical materialism still venerates, as does idealism.[144]

In their paradoxical coexistence and apparent incompatibility, these opposite claims – stemming from the disparate sources of Bloch's philosophy, which draws on the one hand from classical metaphysics and theology, on the other from Marxism – are all woven together by the wise needle of the principle of hope that utopianly redesigns the warp and weft of the social and metaphysical fabric. The principle, the keystone of the philosophical system, does not provide a solution or a release of tension on the sheer logical level. In this, it is no dissimilar from other attempts to systematize messianism, all responding to paradoxical accounts of logic. What the principle of hope is nonetheless capable of bringing about, however, is a catalysis of the reagents, a discharge of the emancipatory energies abiding inside each component. Mankind and matter, history and eschatology, being and not-yet being, Marxism and religion,

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[142] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 314; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 366: 'Nichts widerstrebt derart gerade utopischem Gewissen mehr als Utopie mit unbegrenzter Reise; Unendlichkeit des Strebens ist Schwindel, Hölle.'
[143] Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, 28; Bloch, *Das Materialismusproblem*, 507: 'sich selber ausgebärende Materie'.
[144] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 336; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 390: 'Die wirkliche offene Welt ist die des dialektischen Materialismus, der keine mechanistischen Eierschalen trägt. Von den Idealismen eines Verstands als Erzeuger, eines Geistes als Demiurg, von Pfaffentum und Jenseits-Hypostasen ist er so mächtig weit entfernt wie der mechanische Materialismus, aber auch von der Statik im Einzelnen, vor allem im Ganzen der Welt, dem dieser, zusammen mit dem Idealismus, noch huldigt.'

are set up in a synergic deflagration, an explosive collaboration on the way towards the end of alienation – towards redemption. As Bloch synthetically remarked: "*Messianism is the burning mystery of all revolutionary, all fulfilled enlightenment.*"[145] If hope in totality is the "*inherited substratum*" of "*explosively posited messianism*,"[146] the principle of hope itself is the core, the basis and the animator of any revolutionary enterprise.

Whereas the principle is of no help to solve the logical contradictions that undermine the soundness of a system – were it grounded on pure logical bases –, the same principle holds validity in a practical philosophy such as Bloch's one. His philosophy is ultimately a wager. The extent to which a principle of praxis imbues and pervades the theoretical scaffolding of Bloch's thought is well revealed by a quote from the pre-critical Kant Bloch is quite fond of, using it in two systematically foundational books such as *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* and *Geist der Utopie*. To quote from the latter:

> "It does not seem to me," says Kant in the "Dreams of a Spirit Seer" that ironically betray his deepest principle three times over – "It does not seem to me that some kind of affection or unexamined inclination has deprived me of deference to any grounds for or against, save one. The scales of the understanding are not entirely impartial, after all, and the arm that bears the inscription *Hope for the Future* has a mechanical advantage causing even slight reasons falling into the corresponding pan to far outweigh speculations that in themselves have greater weight." This is however the only "inaccuracy" that even Kant "most likely cannot correct, indeed would never want to correct"; and the time has come to install, purely and exhaustively, such pious deception, such primacy and pragmatism of practical reason with regard to the actual, to the moral-mystical evidence of truth, such a metaphysics of thought conscience and thought hope.[147]

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[145] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, 225; Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 317: 'Das Messianische ist das rote Gehemnis jeder revolutionär, jeder in Fülle sich haltended Aufklärung.'

[146] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1193; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1404: 'geerbt Substratum,' 'sprengend gesetzter Messianismus.'

[147] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 186–87; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 235; Cf. also Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 844; Cf. Kant, *Immanuel Kants Werke*, vol. II. Vorkritischer Schriften, p. 365. 'Allein ob man zwar über eine Kleinigkeit keine große Zurüstung machen darf, so kann man sie doch gar wohl bei Gelegenheit derselben machen, und die entbehrliche Behutsamkeit beim Entscheiden in Kleinigkeiten kann zum Beispiele in wichtigen Fällen dienen. Ich finde nicht, daß irgendeine Anhänglichkeit, oder sonst eine vor der Prüfung eingeschlichene Neigung meinem Gemüte die Lenksamkeit nach allerlei Gründen vor oder dawider benehme, eine einzige ausgenommen. Die Verstandeswage ist doch nicht ganz unparteiisch, und der eine Arm derselben, der die Aufschrift führet: Hoffnung der Zukunft, hat einen mechanischen Vorteil, welcher macht, daß auch leichte Gründe, welche in die ihm angehörige Schale fallen, die Spekulationen von an sich größeren Gewichte auf der andern Seite in die Höhe ziehen. Dieses ist die einzige Unrichtigkeit, die ich nicht wohl heben kann, und die ich in der Tat auch niemals heben will'.

If the principle of hope operates as a synthesis, it does not do so by bringing the various theoretical tensions to a state of quietude; it nevertheless does not despair in front of the possibly aporetical outcomes that such audacious juxtapositions might bring about. Faced rather with the impellent existential as well as political need to take a decision, Bloch's thought does not yield to a renunciative scepticism – the only legitimate attitude ensuing from the realisation of the impossibility to logically and metaphysically ground one's stance –, but on the contrary it chooses a form of partiality that affects its entire edifice, theoretical and practical. This inaccuracy – almost a form of bias, one might say – is provoked by the unbalance of the principle of hope, which leads whoever embraces it to incline towards the future, the possible, the open. In *Geist der Utopie*, already well aware of the necessity to ground his system of messianism, Bloch does not silence the "primacy and pragmatism of practical reason" and instead advocates for the adoption of this "pious deception," in the search for a mystically and practically based notion of truth. In front of the eventually always paralyzing convolution of logical reasoning – Bloch seems to argue – the solution does not come from a more refined transcendental deduction or logical science, but from the risky decision to rely on hope. Hope can be embodied only when one takes this risk and exposes oneself to the possibility of failure or disappointment. To the question Bloch raised at his inaugural Tübingen lecture, "can hope be disappointed?"[148] one must respond affirmatively: "Hope is not confidence. If it wasn't disappointable, it wouldn't be hope."[149] It would otherwise be just a reiterated account of devout and submissive faith.

The decisive difference between a dormant or acquiescing faith and an eruptive account of active hope lies in the theory-praxis tie developed in the maturity years, whereby one can incidentally observe Bloch's definitive acquisition of a Marxist standpoint.

Bloch's comment on the well-known *11 Theses on Feuerbach* in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* constitutes perhaps the most explicit and brilliant display of his adoption of a Marxist epistemological stance. While commenting the eleventh Thesis, Bloch stresses how "In Marx a thought is not true because it is useful, but it is useful because it is true,"[150] therefore not only preventing the reader to interpret Marx's indication as an invitation to dispense with philosophical reflections, but placing the question about truth – eminently philosophical – at

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[148] Bloch, Literarische Aufsätze, 385–92.
[149] Bloch and Adorno, 'Etwas Fehlt', 75: 'Hoffnung is nicht zuversicht. Wenn sie nicht enttäuschbar wäre, wäre sie keine Hoffnung.'
[150] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 277; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 321–22: 'bei Marx ist nicht deshalb ein Gedanke wahr, weil er nützlich ist, sondern weil er wahr ist, ist er nützlich'.

the centre of any practical interest. The inquiry around the veracity of whatsoever proposition, however, cannot be completely exhausted had it been conducted neglectful of its practical implications and of the sensory and material aspects that impinge upon its validity. The process of validation is carried out by thought, but in Bloch's words:

> the function of thought is, even more than sensory perception, an activity, a critical, insistent, revealing activity; and the best proof is thus the practical testing of this deciphering. Just as every truth is a truth for a certain purpose, and there is no truth for its own sake, except as self-deception or whimsy, so too there is no complete proof of a truth from within itself as a truth which merely remains theoretical; in other words: *there is no theoretically immanently possible complete proof*.[151]

In short, the confrontation with the material side of the analysed judgments is not an accessory activity that could be performed at will – supplying the already proven correctness of a proposition with a concrete example – but rather an essential moment of the validation process, without which a thought cannot be said to be properly true. Bloch specifies:

> Correctness is not yet truth, however, that is, depiction of reality and also the power of intervening in reality according to the measure of its known agencies and laws. In other words: truth is not a theory relationship alone, but *a definite theory-practice relationship***.**[152]

Properly intended, truth encompasses not only an accurate reading of reality, but also – and foremost – the capacity to operate onto it, deploying a transformative power. To sum up his Marxist epistemological attitude, marked by the intertwining threads of theory and practice, Bloch eventually concludes: "Concrete thought had never been valued more highly than it was here, where it became the light for action, and never had action been valued more highly than here, where it became the crowning of truth."[153] It is exactly at the point of encounter of theory

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[151] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 268; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 311: 'Die Denkfunktion also ist mehr noch als die sinnliche Anschauung eine Tätigkeit, eine kritische, eindringliche, aufschließende; und der beste Beweis ist deshalb die praktische Probe auf diese Entschlüsselung. Wie alle Wahrheit eine Wahrheit wozu ist, und es keine um ihrer selbst willen gibt, außer als Selbsttäuschung oder als Spintisiererei, so gibt es keinen vollen Beweis einer Wahrheit aus ihr selbst als einer bloß theoretisch bleibenden; mit anderen Worten: es gibt keinen theoretisch-immanent möglichen vollen Beweis.'

[152] Ibid.: "Richtigkeit aber ist noch nicht Wahrheit, das heißt: Abbildung der Wirklichkeit sowie Macht, in die Wirklichkeit nach Maßgabe ihrer erkannten Agentien und Gesetzmäßigkeiten einzugreifen. Mit anderen Worten: Wahrheit ist kein theorie-Verhältnis allein, sondern ein Theorie-Praxis-Verhältnis durchaus."

[153] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 272; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 315: 'Höher ist der konkrete Gedanke nie gewartet worden als hier, wo er das Licht zur Tat wurde, und höher nie die Tat als hier, wo sie zur Krönung der Wahrheit wurde.'

and practice – of argued thought and informed activity – that lies the principle of hope, sustaining and connecting the two co-essential moments of information and transformation. It operates in an utterly non-neutral, in fact distinctly partisan way, so that any gauging and assessing appears almost skewed towards the ever weightier side wherein value – something worth to be hoped for – is found.

One can see how pervasive this imbalance is if one recalls the aforementioned paradoxical moment of the beginning, described as the "darkness of the lived moment." The reality of dearth or lack described as the negative, the *Nicht*, in which any individual finds themselves trapped in, is dialectically overturned in a desiderative push to be freed from this state. Whence does the force and energy to execute this reversal come? What is the fuel of this dialectical engine capable of liberating the single one and their community? In the answer to these questions the principle of hope becomes manifest in tipping the balance in favour of an affirmation of possibility over necessity and of a transformative force over the inertia of the status quo. This way it becomes incorporated not only in the decisive personal struggles for the full realisation of the self, but also as a constant presupposition of any form of political life and action. Acting as a catalyst, it builds up and gathers the energies that compose the pre-political thrust to any concrete endeavour or engagement with social realities. It is the *apriori* of politics in so far as it does not provide any determinate direction as to the specific form to be aimed at, or the means for the struggle towards realisation, but constantly sustains human agency in the task of reshaping the borders of the political. Its realm are the fringes of the political in a narrow sense, which are constantly and stubbornly redesigned to adjust to more human living conditions.

Now that the clarification of the pivotal role of the principle of hope has been concluded, it is finally possible to read Bloch's use of messianic mythologems under a new light, allowing for a deeper and broader understanding of his whole philosophy of religion. The *Prinzip*, the keystone of Bloch's philosophy, is passible to be expressed in figurative fashion – and thus has been in fact historically portrayed in most occasions. Bloch's encyclopaedic approach to the wide variety of religious mythologems accords a specific primacy to the Judeo-Christian tradition, of which the messianic lore represents a considerable part. Bloch's inheritance of this mythological material, however, does not stop at the careful selection of the most explosively charged mythologems, but ventures as far as to reassemble them in a completely new configuration, which from the religious point of view cannot be but heretic, and from the naïve atheist perspective cannot but be (wrongly) perceived as a reinstatement of myth. Bloch's development of a messianism *sui generis* on the one hand gathers and valorises – awakens, one

could say – the emancipatory elements of a religious tradition, on the other provides a figurative counterpart of the principle of hope set in action.

Chapter IV. Messianic Dialectic: Atheist-Gnostic Messianism

After having analysed the set of sometimes disparate sources of Bloch's philosophy of religion and having clarified the central role of the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is now possible to describe the peculiar dynamic and the specific function religious imagery plays in his philosophy. It has been observed how the set of mythologems Bloch mobilises throughout his works serves him to offer a redefinition of the boundaries of the political sphere. It is by working on the margins of the political – on the presuppositions of political action and on the ultimate goals of political activity – that the variety of Jewish, Christian and Gnostic mythologems find fertile terrain and bear fruit. In this chapter, I will first deal with the pre-conditions of political activity, showing how Bloch's inherited messianism serves the purpose of construing a pre-political thrust – the 'lower margin' of the political sphere. Here it will be important to notice how Bloch appropriates and blends together the single elements analysed above, and what role they do play. Secondly, I will reconstruct the 'upper margin' of the political, by showing how religious mythologems contribute to the utopian imaginary of the historical and of the ultimate aim of personal and political actions. In this context, a clarification of the meaning of the theocratic form envisaged through Judeo-Christian mythologems will be necessary. Throughout the exploration of both the fringes of the political sphere, it will be important to keep in mind that Bloch conjures religious imagery only in so far as in the inheritable substratum of theological figures one may retrace the principle of hope. It is this double dialectical movement – the synthesis of Jewish, Christian and Gnostic mythologems, and their inheritance as a principle of hope – that characterise Bloch's original appropriation of messianism.

1. Atheist-Gnostic Messianism *qua* pre-political Thrust

Bloch's practical philosophy takes as a point of departure a sense of lack, dissatisfaction, void that any person experiences in life. This element of negativity applies as much to the personal as to the social level. It is reflected in Brecht's verse from his play *Mahagonny*,[1] "Something's missing"[2] – here pointing to the sense of shallow emptiness that the characters feel in a context of dehumanising capitalism – but finds its most characteristic formulation in the notion of the 'darkness of the lived moment', discussed in the previous chapter. The central query with

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[1] Brecht, *Mahagonny*.
[2] Cf. the conversation between Bloch and Adorno on the Brechtian fragment: Bloch and Adorno, 'Etwas Fehlt', 74; Bloch and Adorno, 'Something's Missing'; Cf. Truskolaski, '"Etwas Fehlt"'.

regards to this state of privation and dearth revolves around the way to overcome the privation and strive towards a form of completeness, ultimately realising the fully fledged acting subject in a world that is finally not alienated from it. The structure of the path towards this goal – the "Ways in this world by which the inward can become outward and the outward like the inward,"[3] as the ex-ergo of the final chapter of Spirit of Utopia reads – requires an initial thrust, that dialectically converts the initial privation in desire and provides the force to pursue the subject's aim to completeness. Some of the inherited messianic mythologems serve this purpose of providing the system with a propulsive force, a source of energy for the process of personal and historical realisation to take place. Inherited messianism works here as a principle of action, endowing the subject with the capacity to move past the state of dearth and privation. The messianic imagery conjured up in Bloch's early works – and very often reprised later on – contribute, in short, to elucidate, if in a mythological fashion, the basis of the human capacity to transform itself and the world. It legitimises the hope for change, allowing to think about its very possibility. Bloch does so through an original blend of Gnostic-infused Christian Christology and Jewish doctrines about the Messiah, a mixture resulting in a heretic approach from the point of view of both religions. It is possible, I argue, to distinguish different moments in Bloch's various manoeuvres with the various religious sources, whose re-composition results in an atheist-gnostic messianism. The usage of Jewish, Christian and Gnostic sources, in other words, yields specific outcomes in his system of utopian philosophy.

1.1 Jewish Mythologems

Though the historical origin of the figure of the Messiah is undoubtedly Jewish, and Bloch often quotes from the Bible – and sometimes from the Talmud – there is no specific treatment and characterisation of this figure that can be referred to one particular account or doctrine found in Jewish tradition. As Landmann sums up, "Like the Baal-Shem, Ernst Bloch's Messiah was […] a mythical figure that recurred informally in his conversation."[4] To be sure, one can argue that Bloch's usage of the term is informal or casual, if one points to the absence of a personal account of the Messiah, to the lack of a flesh-and-blood saviour as found in many other accounts. Bloch is in fact more interested in what he calls the "original spirit of the Messiah"[5] – an overarching concept that includes the inheritable mythologems of the religious traditions he dissects. The characterisation of the messianic spirit, however, is all but casual,

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[3] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 231; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 289: 'oder über die Weltwege, vermittelst derer das Inwendige auswendig und das Auswendige wie das Inwendige werden kann.'
[4] Landmann, 'Das Judentum bei Ernst Bloch und seine messianische Metaphysik', 174.
[5] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 192; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 242: 'originären Messiasgeist.'

and results from a meticulous selection of features, many of which derive from Jewish sources. The messianic spirit, arguably the religious-mythological counterpart to the "Spirit of Utopia", is first and foremost permeated with a longing and a striving towards an ultimate goal. Secondly, this endeavour to attain the goal involves both socio-political and personal changes: both the sides of object and subject of the historical process are to be transformed, sometimes disruptively, to get to the final aim. It has been noted before how the force of attraction to the end goal, which is loaded with ethical and political value, confers to the subject the capacity to move towards it, overcoming the hurdles and limitations of the initial state of privation: this is the working of a principle of motion. In this sense the spirit of the Messiah presents its 'motoric character', a characterisation Bloch derived from a Jewish author, Martin Buber. This term for Buber referred to the Jewish propensity to action rather than to theorising. In Bloch, this Jewish characterisation – a primacy of praxis – is reflected on the one hand in the overall edifice of his practical philosophy, and on the other in the specific characterisation of the final goal as the "motoric-messianic Omega to be achieved."[6] The first feature that Bloch derives from the Jewish treatment of the messianic theme is therefore the propulsive force of the *messianischer Geist*. In Bloch's philosophy, as it has been recalled above, the true origin (the 'alpha') lies at the end (the 'omega'). We can incidentally observe how this overturning is explicitly set against a conservative reading – such as the Heideggerian one – that seeks to ground the philosophical edifice on a mythical (or ontological) origin. The idea that the true origin is found at the end is also mythologically expressed through a religious mythologem drawn from Jewish mystical lore. Bloch cites the name of *Adam Kadmon* and differentiates is from the *Makro-Anthropos*. The tension between the first, the primordial man before the creation, and the latter, the man *qua* macrocosm at the end of the process of creation, is the anthropomorphic correspondent to the inner tension of the historical process oriented towards the end goal. The Jewish mystical mythologem[7] expresses here a second idea, that the process of realisation (of humankind and cosmos alike) derives its orientation not starting from a mythical origin but by clinging to the utopian image of the goal. Here Bloch uses a Jewish mythologem but subverts his semantics by infusing in it a future-oriented character. A third feature of Bloch's messianism is linked to the Jewish mystical doctrine of the encounter with the self, which is echoed in Bloch's term *Selbstbegegnung*, found as the title of a fundamental chapter in his *Geist der Utopie*. In the

[6] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 322'das erst motorisch-messianisch zu erringende Omega'.
[7] Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 198. The image of Adam Kadmon is derived from a quote from the Zoharic appendix 'Idra Rabba' (141b). The spelling 'Makanthropos', however, is found in Schopenhauer and is slightly different from the Greek translation 'Makro'Anthropos' found in Philo.

mystical account of prophecy as self-encounter – as presented in Abulafia and in Moses ben Jakob of Kiev –, the Jewish messianic doctrine is turned inwardly. In short, the central preoccupation of the mystical prophet was not so much (or not only) the wait for the advent of the Messiah (understood as a personal redeemer), or the actions to be done to pave the way for it, but rather a spiritual process of inner redemption – a process of personal perfectioning. Bloch's quoting and referring to this relatively lesser-known mystical tradition allows him to develop a form of messianism whereby the utopian goal therein envisaged finds its expression at the social-political as well as at the individual-personal level. It must be noted that Abulafia's messianic prophecy advances an internalisation of the apocalyptic imagery, common to other Kabbalistic doctrines, such that these figures refer to the inner processes for attaining perfection through the coming nigh – and ultimately identifying – with the messiah, conceived as a spiritual entity. In his treatise *Life of the World-to-Come*, describing the ecstatic experience of the mystic who has come closer to God through prayer and meditation, Abulafia says: "[…] one will imagine that it is as if one's entire body has been anointed with anointing oil from head to feet, and he will be the Messiah of God and his messenger."[8] As Scholem has also observed, for Abulafia the mystic "is, so to speak, his own Messiah, at least for the brief period of his ecstatical experience."[9] Bloch's appropriation of the doctrine of prophetic self-encounter indicates a messianism profoundly interested in the inner processes of renewal and redemption that take place at an individual and personal level. But this account, which is not found with the same intensity in Bloch's contemporaries – most notably, Benjamin – is however not exhaustive of Bloch's inherited messianism. In fact, with equal force Bloch stresses the outwardly endeavours to transform the world around which the subject acts. These two accounts – attainment of the messianic Omega as inner and outer transformation – are pulled together and fused in his re-working of religious imagery. Not by chance the most politically charged chapter of *Geist der Utopie* – with the ex-ergo quoted above – finds its collocation just after the long discussion of the *Selbstbegegnung*. The encounter of the self ultimately coincides with a process of *becoming* Messiah, not merely preparing his coming. But becoming Messiah – being endowed with the messianic spirit – means being provided with the necessary force to act upon and transform the world. This specific re-shaping of a mythologem, or rather of an entire doctrine, is particularly telling of the way the process of inheritance works in Bloch's philosophy. Not only a careful selection, but also an original addition, a twist – in this case: a

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[8] Avraham Abulafia, Hayyei ha-Oleim ha-Ba, Ms. Oxford 1582. Ex., 14:13. Quoted in Idel, 'The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia', 71.
[9] Scholem, 'Abraham Abulafia and the Doctrine of Prophetic Kabbalism', 142.

counterbalancing of inner and outer accounts of redemption – are necessary steps for a religious image or doctrine to be embedded in Bloch's philosophical system. One last note on the relevance of Jewish sources in Bloch's messianism must be added. It has been observed that the figure of the *Tröster*, the consolator, derived from Molitor's Christian Kabbalah, is symptomatic of Bloch's blend of Jewish and Christian messianism. In the already discussed section *Symbol: die Juden*, Bloch subscribes to a messianic interpretation of the passages related to the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. This reading was of paramount importance for Christian theology, but rejected by the better-established rabbinical exegesis, for fear of coming too close to the Christian interpretation. To be sure, the messianic reading was also shared by some kabbalist circles, most notably those around the figure of the mystical messiah Shabbetay Tzevi, as noted by Scholem.[10] On this matter, Bonola observes that "Bloch surely ignored that messianic exegeses of the Isaiah passage were proposed in modern age within Sabbatian *enclaves*, where they were applied to Shabbetai Tzevi,"[11] but nonetheless subscribes to such a reading. Bloch's intention, in Bonola's view, was to move a criticism to the Jewish – and particular the rabbinical – scholarship, unable to grasp the messianic meaning of the Deutero-Isaiah, a meaning that Bloch proposed as legitimate and of central importance to read the prophetic text.[12] On the other hand, in the same chapter Bloch moves an equal and contrary criticism to Christians, who failed to acknowledge the Jewishness in Rom 10-11, downplaying the eschatological nature of these chapters in Pauline letters and therefore ignoring the emancipatory afflatus that permeates these writings. By moving this double reproach to the two religious traditions, Bloch displays how an amended reading of these passages can be conducive of a rapprochement between the two religions, thus pulling them together and blending them in his own appropriation.

1.2 Christian Mythologems

From here to an embedment of some key Christian mythologems into Bloch's philosophical system it is a short step. Jewish mythologem furnished Bloch's messianism with 1. The grandiosity of the utopian goal; 2. The propulsive character of the messianic spirit; 3. The anti-reactionary notion of a true beginning at the end; 4. The notion of a redemptive transformation that is so much inner and spiritual as it is social and historical. What the pathos of Christian

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[10] Scholem, *Sabbatai Ṣevi*, 53–54: 'Contrary to the mainstream Jewish reading, some later Midrashim resorted to the messianic interpretation of the Tannaim: for example such a pivotal figure in Safed's Kabbala as Hayyim Vital referred read the chapter to his master, Isaac Luria. In short, messianic reading of Isaiah 53 existed, but were confined to relatively niche circles and were far from the mainstream rabbinical readings.'
[11] Bonola, 'La nascita dell'utopia dallo spirito dell'ebraismo', 31.
[12] Bonola, 34.

texts added to the picture was the closeness and the human aspect of the figure of the Messiah. To be sure, the spiritualisation of messianism reflected in the doctrine of *Selbstbegegnung* already turned the impulse to renovation inwards. But the accounts of Jewish messianic mystics such as Abulafia are yet too impalpable, with the risk of getting lost in ascetical practices. Bloch was after "a Messiah who appears not in a flash but warm and nearby, as our guest,"[13] so close to us that becomes identical with the human being itself. The main contribution of Christian imagery in Bloch's philosophy is the total humanisation of the messianic figure. Not an ascension towards the lofty heights of God, but a movement downward, a *katabasis* of the messianic. Christian mythologems gradually operate a displacement of the element of Grace – the efficient cause of the theology of history – inside the human. This displacement puts back in human hands all the force and energy that are preconditions of ethical and political action. For this reason, the theologian Moltmann succinctly annotates: "Nowhere does the hereditary substrate of all religion emerge so clearly as in Christianity, with its explosive starting point in the resurrection of the humbled and crucified Christ, and in its long history of heresy."[14] The humanisation of messianism is achieved in two ways; first, through the appropriation of the mystical imagery referring to the divinity of the human soul; second, via the evocation of the figure of Christ as the Son of Man.

1.3 The Divinity of Human Soul

The first step, the valorisation of the human element, comes about through the evocation of the Eckhartian image of the *Scintilla*, the *Funke,* the divine spark that lies at the bottom of the human soul. This mythologem, in his original connotation as found in the mystic's sermons, represents the element inside the human itself that makes the aimed union with the Godhead possible. Recast inside Bloch's works, it conveys the sense that the extraordinary force of the divine, this primordial source of energy, ought not be sought in an external hypostatised entity but, on the contrary, in the innermost depths of the human soul. In a typescript from the 1930s, a preparatory work for his later *Leipziger Vorlesungen*,[15] Bloch provides an account of the Eckhartian "sunken soul". According to the medieval mystic, the human's soul shrinks and disappears before God, in an annihilation of the ego, losing "its number, quality and manner", but, as Bloch summarises:

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[13] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 193; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 244: 'ein Messias, der nicht im Blitz, sondern warm und nahe als unser Gast erscheint, der verworfene Eckstein im metaphysischen Betracht.'
[14] Moltmann, 'Die Apokalyptik im Messianismus', 483.
[15] Cf. Bloch, Zwischenwelten in der Philosophiegeschichte, 156 ff.

> once the person has let go of its "I itself", the human being is immediately deified; he has become the other Nothing, "that which is beyond the world, God and Being", which stands above all determinations, including those of God.[16]

In the mystical act of reaching the heights of the divine, the soul is required to disappear in front of God, but it is at the same time deified. It is the apotheosis included in this potent mythologem that confers to it its potency and makes it appealing to Bloch, who appropriates it so to convey an idea of the autonomy and independence of the human: there is no need for external powers since the human soul already hosts everything that is needed to achieve a divine state – or, in Bloch's terms, to come to full realisation.

Another theological image used to convey the divine power dwelling in human soul derives from the Böhmian notion of *Ungrund*, the unknowable godly source of all transformations and phenomena of the world. Bloch resorts to this mythologem with a slight twist. As observed above, in fact, the first moment of any personal, social and political action consists in a move out of the 'Darkness of the lived moment', from the *Nicht*, the state of privation wherein the individual – but also the social subject – is in the first place to be found. Again, Bloch adopts a mystical mythologem originally referring to the divine – the groundless yet fermenting divine substratum of all that happens in nature – and attaches it to the human subject – wherein it indicates the lively but obscure source of inner energy capable of pulling the subject out of the initial state of dearth and privation. It is inside the human soul, in its inaccessible and restless obscurity, that the primal force to transform oneself and its world is to be found: Bloch paradoxically restores the fullness of human agency through a Christian mystical mythologem.

In the same preparatory text quoted above, Bloch deals with Böhme's doctrine of the opposite principles, expressed through the dialectic of affirmation and negation withing the thing itself:

> Böhme, as is well known, merged the No and the Yes, the "repulsion" as a manifestation of the essence. The dark No sets "everywhere one thing against the other. Not inimical to each other, but so that itself moves and is revealed." The No is the urge in God Himself to become the origin of the world, it is the dark individuating ground, or the source of all forms.[17]

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[16] Ernst Bloch Archiv, Mappe 51, Item 1 („Mystische Geburt im Wesen" – Prag, 1937), seite 226 – folio 2: "Ist aber das Ich-selber der Person ausgegangen, so wird der Mensch augenblicklich vergottet; er ist das andere Nichts geworden, „das Überweltliche, Übergotte des Wesens", das über alle Bestimmungen, auch über denen Gottes steht."

[17] Ernst Bloch Archiv, Mappe 51, Item 1 („Mystische Geburt im Wesen" – Prag, 1937), seite 227 – folio 3: " ging Böhme, wie bekannt, dass ineinander des Nein und Ja auf, das „Widerwärtige" als offenbarer des Wesens. Das dunkle Nein macht, „dass überall Eines gegen das Andere ist. Nicht dass sich's feinde, sondern damit es dasselbe bewege und offenbare." Das Nein ist der Drang in Gott selbst, zum Ursprung der Welt zu werden, es ist der dunkle individuierende Grund oder Quell aller Gestalten."

Bloch transfers the negative principle in all things – the *Nein*, which Böhme associates to the divine origin of the cosmos – from the divine to the human sphere. He is thus able to embed it in a new frame, wherein the primal source of movement is already present in the dark recesses of the human soul. A third mystic and heretic, as showed above, is featured among the main Christian sources Bloch relies upon for the humanisation of his messianism: Thomas Münzer. The German leader of the 16th century *Bauernkrieg* – Bloch asserts in one of the passages dedicated to Müntzer's doctrines – stretched his heretic readings of the Gospels so far as to comprehend "grace itself as the deepest ground of the soul, as arrival, homecoming, phenomenal of freedom."[18] Once again a divine attribute is referred to mankind: Bloch overturns the source and the role of grace, which now springs forth from the innermost recesses of the soul and is by this latter generated, a completely human source of redemptive power. One can see in this tendency, here patently displayed, the Blochian characteristic atheistic twist imposed on Christian doctrines and mythologems, what he labels "the most sublime, magic-mythical atheism."[19] As Münster has argued, Bloch's Müntzer puts forward an "anthropologization of religion, as it manifested itself three centuries later, e.g. in Ludwig Feuerbach, the contemporary of Marx."[20] In brief, through Eckhart, Böhme and Münzer, Bloch gathers mythologems that convey a sense of human power and autonomy, pulling the extraordinary power of divine Grace close to mankind, so close that it is ultimately – heretically – absorbed inside the human essence. Humankind surges thus to the rank of the divine itself, able to autonomously make the first move out of the initial state of privation, towards its own full realisation. It is an atheist messianism the one that emerges from the usage of these re-worked mythologems.

1.4 The Figure of Christ as Son of Man: Towards Atheism

The full humanisation of messianism, however, would not be complete without a reference to the preeminent mythologem Bloch draws from the Christian tradition: the notion of the Son of Man, which gains a primal role in Bloch's works. It is no coincidence that in the second part of *Geist der Utopie*, one finds an entire section dedicated to Christ, depicted as the unveiled face.[21] Its "eschatological, not merely theological meaning"[22] is the shattering and breaking

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[18] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, 81; Bloch, *Thomas Münzer Als Theologe Der Revolution*, 60–61: '[...] die Gnade als tiefsten Seelengrund, als Ankunft, Heimkehr, Phanomenale der Freiheit selbst begreifend'.

[19] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer Als Theologe Der Revolution*, 60: 'das sublimsten, magisch-mystisch Atheismus.'

[20] Münster, *Utopie, Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 215.

[21] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 212–18; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 267–73.

[22] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 217; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 273: 'die schlechthin eschatologische, nicht nur theologische Sinnbedeutung.'

open of God, burst by the shining, “Luciferan” light of Jesus himself. Here Bloch intimates a worldly appropriation of the Jesus mythologem, who – following this reading – in the *eschaton* (at the end of this aeon), eventually enlightens the darkness of the lived moment and thus brings humanity to realization, “in a reversal of movement not only out of love, but out of transcendence downward.”[23]Instead of a human ascent towards the supreme heights of the divine – an always transcendent and never attainable reality –, the Jesus mythologem is paradigmatic of the descent of the divine and of his embodiment in human form: it is a reversal of the classical movement of transcendence. Bloch completes his appropriation of the Christian mythologem by reading the Gospels against the grain, with a paradoxical and courageous atheist movement, stressing Jesus’s title “son of Man”, instead of “son of God”. This movement, already sketched in *Thomas Müntzer*,[24] becomes explicitly thematized in his later *Atheismus im Christentum*, but the reference to the Son of Man is already present in *Geist der Utopie*. Through thius quasi-Feuerbachian manoeuvre, Bloch puts God back on his feet, so to combat the hypostatization of the divine element in an exterior entity. This is the root of his atheism: bringing the loftiest features of human essence back to the terrestrial this-worldly realm and thus obviating the need of an external demiurgical figure entrusted with the onus of liberating mankind. Bloch’s messianism is not so much turned inwards because of a spiritualised account of redemption – although, to be sure, he pays attention to the inner development of the individual – as because of the restitution of the most exalted divine attributes to humankind. Whereas negative theology has approached the divine through the notion of the *deus absconditus*, Bloch substitutes for it the *homo absconditus*,[25] the quantum of humanity which has not come to realization yet. And it is precisely this self-realisation of humankind, which also involves a radical transformation of the social and political realms, that Bloch constantly has in mind when he advances his atheist messianism. Through the mythologem of the Son of Man the full humanisation of messianism has been achieved: “Indeed, Messiah himself, the bringer of absolute adequation, is nothing but the finally uncovered face of our unceasingly nearest depth.”[26] In other words, the Messiah, atheistically conceived, is the ultimate full realization of ourselves as human beings. In this paradoxical appropriation of Christian imagery, is through atheism – and not despite it – that messianism

[23] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 217; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 273: ‘In einer Bewegungsumkehr nicht aus der Liebe, sondern auch der Transzendenz nach unten.’
[24] Cf. Bloch, Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution, 120, 207, 281.
[25] Bloch, Atheism in Christianity, 39.
[26] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 196; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 247: ‘ja Messias selbst [...], der Bringer absoluter Adäquation, ist nicht als das endlich aufgedechte Angesicht unserer unaufhörlich nächsten Tiefe.’

finds its true meaning. As Bloch explicitly affirms in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*: "Atheism is therefore so far from being the enemy of religious utopia that it constitutes its precondition: *without atheism messianism has no place*."[27]

1.5 The Gnostic Overtone

The paradoxical aspect of Bloch's reading is better expressed in the inner tension that the various elements of his philosophy of religion engender. The embedment of Christian mythologems, atheistically interpreted, has furnished Bloch's philosophy with 1. the extraordinary force and autonomy of the human soul; 2. An account of the messianic figure that rejects any heteronomous source of redemption. This humanisation of messianism, however, still shows how Bloch cannot fully dispose of the theological element – no matter how atheistically interpreted –, since it provides his philosophy with the surplus, the *Überschuss*, essential to conceive of the utopian movement out of the darkness of the lived moment. At the same time, however, Bloch's practical philosophy aims at the full emancipation of humankind, and must therefore reject any form of heteronomy, including – and perhaps most importantly – a reliance on an external entity, a demiurge-like hypostatisation loaded with attributes of perfection. The humanisation of messianism, achieved through Christian mystical mythologems, draws back divine attributes inside the human essence. To satisfy the claims of Bloch's theoretical atheism, however, the system needs a complete negation of any hypostatised form of deity. The mythologem of the Christian Jesus as Son of Man, be it closer to humankind as it were, does not fully satisfy this need, if taken on its own. The same must be affirmed with regards to the notion of grace, even when it is referred to the human soul. To ease the tension between the two apparently opposing claims, Bloch resorts to Gnosticism imagery, whereby the idea of salvation through knowledge takes a central role.

Bloch's reading of Judeo-Christian mythologems through Gnostic lenses is the first step for his reconciliation between the religious-metaphysical striving to the *Ultimum* and the atheist denial of a divine hypostasis. This appears with clarity already in the treatment of the abovementioned Christian mystics. One example here will suffice. In the lectures on the history of philosophy he delivered in Leipzig, Bloch picked up again the doctrines of Eckhart, stressing some aspects of his teachings that bring him close to Gnostics. We read: "For Eckhardt, the entire world as its emergence from the inessential is a knowledge process. The immanent God, the implicit

[27] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1200; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1413: 'Atheismus ist folglich so wenig der Feind religiöser Utopie, daß er deren Voraussetzung bildet: *ohne Atheismus hat Messianismus keinen Platz*.'

God, recognizes himself explicitly in the world. Essence and knowing are one."[28] Here Bloch puts the accent on the utmost importance of knowledge for world transformation, an operation through which the inner workings of God are outwardly expressed. The precedence accorded to knowledge over grace is indicative of the Gnostic overtone that Bloch brings to the fore. As Boldyrev has aptly recalled, this precedence has not only an ethical, but also a political connotation: "The very notion that knowledge is an instrument of transforming the world and redeeming it, the claim that to be saved one has to acquire a knowledge of some sort, constitutes the link between gnosticism and Marxism."[29] Arguably, the focus on the pre-political conditions for acting over the social world, the attention to the very first impulse to transform it, far from being a mere intellectual elucubration, has its poignancy even for the Marxist reader. In the passage from the *Leipziger Vorlesungen* on Eckhart, even though knowledge is accorded precedence over grace, the subject of world transformation remains God, thus ultimately depriving humankind of the agency Bloch the Marxist intends to restore to it.

To solve the contradiction and reconcile these two sides, a human, worldly force and source of action would be needed, but capable of that *Überschuss,* "the surplus of the *moral-mystical existence-meaning in itself,*"[30] that leads to the realization of the ultimate goal pictured ever anew in religious imagination. In other words, there is the need for a 'divine-working' operated by man, a theurgy. Bloch's inheritance of the mythologem of Christ turns it into a human figure, but capable of acting on the world with all divine might. In the first edition of *Geist der Utopie* we find this blazing passage:

> In this great coming, almighty, dynamically inner Christos imperator maximus Theurgos, the selfish darkness of the ego collapses, the inessential Demiurge trembles and the real human kingdom, the most diverse kingdom of the Self, absolute Christ-shapedness over the whole world can begin.[31]

This passage, found at the end of the long chapter on the self-encounter, presents the figure of the Christian saviour in a completely transformed fashion. The reference is here to the second coming of Christ, to the eschatological moment that ushers in a new era, the messianic times.

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[28] Bloch, *Zwischenwelten in der Philosophiegeschichte*, 162–63: 'Die gesamte Welt als sein Entwerden des Unwesentlichen ist für Eckhardt ein Erkenntnisprozeß. Der immanente Gott, der implizierte Gott, erkennt sich explizit in der Welt. Wesen und Erkennen sind eins.'

[29] Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries*, 94.

[30] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 194; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 244: 'der Überschuß moralisch-mystischer Existenzbedeutung an sich.'

[31] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1918, 381: 'in diesem großen kommenden, allmächtigen, dynamisch-innerlichen Christos imperator maximus Theurgos bricht das selbstische Ichdunkel zusammen, der wesenlose Demiurg erzittert und das wahrhafte Menschenreich, vielfältigste Selbstreich, die absolute Christförmigkeit über aller Welt kann beginnen.'

At this stage, Bloch affirms, the advent of Christ takes place in the interiority of man: it is the human subject itself to undergo a messianic transformation – to eventually become Messiah, that is: to come to full realisation. In this final encounter, the personal self is not shattered but maintained in all its might, dignity, and diversity. There is no need for a negation of the *pricipium individuationis*, no need to dispose of the self: only the ego and the despotic demiurge attached to it are wiped off. While individual subjectivity is maintained – or rather, finally fully realised –, signs of oppression, despotism and alienation (the demiurgic act of manipulating its material) are cancelled. What is striking in this passage is the epithet attached to Christ, "maximus Theurgos", indicating the human capacity to act supernaturally. Furthermore, this Christ is inner, lies within the human. The inheritance of this mythologem is acted out via its own atheist reversal, so to fit the need for an autonomous subject. From the ancient Gnostic soteriology, Bloch derives a thoroughly different – and heretical – Christology, more suitable to his atheist stance. In the second edition of *Geist der Utopie*, the same passage is reworked and another Gnostic image is attached to the figure of Christ: the Serpent.

> Only in this truth that remained secret in Jesus, was kept secret for later, for last, when exactly this face might be uncovered, but who has become restless since he was forsaken a second time, since his cry on the cross faded away hopelessly, since the head of the paradise-serpent hanging on the cross was crushed underfoot for the second time – only in this concealed aspect of Jesus as the *antidemiurgic* principle as such can one understood the truly theurgic aspect of him who rebels as the Son of Man.[32]

Here the role of the Christ, directed against the Demiurge, the evil creator of this world filled with injustice, is explicitly formulated. Bloch discovers in the Gnostic Jesus a rebel, a defying figure that overthrows the unjust configuration of the world as it is. But this rebellious attitude, this "secret" of Jesus, the "demonic" or "Luciferan" in him – bearer of light – is completely in human hands. This is a theurgy turned upside down, a divine work acted on against the on-high: a force to defy the Heavens and to dethrone the earthly representatives of their power. The coming together of the atheistically inherited Jewish-Christian messianism with Gnostic imagery can be also found in an earlier section of the book, under the title "Not-yet conscious knowledge and the deepest amazement," central to the structure of *Geist der Utopie* and to all

[32] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 217; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 273: 'Erst in diesem, das in Jesus geheim blieb, gehem gehalten wurde, für später, für zuletzt, wenn genau dieses Angesicht aufgedeckt werden mag, der aber ruehlos geworden ist, seitdem er zum zweitenmal veralssen wurde, seitdem der Schrei am Kreuz wirkungslos verhallte, seitdem zum zweitenmal der Kopf der am Kreuze hängenden Paradiesesschlange zertreten wurde, - erst in diesem Verborgenen in Christo, als dem Anti-Demiurgischen schlechhin, ist auch das wirklich Theurgische des als Menschensohn Rebellierenden verstanden.'

Bloch's philosophy. Here Gnostic mythologems are summoned to convey a force or an energy which could not be gathered otherwise, the primary condition for any action – personal, social, political. This is perhaps the most significant passage in which the Gnostic overtone of Bloch's messianism emerges:

> Rather, the demonism of genius commences with itself; love is already no organic but rather a theological state, located on a different level than our creaturely drives, and especially everything else intensively spiritual in us has its own energy source [...] and belonging to whom else but the elevated, reborn, revolutionary serpent; whom else but the true prophetic god Apollo; whom else but the originary spirit of the Messiah in our ownmost depths, who precisely first enables every eros to be divested (not "masked") in colors, wayfaring, festivity, homesickness, homecoming, mysticism?[33]

Bloch introduces here an "energy source", juxtaposed to love, conceived as a theological state. It is not to be found in an external supreme being, it lies within us: there is no need for an external God, the mystical atheism operated via the theurgy is sufficient. Then Bloch specifies that this inner energy source belongs both to the Gnostic Serpent and to the spirit of the Messiah[34]. The Serpent, in this and the abovementioned passage, is a figure whose complex references may be summarised in three main points. First, it clearly points to the tempting Serpent of Genesis, and as such is associated with knowledge. Second, it is a rising figure, rising up from the ground: it is a symbol for the terrestrial-chthonic realm, thus suggesting a this-worldly origin, intimating the autonomy of the human subject, its independence from any external deity. Third and last, the Serpent displays a daring mien, signifying the rebellious attitude of the messianic spirit. All these features, disclosed by one single mythologem, are then attached to the image of the Son of Man. In this extremely dense passage, therefore, Bloch accomplishes a full humanisation of his messianism: on the one hand, he appropriates the title 'Son of Man', reclaiming the humanity of the messiah; on the other, he associates to it the figure of the rising serpent, thus stressing the emancipatory character and its proneness to

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[33] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 192; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 242: 'Sondern die schöpferische Dämonie hebt an sich selber an; schon die Liebe ist kein organischer, sondern ein theologischer Zustand, auf anderer als der kreatürlichen Triebebene gelegen, und erst recht auch hat alles andere intensiv Spirituale in uns eigene Kraftquelle [...] und wem anders zugehörig als der erhöhten, auferstehenden, revolutionären Schlange, als dem wahren Wahrsagegott Apollon, wem anders als dem originären Messiasgeist in unserer eigensten Tiefe selber zugehörig, wie er jeglichem Eros gerade erst die Entkleidung (nicht die »Maskierung«) zu Farben, Reise, Festlichkeit, Heimweh, Heimkehr, Mystik ermöglicht?'

[34] We incidentally observe that the concepts of Homesickness and Homecoming are not to be intended as a regression or restoration. Bloch quotes Jean Paul, who celebrated music's main characteristic, the "power to make us homesick [Kraft des Heimwehs]? Not for the old, abandoned land, but for the virgin land; not for a past but for a future," a 'remembrance' of a utopia to be achieved and not of a static crystallised past to be restored. Cf. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 157. Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 200.

insurgency against the established forms of power. It is through imbuing his messianism with Gnostic tones that Bloch inherits the central mythologem of Christ and fits it in his atheist cosmology. This multifaceted mythologem *qua* 'energy source' is the fundamental pre-condition of any social and political enterprise: it is the *primum movens* – turned in the inmost depths of the human being – of the entire edifice of Bloch's practical philosophy.

Another Gnostic mythologem is of great relevance in Bloch's philosophy. In several Gnostic cosmogonic doctrines, sparks of divine light are scattered in the darkness and mixed with matter, imprisoned by archons (supernatural co-creators and rulers of the world that prevent redemption). The awakened disciple is entrusted with the task to acquire the necessary knowledge through which they can restore the unity of the supreme God.[35] As observed in an earlier chapter, a version of this doctrine has found its way in Lurianic Kabbala.[36] It is not difficult to see in the emancipating task of the initiated, that of liberating the shards of light, a striking resemblance to Bloch's process of inheritance. As I have shown, this process is first described in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, where Bloch attempts to snatch from the hands of Nazi propaganda some ideas and figures that still maintain an emancipative value. In this regard, historian Rabinbach has observed that Bloch's "theory of fascism also borrows from gnosticism that aspect of the myth in which the powers of darkness steal the figure of light and tear it into shreds in order to produce an illusory world which has magnetic powers."[37] In his successive works, the process of inheritance will be applied to the whole cultural heritage, including, most notably, the appropriation of religious imagery here at stake. But this means that Bloch's indebtedness to the religious traditions he deals with is not limited to the contents of these doctrines, namely the mythologems that he tweaks and fits into his philosophical system but must be extended to the method itself. The separation of the progressive elements embedded in cultural materials – be it myth, literature, painting, music – and the disposal of their 'empty shells', is itself the inheritance of the Gnostic task: the salvage of shards of light, which in Bloch's case is the light of a new dawn, that of the revolution.

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[35] Cf. Jonas, The Gnostic Religion. The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity., 42–48.

[36] Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 279–80 Here Scholem, commenting on Luria's doctrine of the moral task assigned to man (reassembling the scattered sparks of the soul of the archetypal man, Adam Kadmon, and thus restoring the original unity of the nature of man), he adds: 'The Gnostical character of this psychology and anthropology is evident,' in particular 'the close affinity of those thoughts to the religious ideas of the Manichaeans must be obvious at once.'

[37] Rabinbach, 'Unclaimed Heritage', 8.

1.6 Atheist Gnostic Messianism

The investigation around the usage of religious sources in Bloch's writings showed that his appropriation, reading and tweaking of a variety of mythologems was meant to embed them as a constitutive part of his practical philosophy, where they are assigned the role of pictorial instantiations of the principle of hope, the ultimate basis of the system. This latter also performs the function of a principle of action, constituting the presupposition upon which the political sphere can be thought.

The inheritance of Judeo-Christian messianism within an atheist framework tinged with Gnostic overtones provides Bloch with the necessary concepts to indicate the primal source of political action. Every personal as well as political act starts with an exit from a state of dearth and privation, through its dialectical overturn into a desiring force that endows the subject with the capability of realising itself and transforming the world around it. This desiring force is what is expressed with the inheritance of messianic tropes. Not a Messiah to be waited, not a saviour to be prayed, but rather the discovery inside the inmost depths of ourselves of the necessary and sufficient faculty to strive to – and eventually attain – our full realisation: this is envisaged in Bloch's messianism. The messianic spirit, this force that inhabits the human's soul, is activated in the human subject as it accomplishes its encounter with its own self, whereby knowledge of the self and self-realisation are indissolubly united. These in turn at the same time require and enable the acting upon the world. The theory-praxis of transformation of the subject and object moves from a first spark: inherited messianism provides the mythological element of the primal thrust one finds in any political action.

2. The Meta-Political Form: a Theocracy from the Bottom

Every progressive element that past traditions bequeath to the present generation offers a glimpse of a possible future, part and parcel of the utopian horizon envisaged in Bloch's philosophy. Inherited messianism does not only provide the system with a notion of the primal impulse to action, but also with pictorial renditions of the ultimate goal of this action. This preternatural force – in so far as nature is reduced to a mechanistic set of interactions – is directed towards the realisation of an ultimate goal, personal and political, involving mankind and cosmos. Inheriting messianic mythologems as principles, Bloch sets the stage for the pursuit of the 'meta-political' goal. This is the other side of the *Prinzip*, where it works by constructing an open, not fixed teleology. The τέλος is intrinsically part of Bloch's philosophy of hope, but it is essentially incomplete: the essence to be realised is not-yet there and the subject, the *Realisierend* itself, is still lacking its final form (its 'unveiled face'). What is

included in this τέλος is therefore but a pre-figuration of the political and ethical goals towards which human endeavours are directed. In his magnus opus, Bloch refers to the Aristotelian notion of *entelechy* to indicate the nature of the envisaged goal:

> Concrete utopia stands on the horizon of every reality; real possibility surrounds the open dialectical tendencies and latencies to the very last. By these the unconcluded motion of unconcluded matter – and motion is, in that profound phrase of Aristotle, 'uncompleted entelechy' – is arch-realistically pervaded.[38]

The envisaged messianic goal that constitutes the core of Bloch's inherited set of Judeo-Christian mythologems assumes the value of an 'uncompleted entelechy', a not-yet fully developed and realised entity that nonetheless can be aimed at and defines the orientation of political action. It is the presentiment of the attainment of the final goal that confers the supreme value to the imagined horizon, which is the heart of the wishful images drawn from religious traditions. I argue that, throughout Bloch's works, this ultimate goal can be described in terms of a "theocracy from the bottom," a peculiar form of political theology whose ultimate principle is not the opposition between friend and enemy but the solidarity among comrades and community members.'

2.1 Bloch's Messianism as a Type of Political Theology

Before delving in the clarification of the ultimate goal conveyed by messianic mythologems, it is necessary to specify the connotation of the term 'political theology,' an overarching concept under which Bloch's philosophy of religion can find an adequate classification. The problematic of political theology, albeit having become a hot topic in continental philosophy as well as in religious studies over the last two decades, has not yet found a shared definition and a satisfactorily clear approach.[39] In its most immediate and plain meaning, political theology is the usage of religion (and of specific mythologems) as a legitimizing fiction that serves the interests of the ruling class. Political philosopher Galli, after pointing out the difficulty of a definition of the term, refers to this first conception as a "metaphysical duplication of reality" that justifies the exertion of dominion in the hands of a single man.[40]

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[38] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 223; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 258: 'Konkrete Utopie steht am Horizont jede Realität; reale Möglichkeit umgibt bis zuletzt die offenen dialektischen Tendenzen-Latenzen. Von Ihnen ist die unabgeschlossene Bewegung der unabgeschlossenen Materie – und Bewegung ist, nach dem tiefen Aristotelischen Wort, »unvollendete Entelechie« – erzrealistisch durchzogen.'

[39] For an historical introduction to the concept, cf. Scattola, *Teologia politica*; Some of the crucial questions on the concepts are elaborated in Hovey and Phillips, *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*; and in Scott and Cavanaugh, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*; Italian theory has dealt with the problematic of political theology. Cf. among others Esposito, *Two*; Cacciari, *Il potere che frena*; Agamben, *Homo Sacer*; in European thought, cf. Žižek, Santner, and Reinhard, *The Neighbor*.

[40] Galli, 'Editoriale. Teologia Politica, Teologia Economica, Filosofia Politica'.

Taken in this form, political theology has mainly a negative connotation, which it gradually acquired over the last three centuries, starting with the Enlightenment. Following this connotation, it is one of the main accounts of ideology understood in Marxian terms, a mystification of reality that is but "the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships […] which make the one class the ruling one".[41] Considering the insistence on the notion of the restrainer (the *katechon*) that Schmitt, as it has been observed in the previous chapter, has advanced in his *Nomos of the Earth*, his account of political theology – arguably the best known in the modern context – would be a good example of this categorisation. His main thesis in this political theology has been boldly formulated in the well-known 1922 namesake publication. The thesis is summed up in a statement that is impossible to ignore, up to the present day, for whoever engages in the topic, and it reads:

> All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology. Only by being aware of this analogy can we appreciate the manner in which the philosophical ideas of the state developed in the last centuries[42]

Here Schmitt advances two distinct points. First, that there is a common "systematic structure" between theological and political concepts. Secondly, that the best explanation of this analogy is the *derivation* of the latter from the former. Although extremely relevant, this understanding of political theology appears to be unsuitable for a comprehensive study of the interactions of political and religious spheres. In fact, assuming the necessity of a hierarchical form of dominion as a consequence of any interaction of the political and the religious may lead to underestimate a number of historical movements which proved to act in the opposite direction. Furthermore, deducing from an analogy of two sets of concepts a derivation from the theological to the political realm is an inference that in many cases is still to be proven.

A better definition and classification of political theology which allows to thwart these risks must be sought. Egyptologist Jan Assmann developed a different theoretical framework to approach the problem of political theology. He opts for a broader definition of the term, which

[41] Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 64.

[42] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

is then subjected to an inner differentiation. According to his definition, talking about political theology means dealing with

> the changeful relations between the political community and the religious order, in short: between dominion [*Herrschaft*] and salvation [*Heil*].[43]

Political theology is here a term used to describe any possible historical relation of the political and the religious spheres. Assmann stresses the *descriptive* usage of the term in his essay. Elsewhere, he highlighted the basic presupposition of any political theology, without which the bond of these two different spheres would not obtain. In his understanding, political theology entails the assumption of the "non-autarchy of the human being, the insufficiency of human innate and acquired capacities."[44] As Meier puts it, "from the very beginning, political theology denies the possibility of a rational justification of one's own way of life."[45] Human's innate and acquired capacities are insufficient to ground their social and political life. In other words, there is no system (be it social, political, economic) whose foundation can be entirely deducible from a rational set of concepts, there is always a need for an external (preternatural) element, hence the intersection with theology for what concerns the embodiment of divine sovereignty. At this point, however, there already emerge two alternative meanings of political theology.

> In the one case divine sovereignty is embodied in the earthly sovereign; in the other, it is embodied in the people. The explosive power of Israel's political theology consists in the fact that here the people replaces the sovereign as the incarnation of divine sovereignty. The earthly sovereign is the representant of the God-King; the people is the partner in the alliance with God, or, as Paul puts it, the "body" of Christ.[46]

Besides that, there still is the possibility to keep the political and theological spheres separate. Assmann accordingly proceeds with a classification of the three basic forms of political theology: 'dualism,' 'representation' and 'theocracy.'

By 'dualism' he means "the categorical distinction and institutional separation of religious and political order and leadership."[47] Assmann refers to the work of anthropologist Rodney Needham, who, analysing several societies, observed a particular arrangement of the balance between the religious and the political spheres which find the form of a "complementary

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[43] Assmann, Herrschaft und Heil, 15.
[44] Assmann, Assmann, and Hartwich, 'Afterword', 140.
[45] Meier, 'What Is Political Theology?', 87.
[46] Assmann, Assmann, and Hartwich, 'Afterword', 140.
[47] Assmann, Herrschaft und Heil, 28.

governance”[48], or “complementary opposition”[49]. In this arrangement, the general influence that power or authority exert on the life of the people has been divided in a series of dyads, which, in concrete instances, can be: Temporal/mystical; Political/spiritual; Secular/sacred; Control/influence. More generally, there is a distinction between what is clearly visible (the juridical power clearly expressed in positive law) and a sphere of the invisible, mystical aspects of this influence, attributed to the religious sphere and administered by its priestly class. Assmann suggests as examples of this type “the dualism of state and church in the West [referring to Medieval Christianity], or the dualism of Kshatriya and Brahmins in classical India.”[50]

The second form is that of ‘representation:’

> The correlation of divine and political rule in the form of analogy and the consequent unification of political and religious leadership in the hands of the earthly representative. An example of this would be Western and especially Byzantine Caesaropapism, but also in a broader sense everything that Erik Peterson understands by political theology, i.e. not the relationship between, but the unity of rule and salvation.[51]

Here Assmann has in mind not only Caesaropapism, but – as the reference to Erik Peterson shows – also the political positioning of Carl Schmitt. Schmitt’s treatment of the topic, in fact, far from being an objective description, is imbued with a normative character and therefore charged with political value.

The third form Assmann analyses is that of ‘theocracy.’ With this term, Assmann refers to

> the subordination up to the abolition of political leadership in favour of pure rule of God; the classic example of this is ancient Judaism (the term theocracy was coined by Josephus Flavius for the Jewish solution); however, the boundaries between "identitarian" and "representative" theocracy are blurred, and with it the boundaries between "theocracy" and "representation”.[52]

In general, it is possible to assert that for Assmann ‘theocracy’ entails the direct sovereignty of God on earth. However, since its means and the practical exertion of it are varied, drawing a clear-cut distinction between this direct sovereignty and the dominion of the priestly class is not *a priori* possible and as a consequence, a more definite distinction must be made.

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[48] Needham, ‘Dual Sovereignty’, 88.
[49] Needham, 64.
[50] Assmann, Herrschaft und Heil, 28.
[51] Assmann, 28.
[52] Assmann, 28.

To draw that distinction, let us take a closer look on Schmitt's position first. What is at stake in all these accounts of political theology, is the configuration of sovereignty with regards to the political and theological spheres. The concept of sovereignty is derived from Jean Bodin – who used it for the first time in the 16th Century.[53] It denotes the authority, on whatever feudal level, from the King down to the husband and expresses the ideas of pre-eminence or controlling power, linked with the majesty and supremacy of the divine entity. At the same time, an aura of philanthropy surrounds the benevolent ruler: the power they are endowed with allows them to act as benefactors.[54] It is arguably the highest form of paternalism. In Schmitt's analysis of Hobbes, these two aspects of sovereignty are reflected in the commerce, so to say, between obedience and protection: the Leviathan demands obedience from the citizen and offers protection against the dangers of the state of nature.[55] On this balance the power of the monarch is grounded – a sovereign power. For Schmitt, "sovereign is he who decides on the exception,"[56] whereby an exception is any kind of severe economic or political disturbance that requires the application of extraordinary measures. There is here the element of discretionary decision, which is for Schmitt the quintessential element of the 'political' together with the distinction between 'friends and enemy.'[57] The decision of the sovereign comes before the enforcement of the law and that is itself the foundation of the juridical system and therefore of the state. Schmitt adopted the term 'political theology' from the anarchist Bakunin,[58] overturning the anarchical motto "*Ni dieu, ni maître*" (neither God nor master) into a positive statement, obtaining a normative and polemical concept, which he used to advocate for an authoritarian state.[59] As Schmitt scholar Meier has succinctly noted, "what Bakunin negates in the name of Satan is asserted by Schmitt in the name of God. And what is nothing but a man-made fiction for the atheistic anarchist, is God-given reality for the political theologian."[60] This makes Schmitt's doctrine the perfect modern example of the third type of political theology: namely, a form of representation. The assumption of the non-autarchy of man poses this latter in a relationship of dependence and orientation towards God (the point of reference for the vertical orientation of all political orders). As a result, Schmitt casts discredit on any form of

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[53] Cf. Bodin, De Republica libri sex. Liber I, chap. VIII, X.; Cf. also Bodin, De Republica libri sex. Liber II.
[54] Georgi, Theocracy in Paul's Praxis and Theology, viii–x.
[55] Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, 2008, 62.
[56] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.
[57] Cf. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 2008, xvii.
[58] Bakunin, La théologie politique de Mazzini et l'Internationale.
[59] Cf. most notably the well-known pamphlet Bakunin, *God and the State*; cf. also Assmann, *Herrschaft und Heil*, 19–20.
[60] Meier, The Lesson of Carl Schmitt, 8–9.

immanent justification of the political order, and advances what Wolin described in terms of a "vitalist critique of Enlightenment rationalism."[61] Nonetheless, Schmitt does not abandon the postulate of a representative political order, whose legitimization can only be transcendent, grounded in God's sovereignty, which is in turn made visible by the political order itself. The hidden and secularized mythologems that underpin the construction of the political order, rather than delegitimising the current structures of power (notably, with the precipitousness of the advent of the Messiah), serve the purpose of delaying the second coming of the Messiah, the Parousia, in an endeavour to maintain their enforcement. Schmitt's *katechontic* (restraining) usage of Pauline theology – especially in his celebratory account of Donoso Cortés's doctrine, in which Schmitt advocates a reinstatement of theological principles to maintain and reinforce secular power[62] – is therefore an almost paradigmatic example of representational political theology.

Opposed to the Schmittian account, the "pure rule of God" entails a form of mystical theocracy, whereby the deity exerts its direct sovereignty on the earthly domain. This direct rule of God in turn delegitimises every form of human exercise of power and domination, leaving space only for Müntzer's *Liebesgemeinschaft*. Assmann's 'theocracy' implies the implementation of an anarchistic principle, in compliance with which no human being can legitimately lay claim to sovereignty. Assmann's reference to ancient Israel in this context is particularly interesting when compared with other studies pointing towards this direction. In the 1930s, Martin Buber engaged with the problem of theocracy in pre-kingly Israel, devoting a rigorous study to the question of divine rulership during the period of the Judges.[63] In describing the account of government of the 12 tribes before the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel with David, Buber expanded on the form of "anarcho-theocracy"[64] that was prevailing in that period. He described the foundation of theocracy in these terms:

> The covenant at Sinai signifies, according to its positive content, that the wandering tribes accept JHWH "for ever and ever" as their King. According to its negative content it signifies that no man is to be called king of the sons of Israel.[65]

The prohibition to become King, extended to all members of the community of tribes, implies the absence of any human ruler at the lead of the political unity. It clearly appears how Buber's

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[61] Wolin, 'Carl Schmitt', 432.

[62] Schmitt, *Politische Theologie I*; Cf. also Schmitt, *Die Diktatur*, chap. VI, especially the comments on the state of exception as formulated in the art. 48 of the German Constitution of 11 August 1919.

[63] Buber, Königtum Gottes.

[64] Cf. Brody, Martin Buber's Theopolitics, 17–121.

[65] Buber, *Kingship of God*, 136.

and Assmann's 'theocracy', far from engendering the government of the priestly class, embraced a form of primitive anarchism. Interestingly, 'theocracy' taken in this connotation leads to very similar political conclusion to the classical anarchist motto *Ni dieu, ni mâitre*, but based on the unflinching affirmation of the power of the deity rather than its suppression. On the other hand, 'theocracy' as the third form of political theology, while moving from the same principle as the Schmittian theory, derives from it the opposite political conclusions. Bloch's messianism takes stock of the progressive substrata of religious imaginary, but in inheriting it, engenders an ultimate meta-political goal, which can be understood under the sign of Assmann's (anarcho-)theocracy.

2.2 Theocracy from the Bottom

To complete the distinction between 'representation' and 'theocracy' and further specify the meaning of the latter, another specification is needed. If one is to describe Bloch's usage of mythologems, in fact, one needs an account of 'theocracy' that is in some way inheritable. To this goal, I suggest that another demarcation might be useful, the one drawn by theologian Dieter Georgi: he distinguished a 'theocracy from above' and a 'theocracy from the bottom.' In an essay on Saint Paul, he presented the clash of early Christianity with the Roman Empire as the background opposition upon which to situate the actions of the apostle. This long essay is significantly titled "*Gott auf den Kopf Stellen*" [God Turned Upside Down] and presents two opposite theocratic accounts, embodied in the figures of the Roman Emperor and of Jesus on the Cross.

The most usual account of theocracy – what Georgi calls "theocracy from above" and corresponds to the representative form in Assmann – is exemplified by the cult of the Roman emperor. Augustus, seen as a saviour as he brought the 'pax Augusta', surged to the rank of the *theioi anthropoi*, [the divine men] and is praised in this capacity. Here the deity exercises its sovereignty through the law, a law which – despite its universalistic claims – responded to the dominant groups and their traditions. The will of God resonated in the will and consensus of the high strata of the roman society. In other words, the elite "embodies in tangible human form the pinnacle of God's law and God's sovereignty over this world."[66] This form of divine power is mirrored in "the concomitant proliferation of such omnipotence […] in contemporary religious and social institutions."[67] In brief, theocracy from above is an affirmation of privilege.

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[66] Georgi, Theocracy in Paul's Praxis and Theology, 89.
[67] Georgi, 97.

Values such as those of loyalty and obedience maintain their validity only as a form of subordination to the superior authority of rulers and judges.

Counter to this, the peculiar form of salvation brought about by Christ (in Paul's letters), stands out. The kind of theocracy that puts God upside down, the theocracy from the bottom, is arguably what better corresponds to Assmann's conception of theocracy. Central to this form, according to Georgi, is a radical redefinition of sovereignty: here sovereignty is "the establishment of solidarity with humanity"[68], with no exclusions, starting from the most disenfranchised. It is not the obedience "to the will expressed in law but in obedience to the creaturely limitations of human existence, vulnerability and weakness."[69] The cardinal importance of solidarity (so Georgi translates δικαιοσύνη) substitutes the aristocratic ideal of a superior man. Here loyalty is directed to everyone, since "Jesus is loyal to God's solidarity with sinful humanity"[70] – even with the rebel and the enemy, like those crucified with Jesus on the Golgotha – and obedience is understood as "a responsible reaction to demonstrated solidarity in the surrender of privileges, rights and power."[71] The fulfilment of solidarity, God's way of exerting His power through His weakness, is acted through the renunciation of privilege by everyone, and this very renunciation is "the true authority which moves and shapes the world."[72] Georgi advances the idea that, in concrete terms, this translates in a pluralistic model-society – the congregation – wherein the divestment of privileges renders a continuous reconciliation of ideological divisions possible.

It is now possible to formulate an account of theocracy which brings together the contributions of Assmann and Georgi. Theocracy from the bottom, as opposed to the representative form of political theology, implies the direct sovereignty of God on earth, with no mediator and therefore the destitution of any autocratic and hierarchical political structure or legal system. Sovereignty must therefore be understood as almost its opposite: the exertion of solidarity with the whole of humanity, acted through the divestment of privileges, the exposure of weaknesses and vulnerabilities and the continuous rapprochement between different positions. The main historical example of this is that of the early Christian communities. Bloch's inheritance of messianic mythologems finds its proper collocation within this specific type of political theology.

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[68] Georgi, 98.
[69] Georgi, 98.
[70] Georgi, 96.
[71] Georgi, 98, note 41.
[72] Georgi, 99.

2.3 Bloch's Meta-political Goal as a Theocracy from the Bottom

The reconstruction of the 'upper margin' of the political required a clarification of the specific kind of political theology Bloch advanced in his philosophy. Embedded in this latter, messianic mythologems contribute to convey a set of utopian images, which serve as indicators of the historical as well as the ultimate aims of human actions. It is relevant to stress the double value that these theological figures play in Bloch's philosophy: on the one hand, they disclose the potentiality still unexpressed in historical movements, the unfinished in history, the many attempts to bring a just humane society to realisation; in this sense these images intimate a possible political configuration that might obtain normative value: they furnish a possible *historical* aim to be pursued. On the other hand, beside the intimation of a possible concrete form, Bloch is even more interested in the *ultimate* aim of political action. In so doing, he maintains the openness, the ever-provisional form of any possible political aim. The goal is not-yet there, not only because it has not been fully implemented, but also because it is essentially incomplete: it works as an open entelechy. This holds true – perhaps more than in other contexts – for the redefinition of the upper margin of the political, which implies the re-discussion of the final goal towards which political action is directed. When I read the political theology Bloch puts forward as a theocracy from the bottom based on solidarity, I intend to maintain both values of the political aim, historical and ultimate, which both emerge from Bloch's works.

In *Thomas Müntzer*, as observed in previous chapters, the horizon of the 'meta-political' goal leads to the delineation of a "community of love."[73] If it is true that the ideal of original Christianity also entailed a specific configuration of horizontal relations among the members of the early Church and therefore was to a certain extent conclusively defined, its reference in Bloch's works should be read not as the definitive political form to be achieved after the struggles for emancipation, but rather as one of the many possible images of liberation – none of which should be intended as conclusive. For this reason – to avoid the risk of slipping into a simplistic and constraining account of normative forms – Bloch, even in his mature texts will not offer an exhaustive description of the practical implementations of the envisaged community.[74]

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[73] Cf. Bloch, Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution, 179.

[74] Most notably, in the paragraph tellingly titled "Salvation of the Individual through the Community". Cf. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 961–73; *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1985, 1139-43.

There is, to be sure, an anarchic overtone in Bloch's treatment of the community. The chiliastic programme of the German heretic Münzer, advanced in the same anti-elitist fashion, was in fact tinged with a clear anarchic stance:

> the illumination and liberation of all the exploited and oppressed through the Holy Spirit and the masterless community.[75]

The anarchic features of Messianism, derived from the tradition of Jewish apocalypticism, imply a repudiation of any form of exertion of power on earth, the cancelling of any master-servant relationship. To this *pars destruens*, the *pars construens* of the constitution of a mystical democracy is advanced. Akin to Georgi's account of congregation, Müntzer's societial model of the *Liebesgemeinschaft* revolves around the principle *omnia sunt communia*, "all things are to be held in common and distribution should be to each according to his need,"[76] a plain and straightforward account of communist solidarity. It must be kept firm, however, that no matter what political and theological-political form is presented, this form serves as a *Leitbild,* a "guide-image" that should not be taken as a fixed form of political perfection to be aimed at, but one of the many possible examples of the concretisation of utopia. What is at stake, in fact, is not so much a recipe for the good government, but the more ambitious attempt to move beyond a restrictive account of politics conceived as mere administration of power. Western political theories developed in early modernity – whose tenets still hold valid in modern democracies – rely on representative systems whereby sovereignty, belonging to individuals, is exerted by the state and its institutions. The step beyond the political, the "meta-" Bloch retrieves from the vividness of religious imagination, consists in an overcoming of the narrowness of bourgeois politics, no matter if this assumes the contours of a deduction of the pure form of law – as in legal positivism – or a legitimation of dictatorship – as in Schmitt's decisionism. Beyond the sheer constraint of the basic norm or the ultimate decision of the sovereign-dictator, there lies the meta-political principle, already harbingered by Thomas Müntzer, of the Kingdom of God. This latter, the ultimate horizon of political action, inherited as the Kingdom of Freedom, is the wishful image of the ultimate emancipation, to which all political actions should be referred, even the revolutionary ones aimed at overthrowing current oppressive powers. This principle is thus a *memento* that it is not sufficient to strive for the liberation of the individual from the coils of unjust law of the state, but it is necessary to

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[75] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer Als Theologe Der Revolution*, 59: 'Der Erleuchtung und Befreiung aller Mühseligen und Beladenen durch den heiligen Geist und die herrenlose Gemeinschaft in ihm.'
[76] Müntzer, The Collected Works, 437.

thoroughly rethink (and re-shape) the relationships among the members of a political unity. Whereas the foundations of political ontology one finds in the fierce debates among Weimar Republic jurists lie either in the friend-enemy opposition,[77] or in the formal deduction of the entire juridical system from the basic norm (*Grundnorm*),[78] Bloch's meta-political principle clings to an altogether different sphere and appeals to the notion of solidarity. Significantly, the last chapter of the book he devoted to a confrontation with the western tradition of natural law, *Naturrecht und menschliche Würde*, opens up the question of the configuration of a classless society. Bloch, speaking form a Marxist standpoint, reiterates the concept of the withering away of the state, whereby instead of a "government over persons" there comes an "administration of things."[79] He subscribes to the Marxist revolutionary programme, ushering in a classless society that poses an end to the alienation of workers. But, not content with the political change, Bloch immediately poses the query of how the "administration of things" would be carried out, a question that clearly demands a meta-political answer. He asks: "where does one find a place for the *organism* of persons, for the *apse*, and, above all, *apse window of solidarity*, which casts a transcending light without transcendence?"[80] Here the convergence of Bloch's meta-political form and of Georgi's theocracy becomes evident. The political ontology of the meta-political community, Bloch suggests, cannot be based but on solidarity, which is in turn the focus towards which all strivings ought to be directed. The exercise of solidarity requires an entity, an 'organism', which sets the direction of political life towards the common good: to this aim Bloch evokes the notion of the church, which, albeit clearly inspired by the structures of primitive Christianity, bears in this context a future-oriented meaning.

> It is one thing when the power church, the church of superstitions, passes away, and it is something different when a power-free force is on guard and stands guard in teaching conscience the "where to" and "what for." Bebel said that in the "future state" it will not be the officer but the teacher who will be the first among men; and the same would be true in a church en route and without superstition. It would be thoroughly religious,

[77] Cf. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 2008, 25–37.
[78] Kelsen, Pure Theory of Law.
[79] Engels, Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science, pt. III, chap. 2.
[80] Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, 277; Bloch, *Naturrecht und menschliche Würde*, 311: 'aber wo stehen der Organismus der Personen, die Apsis und vor allem das Apsisfenster der Solidarität, das ohne Transzendenz transzendierend beleuchtende?'

> but not as *religio*, or the reunion with domination and its mythologies, but as the forward reunion of a whole dream with our deficient fragments.[81]

Indeed, such a religion cannot but be an inherited one, one that maintains the emancipatory value of its own traditions and lore – for Christianity, the 'dream' of the Kingdom of God – without any transcendent divinity exerting its dominion from on high. What is remarkable, from the point of view of political theory, is that Bloch suggests the insufficiency of the many theories of the state that modern western thought has produced. Even the Marxist imperative of the revolution, to wipe away class society and overthrow established powers, needs a step further, the one intentioned in the Blochian appropriation of messianic imagery. The extraordinary force of the atheist-gnostic inheritance of messianism, in short, not only leads to an insurrection against oppressive powers, but allows the envisaging and striving for a utopian, utterly new, communal way of life.

Furthermore, Georgi conceives of solidarity as the renunciation of privilege and power. This aspect is also echoed in Bloch's image of the Messiah, intimated in one of the passages from *Geist der Utopie* quoted above. There Bloch deals with the 'metaphysics of our darkness' and analyses the deepest amazement, the marvel that awakens the messianic spirit, and describes what lies at the core of this astonishment. Bloch suggests that the values of this amazement are

> something small, the kernel within so much impressive empty emballage, a Messiah who appears not in a flash but warm and nearby, as our guest, the discarded cornerstone within a metaphysical perspective, the wafting, comprehensible-incomprehensible symbol-intentions of the tua res agitur as a whole.[82]

The discarded cornerstone – the least of men –, an anti-elitist conception of the Messiah, of the divine man, whose call is directed to us: this is the bottom, the rejection of privilege and the point of departure for the implementation of solidarity. The Horatian line 'tua res agitur', "it is a matter that concerns you", expresses the human proximity and the human stake in the personal and political cause that this understanding of messianism brings forth. This is in turn expressed

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[81] Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, 278; Bloch, *Naturrecht und menschliche Würde*, 312: 'Aber es ist ein anderes, wenn die Machtkirche, Aberglaubenkirche vergeht und wenn eine macht-freie Lehrmacht des Gewissens ums Wohin und Wozu auf der Wacht sein, auf die Wacht treten sollte. Im »Zukunftsstaat«, meinte Bebel, wird nicht der Offizier, sondern der Lehrer der erste Mann sein; auch in einem Kirchenschiff ohne Aberglauben und auf Fahrt wäre das der mögliche Fall. Religiös durchaus, doch nicht als re-ligio oder Rückverbindung mit Herrschaft und ihren Mythologien, sondern als Rückverbindung eines ganzen Traums nach vorwärts mit unserem bedürftigen Stückwerk.'

[82] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 193; Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 1975, 244: 'das Kleine, der Kern so manch prinkvoll leerer Emballage, ein Messias, der nicht im Blitz, sondern warm und nahe als unser Gast erscheint, der verworfene Eckstein im metaphysischen Betracht, die wehenden, verständlich-unverständlichen Symbolintentionen des tua res agitur insgesamt.'

in *Symbolintentionen*, the content of which is always intended in human action and can be but figuratively expressed in symbols. Bloch's philosophy presents as the intended goal a communal life based on solidarity. On the same basis, Georgi describes the theocracy from the bottom, which engenders the communal life of the congregation.

At this point, it is also possible to specify in which sense Bloch's messianism is indeed an inherited theocracy. The *theos* of theocracy is inherited in the divine spark, in the messianic spirit to be retrieved in the inmost depths of human existence: it thus comes from the bottom and has no need for external rulers or for the bestowal of grace. But the pre-condition of the political action is a preternatural force. This force, the real inherited *kratos* of theocracy allows for the act of solidarity that pulls together the members of a political community. The general Blochian statement on the inheritable substratum of religion, summed up in the maxim "where hope is, religion is,"[83] can be finally narrowed down to his specific appropriation of messianic tropes: while religion is inherited as hope, the specific political theology that Bloch puts forward throughout his works – a theocracy – finds its inheritable substratum in solidarity.

Be the intended aim of political action historical or ultimate, Bloch's atheist-Gnostic messianism entails a theurgical form of theocracy. Assmann's 'Theocracy' defines a politico-theological form whereby God exerts His direct sovereignty on earth. In Bloch's inheritance, the divine element is but the shard of light that sparks from our inner depths and strives towards the realisation of solidarity. There is no need for an act of grace, no need for a God to endow people with his rebellious force, because this action is a theurgy, a divine work put into action by human hands.

2.4 Conclusion: How to Read Bloch's Messianism?

The discussion of the role played by Judeo-Christian mythologems in Bloch's utopian philosophy showed that the main value of inherited messianism consisted in fraying the otherwise intact borders of the category of the 'political', opening this up to dimensions that western political theory has forcefully excluded from the concept. The narrow characterisation of the political goes hand in hand with its independence from the other branches of philosophy. Bloch's political theology challenges this independence by prying open the political and exposing it to its utopian dimensions: the utopian dimension of a fully-fledged political subjectivity at the basis of political action and the utopian dimension of the ultimate goal of political action. Thus politics, whose contours are now more than worn out, displays its

[83] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1193; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1404: 'Wo Hoffnung ist, ist Religion.'

permeability with ethics, religion, art, and metaphysics. Bloch demonstrates throughout his works that it is indispensable to think politics together with the intimate parts of the human being, the darkness at the core of our desires and decisions; to properly act politically, however, it is also paramount to respond to the religious afflatus to completion, the striving for the pleroma; the discovery of this linkage erupts into a deep amazement, hence the relevance of the aesthetic dimension even for political action; lastly, the gathering and inheriting of cultural materials so to liberate their emancipatory potential requires the metaphysical notion of the principle to be called forth.

This constant redefining and broadening of the margins of the 'political' is achieved through the development of hope as the principle that is pitted against politics and also works within politics. Political philosopher Michael Walzer, in a book on the political features of the Hebrew Bible, has stated that "antipolitics is a kind of politics:"[84] he meant that even despite the total absence of a political theory – and even more: in spite of the sharp criticism towards political power that is to be found in many of its books – the Bible is an engaging political work. Echoing Walzer, one can assert that Bloch operates similarly: hope as inherited religion works as a peculiar kind of antipolitics. Without developing a new political system, without ultimately advocating for a specific political form to be implemented, Bloch uses religious elements to challenge the sclerotization of political debate and to open up possibilities for the achievement of an ulterior, utopian goal, a goal that is attainable only through the risky undertakings of political activity in the concreteness of human life. In this sense, he posits the presuppositions of good political action while at the same time denouncing the shortcomings of conventional political theories.

Within this frame, the peculiar and original mobilization of mythologems stemming from the Judeo-Christian tradition assumes a central role. Mythologems referring to the divine, the *theos*, are atheistically inherited as shards of light to be fetched, gathered and reunited: these shards stand for the *Überschuss*, the exceeding capacity, fully human, to move beyond the static *datum*, to overcome current stalemates, towards the transformation of the world and the full realisation of our own humanity. Bloch's messianism is therefore far from a mere neo-romantic revival of ancient lore that ideologically nourishes and justifies the core of the political. His messianism, aptly labelled "superconfessionary"[85] or a "materialistic-religious syncretism,"[86] is the preeminent declension of the principle of hope, shattering and broadening

[84] Walzer, *In God's Shadow. Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, xiii.
[85] Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries*, 99.
[86] Münster, Utopie, *Messianismus und Apokalypse im Frühwerk von Ernst Bloch*, 65.

the borders of the political. Inherited messianism serves Bloch to convey the hope for the preternatural act of solidarity to take place on earth, at the core of concrete utopia. This can take place only through the dialectical affirmation of Bloch's atheism. In his own words: "atheism with a concrete utopia is, via one and the same thorough act, the obliteration of religion as well as the *heretical* hope of religion put on its human feet."[87] In order to be possible to "put on its human feet", religious traditions must already include an emancipatory *Kernel* passible of being rescued. In this regard, Richard Faber has underlined the centrality of the Jewish and Christian tradition for Bloch:

> Once again this means that Christian religion of a heretical kind is the irreplaceable reservoir and potential of every utopianism, especially since no heavenly hope, but certainly a worldly hope, was widely at work in Judaism and broadly in Christianity *itself*.[88]

The peculiarities of Bloch's messianism can also be expounded by recurring to the distinction between *via passionis* and *via perfectionis* that Kabbalah scholar Idel advanced in his work on the intersection of Jewish messianism and mystics. Whereas the first form indicates the relevance that the personal and the collective suffering plays in ushering to the messianic times – the birth pangs of the Messiah –, the second one stresses the ardour with which the initiated strives towards the attainment of messianic completion.[89] Interestingly, Idel cites medieval mystic Abulafia as the main proponent of this form of messianism – the same kabbalist to which, as it has been discussed before, the Blochian doctrine of the self-encounter can be ultimately traced back. But Bloch is even more explicit in this regard, as the treatment of religion in his *Prizip Hoffnung* tellingly reveals:

> Every religion has founders, this means at the same time that religion in its invocations, even sometimes under the cover and the dominant ideologies of the masters' and star myth, was a most serious attempt at the name of all-embracing perfection. An attempt with elements of frenzy or of calmness, of the anthropomorphic or of the cosmos, of Promethean rebellion or of hypostatized peace; and the religions of protest represent at least the most human projections and hypostases into awesome dimensions.[90]

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[87] Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, 317; Bloch, Atheism in Christianity, 225.
[88] Faber, *Political Demonology*, 61.
[89] See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 3, 34, 148.
[90] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1193; Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1404: 'Jede Religion hat Stifter, das bedeutet also zugleich: Religionen war in ihren Beschwörungen, selbst zuweilen noch unter der Decke und den überwiegenden Ideologien des Herren- und Sternmythos, eine allerernsteste Versuchung des namens umfassender Vollkommenheit. Eine Versuchung aus Elementen des Rauschs oder der Besonnenheit, des Anthropomorphen oder des Kosmos, der prometheischen Empörung oder der hypostasierten Friedens; wobei der Religionen der Protestation mindestens die menschlichsten Projektionen und Hypostasen ins Ungeheure darstellen.'

Lastly, it must be remembered that the atheist appropriation of messianic mythologems into the principle of hope works at different levels. It is in fact both a personal and collective endeavour to perfection. At the personal level, as Pelletier has stressed, Bloch's philosophy of religion may be read as an exhortation to embark in a "spiritual exercise;"[91] in this direction, Pelletier suggests, one could read Bloch's assertion that – following Franz Baader – philosophy should exert a vicarious function: "like a sun, to rise above all creatures in order to help them manifest something equal to God."[92] If philosophy is the theory-praxis that allows the self-development of the individual, inherited messianism consists in the discovery and nourishing of the shard of light in the bottom of the human soul so that it can ignite the full realisation of the human. This élan is however at the same time a collective effort, since only through the transformation of the world and the disalienation of it can the subject come to completion. Hence Bloch's insistence on the community, on the 'church', on social forms that entail the absence of any oppressive power.

Along another axis, inherited messianism is put at work both historically and meta-historically, and its value holds true in both contexts. On the plane of *history*, messianic mythologems nourish the imagination of possible political forms, such that the envisaged community can and in some cases has found a concrete, if ephemeral, realisation. Religious images such as the Kingdom of God or the Celestial Jerusalem feed into the developments of the momentaneous yet extraordinarily powerful instantiations of novel and more righteous political formations. At the background of Bloch's reflections one can descry a vast repertoire of insurgencies and new governmental attempts, spanning from the 1871 commune of Paris to the early Russian Soviets of 1917, from the 1918-19 *Bayerische Räterepublik* to the 1968 *Studentenbewegung*. At the same time – and perhaps even more poignantly – Bloch's deployment of inherited messianic mythologems serves to convey the *transcendental* basis of a theologico-political form. Inherited messianism acts therefore as a potent wager always made against the *status quo* and never content with the provisional, albeit extraordinary, advancements on the level of history. In this sense it is possible to evince from Bloch's political theology a form of *weak* messianism. The discussion of this concept, which is derived from Bloch but stretches beyond the walls of his philosophical edifice, is the object of the next chapter.

[91] Pelletier, 'La formation de la philosophie d'Ernst Bloch à partir de la mystique de Maître Eckhart', 132.

[92] Bloch, *Tendenz - Latenz - Utopie*, 116: 'gleich einer Sonne über allen Kreaturen aufzugehen, damit er ihnen zur Manifestation eines Gottgleichen verhelfe.'

Chapter V. Critique of Negative Weak Messianism

Weak Messianism with and beyond Bloch

After the exploration of Bloch's philological, theoretical, and political appropriation of the messianic trope, we are left with a simple yet pungent question. How, if at all, could Bloch's philosophical operation with the well-chiselled religious material he inherited into his political philosophy benefit us today? In the following, I will argue that, within the panorama of what Bradley and Fletcher have labelled "the messianic now,"[1] recuperating and reproposing some of the points Bloch raised throughout his works might not only be helpful but necessary. Bloch's messianism maintains its originality even within the recent resurgence of interest in theological political discussions. It proves helpful in so far as it offers a perspective that contemporary authors have either dismissed or not considered altogether, therefore injecting into the debate a fresh view. But given the unsatisfactory answers that nowadays discussions in this field offer to tackle the root of the issues affecting contemporary politics, a recuperation of – and to be sure, a further development from – Bloch's messianism may be indispensable, if we are to address today's pressing political questions. A re-reading of Bloch offers in fact the possibility to re-set the entire discourse on political form and action, based on a transcendental principle, thwarting the double risk of either slipping into an old-fashioned metaphysical foundation, or denying the possibility of positive change. It is often in this stalemate that much of the current philosophical-political debates on the left run ashore – to the detriment of political activity aimed at concrete change.

To clarify what can be taken from Bloch's messianism, it will be necessary to distinguish between a strong and a weak appropriation of the messianic trope. These must in turn be comprised under the general concept of 'political theology' – a concept that, although already presented, requires a further inner differentiation to better appraise the value of Bloch's reflections: a distinction between a positive and a negative political theology. These two specifications will allow us to properly describe the many strains of contemporary weak messianism. In particular, I will confront the subtractive account of weak messianism advanced by Badiou and Agamben with Bloch's own account, showing how the latter allows for a mediation and an engagement with socio-political reality. I will conclude by suggesting how this messianic form may serve as the basis of a newly founded political philosophy. In doing

[1] Bradley and Fletcher, *The Messianic Now*.

so, I will intentionally move past the boundaries of Blochian philosophy, while at the same time – I believe – staying true to his though.

1. Positive and Negative Political Theology

In the previous chapter, I have introduced the notion of 'political theology', taken in the broad sense and with the inner differentiations that Jan Assmann has proposed. Taken in this meaning, the concept indicated any interaction between the political and the religious sphere, and it presents three main types: dualism, representation, theocracy. Bloch's philosophy of religion can be ascribed to this latter type, since it advocates for a peculiar form of divine rulership, atheistically interpreted.

It is now necessary to introduce a new distinction to better grasp the many nuances the concept of 'political theology' presents, so that it will be possible to properly qualify the main forms of the messianic now. This concept has in fact been mobilized to advocate both for and against the current political order. To account for this *prima facie* paradoxical opposition, Assmann, taking the cue from the reflections of Jewish theologian and philosopher Jacob Taubes, distinguishes a 'positive' and a 'negative' political theology. In 1987 – a few months before eventually losing his struggle against cancer – Taubes delivered a series of lectures on the political implications of the theology of Paul the apostle.[2] The astounding thesis, around which the entire seminar revolved, was that Paul's *Auseinandersetzung* with the law – most notably in his Letter to the Romans – was not only a criticism towards the Jewish priestly establishment, but also and primarily an attack on the norms imposed by Roman rulership. As a result, the portrait of Paul the apostle turned Paul into the most vehement adversary of the Roman Empire, with an indisputably anarchic tone. In his commentary to Taubes's lectures, Assmann states:

> Paul […] doesn't oppose a political theology of the Torah to the Roman *nomos* of the earth in order to establish a new national form of rule. He fundamentally negates law as a force of political order. With this, legitimacy is denied to all sovereigns of this world, be they imperatorial or theocratic […] This negative political theology is even more dangerous for Rome, as it universalizes the messianic revolt. The position of Paul doesn't imply any positive political form. This is why all oppressed peoples and groups can identify with it.[3]

Assmann implicitly takes the concept of 'political theology' as expressing its 'positive' value, i.e. laying the foundation of (*ponere*) the exertion of political power in the form of sovereignty

[2] Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*.
[3] Assmann, Assmann, and Hartwich, 'Afterword', 121.

and decision. Political theology, taken in its positive meaning, entails the need for someone who embodies this decision, someone who parallels the sovereignty of God on the earthly realm. While in antiquity this role was reserved to the Roman Emperor, in modern times this is attributed – here is Schmitt's lesson – to the dictator, upon whom all the political power is bestowed. 'Positive' refers therefore to a constructive theoretical formation that sanctions the establishment and exertion of power.

Contrary to its positive connotation, Assmann retrieves in Taubes's treatment of Paul its negative counterpart. Paul's political theology is negative because it denies the legitimation of any political order. To be sure, Taubes is in perfect agreement with Schmitt about the impossibility of a legitimate foundation of the political order, but from this he derives the opposite conclusion: that there is no immanent category that can legitimize political power at all. From Paul's preaching, Taubes recovers a theological stance that opposes in principle any sanctioning of the law, with the consequence of the "nondifferentiation among the dominant political power constellations"[4] currently in force.

The term 'negative political theology' is undoubtedly associated with Taubes. However, it was arguably used for the first time by Maurer, during the 1980s discussions of the group "Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie" organised by Taubes himself. As Maurer put it, negative political theology, by

> agreeing with Augustine's interpretation of Christianity, disputes the legitimacy of a positive political theology [...] insofar as the latter supports a specific policy to the point of absolutizing its goals."[5]

It is worth noticing that there is a difference between relying on theological reasoning to affirm the delegitimation of the political order, as Taubes does, and sustaining the impossibility to ground a political position on a theological basis. The latter, a rejection of political theology *tout court*, and not a negative form of it, has been perhaps most notably put forward by Peterson in his essay on monotheism, directed against Schmitt.[6] Differently from this impossibility, as Terpstra and De Wit have aptly observed, "negative political theology is thus a position *within* political theology, not a rejection or *Erledigung* (Peterson) of political theology in an attempt to return to a "pure theology."[7] Taubes's position on the political level is perhaps best expressed

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[4] Assmann, Assmann, and Hartwich, 141.
[5] Maurer, 'Chiliasmus und Gesellschaftsreligion Thesen zur politischen Theologie', 117.
[6] Peterson, *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem*.
[7] Terpstra and de Wit, ''No Spiritual Investment in the World as It Is'', 324.

in his *dictum* "I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is,"[8] a statement clearly symptomatic of his staunch apocalypticism. It is not a different political order, but rather the dissolution of the current one, that Taubes really argues for: his is an "apocalyptic political attitude marked by detachment from every existing order and the messianic expectation of the revolutionary interruption of history."[9]

This negative attitude towards the concerns of political life, although being remarkably sympathetic to the oppressed, does not translate itself in a justification of subversive or revolutionary acts.[10] Were this the case, even a negative version of political theology could be suspected of hiding a positive form underneath. German philosopher Odo Marquard was very wary of this option, against which he directed his criticism, accusing revolutionary (negative) political theologies of "futurist conformism"[11] — a sort of apology for future political powers. Albeit being subject to this accusation, Taubes made it clear that for him revolutionary utopias are but a faint form of secularised eschatology, to be eschewed on the ground that "the attempt to rule and dominate tomorrow and the day after, leaving the creation of the future in human hands, deprives the spiritual powers of their last domain."[12] The only tangible political outcome of this nihilistic account of political theology cannot but be a timid appeal to maintain secular and spiritual powers distinct and divided. In Taubes's words:

> "You see now what I want from Schmitt – I want to show him that the separation of powers between worldly and spiritual is *absolutely necessary*. This boundary, if it is not drawn, we will lose our Occidental breath. This is what I wanted to impress upon him against his totalitarian concept."[13]

It is noteworthy that this separation, rather than being advocated from the point of view of the atheist thinker that dismissed all things religious, is put forward by the theologian who fears a contamination of the spiritual world by the secular one, upon which he casts his contemptuous sight.

Finally, it must be remembered that the term 'negative political theology' has earned some consensus among contemporary scholars, but not always maintaining its original nihilistic connotation. Among those who recently appropriated the concept one finds Newheiser's appeal

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[8] Taubes, 'The Taubes-Schmitt Story', 103.
[9] Terpstra and de Wit, ''No Spiritual Investment in the World as It Is'', 325.
[10] Terpstra and de Wit, 341.
[11] Marquard, 'Aufgeklarter Polytheismus — auch eine politische Theologie?', 78.
[12] Terpstra and de Wit, ''No Spiritual Investment in the World as It Is'', 352.
[13] Taubes, 'The Taubes-Schmitt Story', 103.

for a negative political theology.[14] In this, however, he departs from the Taubesian concept, and uses the term to advance a counterbalance to what he describes as the ‘pessimistic’ theologies put in place by 20th century Christian theologians such as Sölle, Moltmann and Metz. For the latter, for instance, political theology, when intended negatively, served “as a critical correction to the extreme tendency toward privatization in contemporary theology.”[15] Newheiser argues in favour of a more ‘optimistic’ take on negative theology, drawing from its classical canon, especially from Dionysus the Areopagite, who developed the dialectics of affirmation and negation with regards to the deity. From there, he concludes that “although negative theology does not offer direct prescriptions for modern politics, it exemplifies an ethical discipline with political implications […] a circumspection that avoids both optimism and despair.”[16] While agreeing with Taubes that theology does not allow for any positive intervention in the political realm, he maintains a possible ethical outcome, a sort of theology of prudence. The coexistence of affirmative and negative politico-theological statements, Newheiser concedes, is a “simple contradiction” on the synchronic plane of logic, but – he argues – can unfold into the “diachronic perspective of ethical practice […] a negativity that holds affirmation open to future revision.”[17]

To sum up, whenever ‘negative’ political theologies have been discussed, authors used the term to make an intervention into the space occupied by political theology, sustaining the illegitimacy of a theological foundation of the political. This ends up either in a nihilistic disdain for the secular world, and a plea for its separation from the religious, or – at best – in a faint yet hopeful ethical appeal to circumspection.

In so far as the appropriation of messianic tropes entails a form of political theology, it is consistent to apply the same distinction. As scholars have noted, “Taubes’s paradoxical attitude — that, from a theological perspective, there is no legitimate political order, and that this idea must be at the center of political life — […] may just as well be characterized as a ‘negative messianism,’”[18] contrasting its positive counterpart. Before dealing with this contrast, however, we must introduce another differentiation.

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[14] Newheiser, ‘Why the World Needs Negative Political Theology’.
[15] Metz, Zur Theologie der Welt, 99.
[16] Newheiser, ‘Why the World Needs Negative Political Theology’, 7.
[17] Newheiser, 8.
[18] Terpstra and de Wit, ‘‘No Spiritual Investment in the World as It Is’’, 326.

2. Strong and Weak Messianism

The semantic value of a mythologem or a religious trope such as messianism can be described from still another angle. It is possible to account for the extent to which an element of a religious, mythical, or fantastic lore is incorporated in one's own *Weltanschauung* or construction of reality. This way of expounding the appropriation of a religious trope deals with the kind of adherence between the mythological lore and the explanation of actual historical facts that takes place in one's usage of mythologems. In other words, it has to do with the relationship between myth and reality, or between mythology (an aetiological narrative with foundational value) and cosmology (an account of the reality we live in). When the question of this relation interrogates the appropriation of the messianic tradition, it is possible to distinguish a *weak* and a *strong* messianism.

In modern times it is not possible to say that we live in intimacy with our own myths anymore. Mythical tales are on the contrary often perceived as referred to ancient times and their value as foundational for our society has been replaced by science – on the one hand – and jurisprudence – on the other. Belief in the actual reality of mythical or, more generally, fantastic lore is reduced to marginal and negligible groups, if not merely isolated individuals. Even in religious communities, most of the self-declared believers would not fully adhere to the literal meaning of their creed's dogmas. In short, we do not live in a mythical age anymore, at least not in the same way a Greek in the 5th Century BC, a Roman in the 1st Century AD, or a Christian European in Medieval age could have lived. Nonetheless, the possibility exists of the emergence of a 'strong' appropriation of the messianic promise.

2.1 Strong Messianism

Understood this way, messianism presents a revival, a reiteration of myth, as if we lived in a new mythical age: it assumes no solution of continuity between myth and reality, whereby mythical events are contiguous to historical ones, juxtaposed at the origin or at the end of the latter; myth is totally absorbed in the course of history, of which it relates the very first and last happenings. 'Strong' messianism presents two variants, one being eminently Jewish, the other intended in a trans-confessionary meaning. Without venturing into the intricacies of the specific political implications of each variant, one observes that in Israel messianic claims are common to many organizations and parties – most prominently, *Gush Emunim* – linked to religious Zionism, especially after the Six days War.[19] Outside Israel, one finds the Chabad-Lubavitch

[19] Don-Yehiya, 'Jewish Messianism, Religious Zionism and Israeli Politics'; Don-Yehiya, 'Messianism and Politics'.

Hasidic dynasty, wherein many also advanced strong messianic claims, which are still held valid by some, despite the death of the designated Messiah.[20] We incidentally observe that this pattern – the reaffirmation of the veracity of the messianic belief despite the failure of its leading figure – is common to other notable examples in Jewish history, from Sabbetai Tsevi to Jakob Frank. Beyond Judaism, taken in a broader sense, strong messianism characterizes any bestowal of a redeeming task on a singular man, such as a political leader, custodian of the destiny of the political community and therefore invested with exceptional powers: such is the pattern of many contemporary populist movements. This is the most common meaning of 'messianism' in general parlance: an ideological tool to justify the worldly power exerted by political subjects – in Assmann's terms presented above, it is taken as a form of 'representative' political theology. Regardless of the reasons he adduces to his criticism, one can agree with Gardiner when he affirms that "'Strong' Messianism has proven to be so disastrous over the course of the twentieth century – and continues today, in various fundamentalisms and atavisms of one kind or another."[21]

2.2 Critique of Strong Messianism

Guarded against those very risks, a series of scholars have developed a staunch critical stance towards 'strong' appropriation of messianic – and, more broadly, theologico-political – imagery. I hinted at this attitude in the previous section, when I introduced the position of Peterson, who, rebutting Schmitt's core thesis, has sanctioned the impossibility of any political theology, basing this on the irrepresentability of the Christian trinitarian account of God.[22] While Peterson opposed to the Schmittian stance a theological argument, other scholars would put forward a rationalist critique whereby myth is secularized or demythologized, debunked as the ideological underpinning of the seizure and exertion of power. Here messianism is not merely weakened but altogether wiped out by the demystification of the *arcana dominationis*,[23] of the occult theological and mythological instruments of secular domination. This position entails a form of Enlightenment, with the task of the critique of (*strong*) messianism as ideology, a critique whereby the system of power lays bare in front of the philosopher, who dissects and dismantles it. Although moving from a different, if opposite, point of departure

[20] Cf. Bilu, *With Us More Than Ever*, pt. I; Kravel-Tovi and Bilu, 'The Work of the Present'.
[21] Gardiner, 'Weak Messianism', 37; An identical critique is advanced by Negri and Hardt, who stated in an interview: 'We remember well the dangers tied to political versions of strong messianism, which have arisen at different times from thwarted political will, fanatical ethical purity or unbridled hatred. In every strong messianism there is the stink of terrorism'. Hardt et al., 'The Global Coliseum', 188.
[22] Peterson, *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem*.
[23] Cf. Clapmar, *De Arcanis Rerum publicarum. Libri Sex*.

than in Peterson, the rationalist/enlightening argument reaches the same conclusion: the basic tenets of political theology are dismissed. In this vein, opposing the blatant authoritarianism of Schmitt's thesis and denouncing its ideology, Löwith's works constitute notable examples of the secularization of myth.[24] In current Italian Theory, this is the position of Esposito.[25]

2.3 Weak Messianism: Benjamin and Beyond

Whereas the rationalist critique carries out a form of secularisation, if not altogether disproval of the messianic trope, the latter can also be inherited so to forge a new narrative: the outcome of this process is what I call 'weak' messianism. As seen in previous chapters, inherited myth presents an appropriation, tweaking and adaptation of mythologems, which come to be embedded in philosophical systems, keeping firm that we do not live in immediacy with myths and therefore marking the gap between ancient lore and myths on the one hand, and historical and political reality on the other. At the same time, however, the political or ethical tenets advanced by the messianic tradition are still deemed valid and effective forces operating through the fabric of reality, altering its warp and weft. Understood this way, weak messianism differs from a mere ideological orchestration – a justification for an act – yet it represents an ethical-political intervention. Rather than providing an imaginary origin or end of history, it fills the interstices and surrounds the borders of the ethical or political space, determining its conditions of (im)possibility and displacing worldly and historical events onto a different level, marked by an elusive logic that is neither deterministic nor reducible to *Realpolitik* or to the categorical imperative. The weakness of this messianism does not consist in its limited effectiveness – on the contrary, it is what bestows validity on intra-historical action – nor has it anything to do with a judgment of value of such a system or worldview. It rather indicates the looseness of the bond that links a mythological system of belief and the reality upon which the creed is supposed have an effect.

In opposing its strong counterpart, Michael Gardiner has used the category of weak messianism, stating that it "eschews such quasi-transcendental solutions"[26] and finds its proper domain in the here and now of everyday life. According to his construction of the category, 'weak' signifies a renunciation of metaphysical foundations and references to an otherworldly dimension, while at the same time retracing in the present "multiple temporalities and

[24] Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*. Habermas's works on the post-secular society also are aligned with the defence of liberal democracy and might therefore be opposed to the Schmittian authoritarianism.
[25] Esposito, *Two*.
[26] Gardiner, 'Weak Messianism', 36–37.

alternative possibilities (utopian time)."[27] We parenthetically observe the similarity of Gardiner's take with Negri-Hardt's reading of Benjamin's "weak messianic hope [*sic*] – weak because it expels any transcendental elements from the communist project. A weak messianism in this sense would be constituted by a strong attachment to reality and realistically exclude any mystical or political faith in the outside."[28] Gardiner adopts the category from another scholar, Eric Jacobson, who in turn derived it from Benjamin.

It must be noted that all modern reformulations and understandings of the nature of messianism's weakness must come to grips with the first formulation of it, namely that which is included in Benjamin's *Theses on Philosophy of History*, where he first used the term "*schwache* messianische Kraft."[29] The construction of a modern 'weak messianism' that takes its cue from Benjaminean philosophy is common not only to Gardiner and Jacobson, but also to Agamben and, before him, to Taubes himself. It is therefore worth taking a closer look at Benjamin's text so as to better understand the possible nuances of Benjaminean weakness and be in a better position to distinguish other possible connotations of the term. It is worth starting from the first Thesis, where Benjamin sets the stage for his brief compendium on philosophical history by bringing together the two most striking components of his thought: theology and dialectical materialism. As it is customary in his writing, he does so by means of an image, a *Denkbild,* providing to the reader with a key for the understanding of his messianism.[30] He presents a chess table where a "puppet wearing Turkish attire" is sitting, an automaton so perfectly built that it can win all games. Concealed under the table, however, there is actually a "hunchbacked dwarf," who – Benjamin assures – is a "master at chess"[31] who ensures victory by pulling the puppet's strings. The allegorical meaning of this image is soon to be clarified: to the puppet corresponds 'historical materialism', that must win all the time, at the condition, however, of taking advantage of the services of 'theology' – the hunchback dwarf – who "is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight."[32] Löwy notes that 'theology' here "refers to two fundamental concepts: remembrance (*Eingedenken*) and messianic redemption (*Erlösung*)."[33] The two are intimately connected in Benjamin's thought, since redemption on the one hand is not possible without considering the past – especially the history of the oppressed – and on the

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[27] Gardiner, 38.
[28] Hardt et al., 'The Global Coliseum', 188.
[29] Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 694.
[30] On the epistemological role of images and their differentiation in Benjamin's thought, see: Weigel, 'The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images'.
[31] Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Vol. 4*, 389.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 27.

other is itself enabled by a force attained through historical remembrance, reading history against the grain. The whole of the *Theses* deals with this reading, advancing a stark critique of the notions of progress and historicism, linking these to the pressing political events of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Within this frame, Thesis 2 inspects the specific yet inconspicuous relationships of past generations with the present one, a relationship woven together by a theological thread. Here Benjamin writes:

> The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that.[34]

The capacity to bring about a messianic redemption is dependent upon a weak power, belonging to current generations but granted by past ones. There is widespread consensus among modern interpreters that the characterisation of this force as weak has nothing to do with its efficacy or with its intensity: the present generation is no less able than the previous or following ones to carry about redemption. Benjamin in fact writes of a power that has been endowed to the present one as well as to every generation before.

The understanding of this connotation poses some difficulties and has elicited different responses. Löwy refers here to two possible meanings. First, following Agamben's reading, whereby the weak messianic power is juxtaposed to Pauline theology presented in 2 Corinthians.[35] Agamben reads Benjamin's adjective as a concealed citation of 2 Cor 12:9, "my strength is made perfect in weakness," and proceeds to an interpretation of this feature of the messianic force such that it collimates with the Pauline invitation of making use of the world as if they do not (*hos me*) use it (1 Cor 7:29-31).[36] For Agamben, "hos me" – literally: "as if not" – implies a practice of anomia (the absence or deactivation of the law): the Benjaminean weak messianic power would be nothing other than the suspensive practice of inoperativity: not the bursting off of an eruptive and straightforwardly revolutionary force, but rather the severing of any link and bond to a possible goal in history in face of the approximation of the messianic redemption.[37] Deuber-Mankowski has stressed, against Agamben, that the notion of messianic weakness is more likely to be derived from Benjamin's reading of Cohen rather than

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[34] Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 254.
[35] Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 33.
[36] Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 23 ff-.
[37] On Agamben's inoperativity, cf. the section on subtractive messianism down below.

Paul, and thus refers "not as Paul's heroic suffering from powerlessness, mistreatment, hardships, persecutions, or cares but, to the contrary, as the summons to self-responsibility."[38] While she underlined a possible ethical reading, Löwy recalls another semantic value of messianic weakness, following the text of the Theses more closely, where a political connotation cannot be left aside: "the melancholy conclusion Benjamin draws from the past and present failures of the struggle for emancipation. Redemption is anything but assured; it is merely a slim possibility, which one has to know how to grasp."[39] In this sense, Löwy seems to echo a more extensive reading, whose complexity has been disentangled by Werner Hamacher. The latter uncovered two possible meanings of weakness. First, it "is not one that is our own, independent of this claim. It is not 'ours', something we can have at our disposal by our own means, but it is the force which we have been 'endowed with' by others, it is the force of the claim itself and of the expectation that the claim is met."[40] This means – in accord with Löwy's succinct formulation – that "'Weak' denotes not so much the quantum of this force in relation to a larger one – be it a demanded one, or even an ideal one – but rather the susceptibility, on principle, to its failure."[41] Secondly but not less importantly, "it is a weak force also because it has to become extinguished in each future in which it is not perceived or actualised."[42] The current generation is, to be sure, endowed with a special messianic power, but this attribution of a special force ought be exploited in the very moment in which the past becomes recognisable in the present, the very instant in which the materialist historian understands the past and its claim and acts by precipitating the moment, by forcing history to its own end. This ephemerality of the messianic power leads us to yet another aspect of Benjamin's messianism that I have briefly touched upon in a previous chapter: his nihilism.[43] Crucial to the understanding of Benjamin's weak messianism is in fact the cryptic yet much commented *Theological-Political Fragment*, a piece of writing dating back to the early 1920s[44] putting forward a mystical interpretation of history and a peculiar relation of the profane with the theological. Let us quote once more the close of the fragment:

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[38] Deuber-Mankowsky, 'The Image of Happiness We Harbor', 68.
[39] Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 34.
[40] Hamacher, '"NOW": Walter Benjamin on Historical Time', 165.
[41] Hamacher, 168.
[42] Hamacher, 165.
[43] Cf. above, Chapter I, section 4, p. 75.
[44] The dating of the fragment has been a matter of controversy since it was first published by Adorno in 1955. As the curators of the Gesammelte Schriften note, while Adorno maintains that the text dates back to 1937, when he first saw and received it, Scholem assures that its content and style place it among the discussions that him and Benjamin were having in the early 1920s. I am inclined to follow Scholem's indication. Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Vol. 3*, 306, note 1.

> The spiritual restitutio in integrum, which introduces immortality, corresponds to a worldly restitution that leads to an eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.
>
> To strive for such a passing away-even the passing away of those stages of man that are nature-is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism.[45]

The profane, the worldly realm, is marked by its continuous passing, by the Heraclitan impermanence that tarnishes all things natural. The consummation of the worldly, however – thus seems to affirm Benjamin in the second half of the fragment – paradoxically approximates the messianic redemption through bringing history to its end, thus hastening the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. Expressing a critical stance towards this take, Martin Kavka explains:

> We are redeemed when the historicity of history — its 'transience,' to invoke the text of the fragment — ceases. Messianism was necessarily nihilist because Benjamin had made a desire for stability equivalent to a desire for an order in which time and change cease to exist. Such a nihilist stance […] is part and parcel of the desire for immortality: when the destruction of the world leads to the cessation of time, this entails the cessation of death.[46]

The redemption of past and present generations requires the cessation of the ever evolving and ever passing character of nature, a complete consummation of the worldly historical realm. While this process is approximated through human endeavour, through the 'striving for this passing-away', Benjamin is adamant that "Only the Messiah himself completes all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the messianic,"[47] as the incipit of the fragment recites. What does it mean that history must come to completion? Let us go back to Jacobson's reading, where the fragment and the theses are explained one with the other, leading to a deeper understanding of messianic weakness. He comments the last part of the fragment, affirming:

> To understand the rhythm of messianic nature leads to a striving. This striving is a praxis in itself. But just as it is a praxis of program, it is a praxis of nihilism, meaning a retreat from worldly participation in favour of an abstract and categorical realm of messianic reflection, embodied in a 'mystical' understanding of history.[48]

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[45] Benjamin, 305–6.
[46] Kavka, '3 What Do the Dead Deserve? Toward a Critique of Jewish "Political Theology"', 115.
[47] Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Vol. 3*, 305.
[48] Jacobson, 'Understanding Walter Benjamin's Theological-Political Fragment', 246.

His political nihilism presents, in other words, an abstention from the political realm at the same time enabling and enabled by a messianic reading of history. While Kavka criticises Benjamin's nihilism, accused of favouring the implosion of everything worldly in its striving to put an end to history, Jacobson reads the completion of history – and the corresponding redemption – as an abstention from the worldly realm, a distance that is only capable to grant space for a reading of it, for the interpretation of history. The latter is for Jacobson the proper meaning of messianic weakness. Turning back to the second *Thesis*, we observe with Jacobson that Benjamin in the same paragraph links past and present through a 'secret index' that the materialist historian is tasked to retrieve. For Jacobson this amounts to the exact meaning of weakness, the act of re-reading and interpreting history:

> Here lies that "weak messianic force", which is bequeathed to us not by election or birthright, but only through a culture of meaning which anticipates a generation to come. [...] The messianic as an event is off the scales entirely, and, precisely in this sense, serves as a counterpoint to the dominion of the past over the present, the reign of power over the reign of truth.[49]

The task of the materialist historian is to retrieve the "heimlichen Index" of history and read it against the grain, so as to liberate its secret – even unknowing/unwitting – redemptive currents. This leads Jacobson to enlist Scholem among those who eminently represented the weak messianic force of interpretation, once he acknowledged that his juvenile messianic calling was not to be intended as personally directed to him: "In the very moment that the logical possibility of his calling is not personally messianic, the scholar and exegete can become part of that weak messianic force of which Benjamin speaks that emerges from the rubble of the past."[50] Whereas Gardiner reads the weakness of inherited messianism as a sign of worldliness and inscribes it into the preoccupations of his everyday utopianism, Jacobson proposes a closer reading of Benjamin's text, from which he evinces the subtle activity of interpretation: the writing and re-writing of history.

The strictly Benjaminean account, together with its contemporary appropriations, presents but the negative side of a possible inheritance of the messianic trope.

In this chapter, I intend to advance a wider notion of weak messianism, that shares some of the features mentioned above but is not limited to Benjamin's messianic nihilism. First, this account of weak messianism, following Hamacher, is marked by the lack of guarantee

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[49] Jacobson, 'Locating the Messianic', 220.
[50] Jacobson, 221.

regarding the success of its endeavour: it is not a novel account of religious faith, that would assure to the believer the realisation of their prayers, nor a nebulous mystical teaching explaining the immutable law of the achievement of the Kingdom. Nothing in weak messianism is guaranteed, only risked. Second, messianic power is weak because of its indirect relation to history. While strong messianism envisions a historical subject purportedly endowed with an extraordinary actual power – and is thus a sheer form of magic –, weak messianism refrains from literal readings of mythological material. As seen in Benjamin's *Fragment*, there is a gap between the messianic and the profane that characterises weak messianism: this means that the historical and the theological planes are not contiguous, contrary to the picture of strong messianism.

When it comes to the further characterisation of the weak messianic force, however, I argue that the Benjaminean reading of the interaction of the two spheres, the messianic and the profane, is but one possibility among many, namely a negative possibility. His nihilism reflects his account of the relationship of the historical and the theological spheres, whereby the redemption is achieved in the latter through a consummation of the former. Kavka summarises: "Benjamin here argues that unified structures of meaning (which are false because they are ahistorical) must be destroyed, so that history can be redeemed."[51] To a theoretical destruction on the metaphysical level – the erasure of the transcendental –, the deactivation of, the suspension of, or the distancing from historical structures of power correspond. All these stances towards the metaphysical correspond to a negative weak messianism. Counterpart to this account, as seen with Bloch, the inheritance of mythologems can also yield positive outcomes, which in his philosophy are presented in terms of a principle. Maintaining the previous distinction between positive and negative political theology, one can distinguish a positive and a negative form of weak messianism. Differently from the negative account, the positive counterpart does not shun transcendental elements; rather, it seeks to articulate the transcendent while at the same time rejecting hypostatised transcendence: it seeks to account for the nature of the surplus in human life and history. This makes it 'weak' because it does not attribute redeeming agency to a deity and does not posit an essentialist and fixed goal of the historical process. But it is 'positive' because it does not limit itself to an interpretation, to the opening up of the multiplicity of perspectives in history, but it goes further to ground political and ethical action by setting their direction. Whereas Gardiner intends to "break definitively

[51] Kavka, '3 What Do the Dead Deserve? Toward a Critique of Jewish "Political Theology"', 113–14.

with theological (and teleological) thinking,"[52] positive weak messianism offers a form of open teleology: it maintains a form of *telos*, but not in the form of progress as secularised messianism; rather, in the shape of meaningful action that needs be directed towards a goal. Gardiner, who is otherwise a faithful Blochian disciple, departs from Bloch in abdicating any form of finality. Furthermore, Bloch's teaching is that theological thinking, if inherited, proves to be much more fruitful than shallow atheism.

In summary, against the current politico-theological panorama the following options stand out. Confronting the absolutisation and the totalitarian dangers engendered by strong messianism, one can oppose a rationalistic critique and rejecting it as mere impossibility or mystification. Alternatively, one can attempt an inheritance of the messianic trope, bringing about a weak messianism. This latter presents two sides: Negative weak messianism gets rid of theological and teleological claims and allows for a re-interpretation of history. Positive weak messianism maintains teleological claims and constitutes the transcendental side – the *apriori* – of ethics or politics.

2.4 Configurations of Weak Messianism

Weak Messianism can itself take different configurations. I argue that in recent scholarship four main configurations of weak messianism can be described, the first two of which are representatives of the 'negative' kind.

1. In the first place, weak messianism can be conceived as a deconstructive force, a sign of an absence, of an impossibility. Following Derrida, this postmodern configuration of weak messianism leads to the denial of the very possibility of any foundational account of politics: the political, however it may be conceived, presents a void, an *aporia* at its core, an unavoidable absence of any legitimization of political power.[53] Bradley and Fletcher present Derrida's philosophical project as aiming to "open a relation to an absolute, unforeseeable future in the face of every political, theological or economic attempt to foreclose upon that future."[54] This openness, however, rather than paving the ground to specific formations of the political, is deprived of any expectation: for Derrida,

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[52] Gardiner, 'Weak Messianism', 243.

[53] Cf. Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*; Derrida, 'Declarations of Independence'; Horwitz, 'Derrida and the Aporia of the Political, or the Theologico-Political Dimension of Deconstruction'.

[54] Bradley and Fletcher, 'Introduction', 184.

> The messianic, including its revolutionary forms (and the messianic is always revolutionary, it has to be), would be urgency, imminence but, irreducible paradox, a waiting without horizon of expectation.[55]

This enlists it in the ranks of the weak form, a "dry, anonymous — even atheistic — messianic," an instrument of deconstruction capable to "expose the historical contingency of every form of current political or philosophical organization."[56] Its revolutionary charge, albeit arguably present at least in its intentions, cannot be formulated into the assertive task of revolt or into the picturing of the new, lest it loses its absolute character and falls prey to the dangers of reification. The absolute future – an unimaginable horizon – only relates to the now by opening up a hiatus that exposes the inner contradictions of current political reality. Correspondingly, as Nancy would put it, the mythical tale is "interrupted", leaving space for a mere "literary messianism": divested of the catalytic role of gathering of the community, myth is reduced to an infinite play of literature.[57] This configuration of weak messianism, having rejected any foundational claim of inherited myth, sanctions the impossibility (or the aporetical nature) of any form of political theology, thus engendering a reading whose impact is in fact itself rather renunciatory in its possible political reverberations.

2. Another negative account of weak messianism has been conceived as a subtractive or suspensive force. In this declension, messianism is still found in alliance with those who – heir to the communists' struggles – advanced a staunch criticism towards political reality, whose authoritarian grip it aims to escape. Following this understanding, as John Roberts remarks,

> there is no messianic politics as such (just as there is no Christian politics as such) because the conditions of its possibility cannot be named and fulfilled in practice. Consequently, we might talk about this messianic writing, in the wake of the collapse of 'communism as the real movement that abolishes the present state of society', as a form of suspensive revolutionary consciousness. In its identification of a politics with the refusal to participate in the formal channels of the political process, it renders the idea of struggle in present conditions largely antinomian.[58]

This 'negative' form of weak messianism has been proposed by various thinkers during the last two decades, such as Agamben, Badiou and Žižek,[59] and presents an appropriation of the

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[55] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 211.

[56] Bradley and Fletcher, 'Introduction', 185.

[57] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*.

[58] Roberts, 'The "Returns to Religion"', 97.

[59] Cf. Agamben, *The Coming Community*; Agamben, *The Time That Remains*; Badiou, *Saint Paul*; Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*; Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*; Žižek, Santner, and Reinhard, *The Neighbor*.

anarchic, apocalyptic and antinomian facets of the messianic mythological tradition, arguably making theirs the closest positioning to Benjamin's messianic nihilism. Agamben, for example, aptly mobilises this weak messianism to back political movements of subtraction from the grip of the state by invoking the suspension of the law. In so doing, subtractive messianism does not limit itself to theoretical speculation, but marks a concrete intervention in the political arena. This configuration of weak messianism is ascribable to an anti-identitarian political theology that pries open the system of power of western democracies through the renunciation of any essentialist and teleological affiliation.

3. When weak messianism takes a 'positive' form instead, it may assume the shape of an ethical imperative. It is the case of the Levinasian account of messianism, whereby a messianicity, tinged with suffering that takes upon itself the sins of the Other, is presented as the primary feature of ipseity, of the self-sameness of the individual: "the Messiah is myself; to be myself is to be the Messiah."[60] This form leads to a formulation of an ethical command that unfolds in the relation of the single individual with its Other. Thus, in Lévinas's philosophy,

> each person acts as though he were the Messiah. Messianism is therefore not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops History. It is my Power to bear the suffering of all. It is the moment when I recognised this power and my universal responsibility.[61]

In this ethical account of absolute responsibility towards the Other – the primacy of justice over freedom in Lévinasian terms –, messianism is introjected into the ethical subject as its own crisis and foundation at the same time. The inviolability of the Other, the obedience to the commandment not to kill, on the one hand is posed as the prime ethical demand for justice, entailing the reaffirmation, on metaphysical principles, of the human dignity of any person. On the other hand, it is stretched to the point of an absolute responsibility demanding to "bear the suffering of all." From a political-theological point of view, this extreme ethical account of messianism finds its place within what Critchley has labelled an "anarchic meta-politics" where a messianically tinged radical ethics leads to the construction of the political subject and finds in the "interstitial distance with the state" the proper *locus* of politics.[62]

4. A positive form of weak messianism, however, does not have to be restricted to a personal or individual ethics – however radical – but can assume the shape of a utopian principle, whose validity is extendable to the entire community wherein it is at work. Bloch's messianism

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[60] Lévinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 88–89.
[61] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 245.
[62] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 56–63, 111–14; See also Badiou, 'On Simon Critchley's Infinitely Demanding'.

embodies this collective form of weak messianism: the inheritance of mythologems is conveyed into a philosophical system that encyclopaedically encompasses all aspects of human life. From the triviality of the dreams of a better future to the grandiose images of the heavenly Jerusalem, the *Parousia*, and Isaiah's "new skies, new Earth,"[63] the utopian principle of hope makes humans capable of envisaging a better future on Earth through what ultimately comes to be a subversive outburst of messianic force.

3. Subtractive Messianism: Badiou and Agamben

A fruitful way to compare negative and positive accounts of weak appropriations is offered by the analysis of the contemporary re-appropriation of the traditional notion of the 'transcendental'. Elements of inherited messianism – and particularly the marked antinomianism featured in its apocalyptical versions – have been used to undermine and rethink some of the pivotal notions of the western tradition of thought. I am referring to the partial recovering of the "transcendentals" in Agamben and Badiou, which is happily espoused with their recuperation of the messianic. To be sure, their reference (implicit or explicit) to canonical scholastic concepts ought not be read as a mere restoration of old metaphysics – quite the opposite, in fact! – but cannot be reduced to an all too easy opposition. It is rather an oblique intervention that allows them to supersede both medieval scholasticism and its own overturning in Kantian and post-Kantian critical thought. It is through positing a novel ontology – a de-essentialised ontology, as it were – that they lay the basis for their political considerations, where their messianic overtone emerges more clearly. In this sense, the analysis of the main tenets of subtractive messianism is particularly interesting because, contrary to other contemporary appropriations, it is not used as a mere hermeneutical device or theoretical critique but intends to endorse actual interventions in the political sphere. The elucidation of the ontological and political underpinnings of subtractive messianism will then allow me to advance a different, positive, re-appropriation of the messianic trope.

Although the term "transcendental" is largely associated with the first Kantian Critique, where it counts as one of the principal elements of his 'Copernican revolution', the attempt of Agamben and Badiou is that of recovering the classical, pre-Kantian notion. Leung has convincingly showed how this reprisal works and I am bound to follow his reading in this regard.[64] The Kantian treatment of the transcendental presents it in terms of the conditions or

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[63] Is, 65:17.

[64] Leung, 'The One, the True, the Good… or Not'; Although admittingly very similar to Badiou's and Agamben's position, Derrida's 'quasi-transcendental' indicates "an inner failing or principle of ruin affecting this transcendental position as such." Cf. Bennington, 'Aesthetics Interrupted', 21.

modes of human knowledge, denying any metaphysical claim as to the nature of the object or thing itself. In short, metaphysics has inappropriately attempted to deal with something that is intrinsically inaccessible to human knowledge (the thing as object of ontological investigation) – of which we can only describe its conditions.[65] Contrary to this indictment of western metaphysics, Badiou and Agamben have re-claimed philosophy's right to talk about and deal with Being as such, they have re-claimed ontology's legitimacy. Both their philosophical programmes, in fact, attempt to rediscuss the core notions philosophy uses to think the constitutive elements of our reality, without restraining their investigation to the mere epistemological level. In this, Leung argues, their works "recast a 'classical' sense of the transcendentals as common notions or indeed dimensions of Being itself."[66] Transcendentals hold the double meaning of what is common to all things and what lays beyond each individual things, following the Latin term *transcendere*.[67] Despite the lack of a pre-eminent scholastic theory of the transcendentals, given its many variations in a four century-long dispute, the simplest and most-often quoted formulation of it can be tracked down to the writings of Albertus Magnus. The Dominican maintained that, in addition to 'being', one should count unity (*unum*), truth (*verum*) and goodness (*bonum*) as part of the transcendental family.[68] The classical formulation therefore reads: "*quodlibet ens est unum, verum bonum*," as also found in most modern references, not least in Kant's Critique.

To the extent that a preoccupation with the ultimate features of Being itself animates an important part of Agamben's and Badiou's theoretical investigations, it is legitimate to affirm, as Leung does, that they are "in some sense, returning to a mode of philosophising that Kant would associate with the 'transcendental philosophy of the ancients.'"[69] The other side of their philosophical interests has a clearly practical implication: they are both concerned with the problems of agency and subjectivity that current (neo- or post-) Marxism has to face. As John Roberts has stressed, however, they posed these issues from outside the frame of the "twentieth Century form of Marxism: the relationship between party, class and state."[70] In their re-reading, the messianic acquires a central role in redefining the space for the left today, insofar as it

[65] Kant, Immanuel Kants Werke, bk. KrV, [B25]; Aertsen, Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought, 13–15.
[66] Leung, 'The One, the True, the Good… or Not', 78.
[67] Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, 13–34.
[68] Aertsen, 'Die Frage Nach Dem Ersten Und Dem Grundlegenden. Albert Der Große Und Die Lehre von Den Transzendentalien'.
[69] Leung, 'The One, the True, the Good… or Not', 78.
[70] Roberts, 'The "Returns to Religion"', 96.

enables a "readiness to force the end", or an ability "to act politically for ultimate purposes."[71] In his poignant commentary, Roberts has perhaps best expressed the limits implied in their recasting of messianic tropes and its political implications:

> The subtractive, renunciative, and suspensive conditions of the political subject are the necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for clearing a distance between what might be named as revolutionary politics and the day-to-day 'democratic' representation of politics under mature capitalism.[72]

In the following pages, I will explore this tangle of theoretical and practical philosophy connecting ontology and politics, showing how a recasting of the transcendentals nourishes a subtractive messianism and what consequences this latter entails. After this, I will bring up again the Blochian notion of principle *qua* transcendental to re-think a different, alternative ontology, tapping into a positive form of weak messianism.

3.1 Badiou: Subtraction and the Void

The act or movement of subtraction, Badiou's central political notion, has to do with the attempts to escape the suffocating grip of the state, which is perceived as the "objective and violent core of legal domination."[73] Subtraction finds its place, according to Badiou, between two other modes of negation of the current socio-political-economic structure, *destruction* and *communication*.[74] The first refers to the disintegration of an old world – the bourgeois state – via a violent and frontal opposition to it: in short, to class struggle possibly bursting into a revolution; the second, on the contrary, is an attempt of negating the current framework without its annihilation and takes the forms of the democratic opposition to which we have become accustomed.[75] While the first movement entails the risk of slipping into an authoritarian form of exertion of power – personified by Stalin's dictatorship[76] –, the second results in a fictitious opposition that never achieves the aimed goal: the outcome is a death of negation and political hope, which leads to despair.[77] An alternative and not (only) destructive form of negation has to be sought in the indifference to current laws, in the suspension of the political structure, namely: in *subtracting* the subject from the framework of the state. If we maintain that the reality of the socio-economical-political structure ultimately lies on the categorial distinctions

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[71] Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 139.
[72] Roberts, 'The "Returns to Religion"', 101.
[73] Hallward, *Badiou*, 98.
[74] Hallward, 272.
[75] Badiou, 'Destruction, Negation, Subtraction'.
[76] Hallward, *Badiou*, 273.
[77] Badiou, 'Destruction, Negation, Subtraction'.

that build up logical norms and substantial predicates – in other words, the components of socio-political identities –, the act of subtraction consists, in first instance, in a withdrawal from *reality* and in appeal to the *real* that does not find any suitable representation there. In other words, this movement is the "infinite subtraction from the subsumption of the multiple beneath the One of the concept."[78]

It is at this point that Leung notes how Badiou's argument in search of a universal presents a similarity with the discussion of transcendentals. Badiou states:

> There is no God. Which also means the One is not. The multiple 'without-one' – every multiple being in its turn nothing other than a multiple of multiples – is the law of being. The only stopping point is the void.[79]

In brief, a subsumption under the overarching concept of the One is rendered logically impossible by the existence of mere multiplicities. Without venturing into the discussion of the mathematical arguments he advances, it suffices here to recall that, opposite to the One, Badiou states the paradoxical omnipresence of the lack, the absence, of "the Void." The Void becomes then "the initial point and the halting point of all beings [...] the *arché* and the *telos* of all things."[80] In a similar fashion, Badious argues in *Logic of Worlds* that, since there is no Whole in the same way there is no oneness, there can be "no uniform procedure of identification and differentiation of what is."[81] Opposed to the "unified 'centre' of transcendental organisation, such as the Subject is for Kant,"[82] there is a multiplicity of worlds, each of which presents its own rules and regulations, none of which are ultimately ascribable to a Whole or a universe. What he puts together is a "transcendental constitution (without subject),"[83] turning upside down the scholastic transcendental of *Unum*. Instead of affirming that every being must be thought as a unitybof its own *quidditas* (the only knowable aspect of beings), Badiou retorts that the only character common to all beings is, paradoxically, their vacuity, their being void. This overthrowing of essentialist ontology is also mirrored in his conception of truth. In this regard it is worth recalling Badious's notion of truth as "the real process of a fidelity to an event," ontologically indiscernible and as such radically opposed to the scholastic transcendental of *verum* based on the conformity of intellect and thing.[84] Here again, one can

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[78] Badiou, Theoretical Writings, 108.
[79] Badiou and Hallward, *Ethics*, 25.
[80] Leung, 'The One, the True, the Good... or Not', 81.
[81] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 112.
[82] Badiou, 120.
[83] Badiou, 102; cf. pp.192, 571.
[84] Thomas (Aquinas), *The Disputed Questions on Truth*, sec. I,I.

notice the undermining of the classic transcendental, which comes to be substituted by its modern, de-essentialised counterpart.

This engagement with the transcendental and its re-writing from an anti-essentialist point of view reverberates into historical and political reality. Thus, through a break with the objective structures of Being – namely from social and historical particularities – subtraction acts as a subjective gesture performed as a non-consensual "politics of truth" reviving ideas of justice and equality.[85] This movement of disentanglement from legal, gender, ethnic, class, etc. identities (from the One) produces the *generic*, disregarding all predicates and therefore producing the universal. It is here worth noticing the affinity of the *generic* with Agamben's *quodlibet*, which we will discuss shortly.[86]

Analysed from a diachronic perspective, subtraction presents coherent implications at the level of philosophy of history. Since the act of subtraction must be "devoid of any aim that would be representable in the object or supported by a principle of objectivity,"[87] it can be described, with a pinch of salt, as an attempt of thinking a form of being deprived of the Aristotelian *entelechy*. This results in a sharp rebuttal of teleological models, since thinking a *telos* would imply once again readmitting the One and its essence. The transfer of this movement from a philosophy of history to political action implies the imperative of a refusal to interact with any structure that entails a political identity, without necessarily obliterating it, but rather suspending or eluding it. Practices of passive resistance, strikes, squatting, etc. are among the most common translations of the act of subtraction to the field of political action but so far have not proved successful in curbing the hegemony of capitalist economy and of the state as its counterpart.

In short, the exodus from identitarian politics in the attempt to re-build an opposition to the current economic-political structures is what Roberts refers to when he talks about the "subtractive, renunciative, and suspensive conditions of the political subject," acknowledging the ineffectiveness of their corresponding practices. This exodus, Badiou's own weak messianism, is paired with a radical theoretical redefinition of being at the transcendental level through the notions of the Void and of the Event. These ontological reformulations and their corresponding messianicity engender but a timid practical response, as Roberts pointed out.

This leads to the question: if the politics of subtraction is only the *necessary* condition, what would be *sufficient* to endow the political subject with the capacity to fret capitalism's

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[85] Chattopadhyay, 'Alain Badiou's Truth-Ful Politics of Subtraction and Genericity'.
[86] Agamben, *The Coming Community*.
[87] Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, 112.

dominance and overturn its power? Before suggesting a tentative answer to this thorny query, however, it is interesting to note how a similar pattern is to be found in Agamben's reflections.

3.2 Agamben: Inoperativity and the *Quodlibet*

The concept of inoperativity [*inoperosità*] is central to Agamben's entire work and arguably the core of his entire production from *Homo Sacer* on. In fact, the philosopher reaches the point of equating the political sphere to inoperativity *tout court*: "Politics is that which corresponds to the essential inoperability [*inoperosità*] of humankind, to the radical being-without-work of human communities."[88] Agamben, moving from a Foucauldian perspective, maintains that the biopolitical apparatuses (states, nations, etc.) exert their power directly on the living body of the subjected individuals, not only setting their tasks but also disciplining their acts by forcibly directing them towards predetermined goals. This control over the body takes place, for Agamben, in the form of steering them as *means to an end*, thus denying the very essence of humankind, namely the absence of a determinate essence. By severing the co-opting linkage between potentiality and actuality, by negating a plain "*transitus de potentia ad actus*,"[89] Agamben seeks to restore man to the dimension of pure potentiality, that is, the free choice to be or not to be in a determinate status. This freedom, however, takes place not so much *qua* possibility to pass into actuality as possibility of his own impossibility: the capacity *not to* do something, *not to* fulfill his assigned task, *not to* be a determinate being. Here a literary parallel can be found in Melville's character of Bartleby, in his namesake tale where he is seen repetitively answering to his employer's requests, a well-off Wall Street lawyer, a polite yet disconcerting "I would prefer not to."[90] Agamben finds in this character the "strongest objection against the principle of sovereignty,"[91] a veritable embodiment of messianic weakness in his challenging the Aristotelian conception of potentiality and actuality.[92] The capacity not to perform a task (in abidance to the rule), an inherent human capability, is thus properly restored in an act of subtraction which Agamben names inoperativity and which constitutes the political act par excellence. As Prozorov notes:

> For Agamben, the way to bring things to the end consists not in the teleological fulfillment of a process of development (the end as completion or accomplishment) nor in the merely negative act of the destruction or elimination of an object (the end as

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[88] Agamben, *Means without End*, 140.
[89] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 40.
[90] Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*.
[91] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 48.
[92] Cf. Whyte, "'I Would Prefer Not To'".

> termination or cessation). Instead, it is the process of becoming or rendering something *inoperative*, deactivating its functioning in the apparatus and making it available for free use. Happy life is thus made possible by neutralizing the multiple apparatuses of power to which we are subjected, including our own identities formed within them.[93]

This weak messianicity, presented in its utter negativity through an attitude of inoperativity, reflects an ontological structure of the subject that, similarly to Badiou's one, rejects an essentialist account of being. Interestingly, as Agamben puts forward this ontological argument, he explicitly refers to the problem of the transcendental, taking up again the scholastic enumeration: *quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum seu perfectum*. His unconventional move consists in his stressing the relevance of the adjective *quodlibet*, ('whatever'), deeming it, as Leung puts it, "a condition that is more universal than the conventional Scholastic transcendentals."[94] The *quodlibet* thus signifies, in Agamben's take, the singularity of being, namely: "its being *such as it is*."[95] The radical overturning of this ontological take is evident: any being, any object, rather than being defined by a supposedly transcendent essence – a specific content or form common to all its species – is such as its own singular mode of being. There is here a movement of *kenosis*, an evacuation of content: "Whatever adds to singularity only *an emptiness*."[96] This structure of emptiness is taken up again in some of his later works, where he describes the relation between Being *per se* and the beings as singularities. In *The Use of Bodies* he writes:

> Being does not preexist the modes but constitutes itself in being modified, is nothing other than its modifications. […] And this is also the only sense of the doctrine of the transcendentals: the being that is always already its modifications.[97]

The mode precisely indicates the being of the singularity such as its own singular being. In this, the mode is another notion through which Agamben constructs his anti-essentialist ontology. There is no overarching Being that subsumes all the particular beings, no stand-alone Substance: this latter constantly and dynamically unravels in the multiplicity of its modes and only through this multiplicity. To be sure, by taking the cue from Spinoza's distinction of substance and modes, Agamben explicitly distances himself from scholastic speculation, but only to devise the ontological presuppositions of his account of biopolitics more thoroughly.

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[93] Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics*, 31.
[94] Leung, 'The One, the True, the Good… or Not', 86.
[95] Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 1.
[96] Agamben, 67.
[97] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 170.

This empty ontology allows him to cancel the categorical distinction between different subjects, that are free (not) to assume whatever identity without it being pre-ordained to them. There are strong political implications that follow from this outline. The negation of the identitarian construction of the political subject, together with the deactivation of the apparatuses which seize its living body, are the two dynamics which subtract people from the control over their life and re-enable a free use of the body itself, no more forced to accomplish a given task. On the political level, Prozorov suggests that this act of subtraction might find its counterpart in the practices of the Italian Autonomist Marxist movement in the late 1970s.[98] However, it would be more accurate to refer, as Franchi does, to the theorisations of Mario Tronti, which during the 1960s laid the background for 'Workerism' and provided the theoretical ideas to the subsequent autonomist movements. Workerists claimed that since

> capital is essentially a social power that requires, as a prerequisite, the existence of productive labor [...] a withdrawal from labor, or more generally, a refusal to collaborate with capital in the organization of labor by presenting, for instance, demands that cannot be satisfied, is a political 'act' of destruction that would bring down the capitalist organization of society. Politics becomes passive in the sense that canonical form of Marxist political action, the workers' struggle against capital, is identified with a denial of any action at all, as Mario Tronti declared in "The Strategy of refusal."[99]

Behind these ideas there was a series of practices of insubordination and sabotage which spread and radicalised in factories until their explosion in the autumn of 1969: the rejection of work was conceived as a unifying practice of struggle as it implemented a refusal to the obligation to produce surplus value. Proletarian expropriations, self-reductions of bills and rents, squatting were among the practices gravitating around the concept of refusal to work. As Franchi points out, the "thematic affinity" between the workerist framework and Agamben's inoperativity is striking, since Agamben reaches similar conclusions from a philosophical standpoint almost entirely alien to the Marxist conceptual system.[100]

The capacity *not to* work, to refuse any allegiance with the biopolitical machine, depends not so much on the disregard for the assigned end as on the intrinsic absence of any end itself. Human beings are, for Agamben, inherently devoid of any determinate identity (they are *quodlibet*), and there is therefore no *telos* on their life except from that which has been cast upon them by the apparatuses of power.

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[98] Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics*, 33.
[99] Franchi, 'Passive Politics', 38; Tronti, *Workers and Capital*.
[100] Franchi, 'Passive Politics', 38.

As a consequence, inextricably bound with the essential inoperativity of human beings is, once again, an anti-teleological conception of history. Were human activity directed to an end – even the utopian end of liberating man from the constraints of the biopolitical power –, its acts would be helplessly trapped in the net of teleology and so eventually of identitarian politics. The exclusion of any utopian projection into the future from Agamben's political philosophy has been well described by Salzani:

> Radical politics is usually based on imagining that something very different from this world is possible and that the possibilities of this new world lie in the future. To start all over, though, implies a *de-cision*, the drawing of lines and demarcations between the old and the new, the past and the future, and the violence that goes with it. For Agamben, to the contrary, it is in this world, in the present, that we have to uncover the potentialities for the new world, a supplementary world that exists already, in potential. [...] And this implies rendering inoperative [...] all historical and utopian projects. Redemption is not opera, work, but, rather, a peculiar sort of sabbatical vacation from all the communities of the future, from everything about the future that demands a production, from all the demands of the future.[101]

Agamben's political thought is then characterised by the sheer absence of any new world and of any utopia. It is rather to the present – devoid of any assigned new *telos* – that the political thought and action are directed.

To sum up, both Agamben and Badiou, in their respective and different philosophical projects, attempt to put forward an anti-essentialist ontology, so as to free the subject from the constraints of an over-imposed identity. In so doing, they can be said to rethink the medieval notion of the transcendentals, shattering the classical essence-existence dyad. Dickinson sees in Agamben's thought a "practical form of atheism" wherein the profanation of Christian theology leaves space to think a form of transcendence. Along the borders of his ontology, Dickinson writes, one finds a profanation of western theology ushering "a silent transcendence […] forever inaccessible yet grounding everything that is said, one that exists, if at all, *as if* it did not really matter at all."[102] This sort of indifference, applied to the various levels of metaphysics, philosophy of history, and political thought is the seal of the negativity of Agamben, as well as Badiou's subtractive messianism. The ban on essentialism – whereby the identity of the essence of beings is substituted by the 'Void' or the 'Whatever' – entails a conception of history deprived of goals. The utter rejection of teleology enables political subjects to elude the coils

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[101] Salzani, 'Quodlibet', 227.
[102] Dickinson, 'The Profanation of Revelation', 77.

of institutionally sanctioned norms and frees it from the over-imposed identities. It is but a negative freedom, which can ultimately repeat with Bartleby "I would prefer not to." The weak messianicity that permeates their philosophical projects inherits the apocalyptic overtone of this tradition, leaving out the eschatological tensions included within it for fear that these might tarnish the pure inessentiality of their newly founded subjects. As a result, the only possible political reverberation – in Taubes's phrasing, the lack of "spiritual investment in this world" *qua* actual political intervention – is emboidied by the practices of passive resistance common to left-wing movementism.

Weak messianism, when taken in its subtractive variant, while fulfilling a necessary condition to evade the oppressive grip of the current economic and political configuration, falls short of pointing to the direction for the re-thinking of an altogether alternative political reality. However, the subtractive version is not the only possible inheritance of weak messianism. If one takes up again the considerations on the Blochian notion of *Prinzip*, I argue, one can develop a different form of weak messianism, elaborating its positive, constructive counterpart.

4. Positive Weak Messianism: Politics of Solidarity

If we maintain that any form of religious inheritance, in so far as it is encapsulated in a Western philosophical system, entails a redefinition of the ontological presuppositions of the system itself, it is worth exploring yet another possibility to appropriate the messianic trope. The discussion of the previous chapters interpreted the Blochian inheritance of messianic mythologems in the form of a principle of ethical and political action. There, I have already hinted to the possible transcendental value of the principle of hope. In a very broad sense, messianic mythologems furnish Bloch's system with the theological elements to rethink the foundations of political thought and to widen the perimeter of the political. But if hope is the operating principle stirring the vibrant core of inherited mythologems, what kind of ontological implications ensue? And given the new ontological reconfiguration, what kind of political implications might follow?

While an exhaustive treatment of the matter will require a further extensive project that is well beyond the scope of the current thesis, I will suggest one way of setting the stage and pointing to a possible research direction.

To answer the first question, it is useful to go back to the medieval formulation of the transcendentals and its modern overturning by proponents of subtractive messianism. In Agamben we find an anti-essentialist reformulation of the adjective *quodlibet*, taken as the new protagonist of the advent of the new (inoperative) community. Badiou, for his part, nullifies

the unity of the *unum,* demonstrating how at its core there lies nothing but the 'Void'; besides, he rethinks the *verum* in terms of a fidelity to the 'Event'. This allows him to avoid the trap of the Whole or the Truth understood as omni-comprehensive totalities. From the classical list of transcendentals, however, one went missing: modern ontologies underlying weak messianism have left out a reconsideration of the transcendental quality of goodness: whatever being is also *bonum*. Regarding this particular qualification, Leung notes that for scholastic thought "even if things are not fully or actually good, everything has the potency to be good."[103] In the classical thesis of the convertibility of being and good, as conceived by scholastic philosophers, a key role is played by Aristotle's authoritative definition, contained in his *Nichomachean Ethics*, "the good is that which all desire."[104] This led Aquinas, among others, to think of goodness as a relational quality, a form of *convenientia* or conformity between being and appetite: good is the being that corresponds to our desires.[105] However, he did develop another important argument, by connecting "the actuality of being with the proper character of the good as that which is desirable – since a thing is desirable only insofar as it is perfect, and is only perfect insofar as it is in act, the goodness of a thing depends on the actuality of its being."[106] What would happen, however, if the transcendental quality of goodness, rather than being defined from the point of view of the perfection of its actuality (thus fixating the qualities essentially inherent to it), begins to be thought from the perspective of the possibility that this very being offers?

This starting point reflects the adherence to the Blochian ontology of not-yet being: goodness is re-thought as the transcendental utopian potentiality dwelling in each and every being. Paradoxically, it is not the completion of the singular being, but its unfinishedness, that allows us to predicate its goodness. This unmistakably marks a striking departure from the scholastic ontological conception of being, which is substituted by the underpinnings of utopian messianism. One of the central claims in the scholastic treatment of the transcendentals was the convertibility of being for its transcendental qualities. Boethius, upon whose reflections the later doctrines were grounded, maintained that "all that already exists loves its own being and preserves it with all its strength. Therefore, being itself (ipsum esse) has the character of the good."[107] The transcendental of goodness, therefore, was marked by a distinctive conservative

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[103] Leung, 'The One, the True, the Good… or Not', 78.
[104] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. I, c. 1, 1094a2–3.
[105] Cf. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, 619.
[106] Goris and Aertsen, 'Medieval Theories of Transcendentals'.
[107] Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, 42.

character, constructed on the basis of the self-preservation of being, from which its goodness is derived.

The adoption of a utopian perspective, on the contrary, compels us to think the inconvertibility of being and good, on the premise that every being is not-yet fully realised, it is not completely formed or actual. One can paraphrase Boethius and say that all that exists loves the being that it is not yet (but can potentially become). This insertion of an inner tension at the ontological level is the core feature of the ontology of not-yet being and is loaded with theoretical and practical consequences. The transcendental indicates here the ever-stirring character of being that is actively seeking its own form (essence) and is never content with provisional formations. At the same time, however – and this distinguishes it from the subtractive recasting of transcendentals – it allows to conceive of a content and a form for the uncompleted being. This means that it is legitimate to proceed with a categorical definition of a being, determining its (potential) essence, provided that one maintains its being subjected to in(de)finite reformulations. Being is thus convertible not so much in *utopia* but in its intrinsic *striving towards* utopia – and this appetitive character accounts for the weak messianic inheritance of the transcendental of *bonum*.

The only convertibility that one can therefore posit is that between being and *desire* to realisation: this is the meaning of hope taken as a principle – hence this is another way of inheriting messianism in a weak sense. Desire, however, requires intentionality – the being directed towards an object – and this in turn must to some extent conceive of the intended object itself. In other words, one needs to describe the attributes of the being in order for it to be thought and intentioned. However, this happens not through the classical formula "S is P", but through its substantial reformulation "S is *not yet* P."[108] Taking seriously this Blochian formula allows us to conceive and attribute a specific content (P, an essence, a form) without foreclosing its capacity to change and be modified. In short: *categorically*, one can think and describe the essence of a particular being; *transcendentally*, one must admit the unfinished status that characterises whatever being, an unfinishedness that implies a striving for realisation.

It must be observed that the transcendental, so conceived, is not neutral: it is directional, aimed at the form that, in a particular being, contributes to the hoped-for goal. Not *whatever* form, but only the *good* form is the desired one. Once again, the latter as the ontological horizon for not-yetness is itself subject to reformulation. Still, it works as a compass setting the direction

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[108] Bloch, *Experimentum mundi*, 44: 'S ist noch nicht P.'

of the inner tension of the being, a compass whose fluctuations are inevitable as the movement towards completion demands a continuous readjustment. The world itself is on the search of, and on the move towards its own essence.

The ensuing philosophy of history bears the consequences of this ontological reconfiguration of the principle of hope as a transcendental. Readmitting a goal for the desiring character of being entails, at the historical level, a specific form of teleology. Here one sees how the eschatological afflatus inherited from the messianic doctrines also finds its proper collocation within this weak appropriation. The eschaton, or the end of times, condenses the utopian expectations that religious imagination has thought to happen at the end of the current aeon, or historical age. History is oriented towards this very last moment when redemption finally takes place. As I tried to show elsewhere, the Blochian appropriation of eschatological motives requires a reconciliation of the tensions between the claim to fullness (the full attainment of the utopian being, that eschatology would situate *at the end* of the historical process) and the realizability of such an enterprise (which must take place *inside* the historical process).[109] This apparent contradiction finds its solution in the instant of the present moment, when the subject of the historical process takes a decision, which is informed by the envisioning of the eschatological goal. In Bloch the eschatological element is a function played within the very fabric of history, as the image of the ultimate goal serves the action of the present moment.

In a novel weak messianism true to Blochian thought, the eschatological aspect of the messianic trope is retained and thought together with the transcendental character of being. This aspect takes on a new meaning, according to which the *desiderium* inherent in whatever being is infinite and cannot be reduced to finite categorisations. This again explains why categorisations, albeit necessary, must always be taken as provisional, tentative indications. In short, a teleological account of history and an eschatological element, rather than obstructing the way towards a constant and open reconfiguration of reality, are precisely the elements that allow to think it. On the one hand, the *telos* is never fixed and given, because that would prevent the process from reaching its eschatological consequences. On the other, eschatology is not merely a continuous deferral of the attainment of the ultimate goal (as Scholem would put it, the damnation of "*a life lived in deferment*"[110]) but acts in the present as the function that gives impetus to the process by indicating its direction and aims. The full presence of the acting subject is given in its *good* acting, in the act intentioned to the good, in accordance to its

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[109] Filauri, 'Attimo e Prassi'.

[110] Scholem, 'Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism', 35.

ultimate possibility, to its eschaton. Open teleology and present eschatology complement and counterbalance each other. At the basis there lies a metaphysics whereby each being is conceived as an *open entelechy*, whereby its essence is unknown in as far as it is as yet incomplete, not yet in existence. This variant of weak messianism, in brief, rather than adopting just the apocalyptic aspects – recasting them in forms of indifference, subtraction, distancing and elusion of current worldly structures – incorporates the eschatological overtone of messianic doctrines as the ultimate end is anticipated in the present of decision and relativises all current achievements.[111]

Lastly, let us turn our sight to the political implications that such a positive weak messianism entails, answering our second question. There are at least two striking considerations that follow from the ontological restructuring informed by the inherited principle: first, a politics of mediation; second, a newly shaped political ontology.

The readmission of picturing an historical goal down to the very core of the constituents of Being – a messianicity inherited in terms of (redemptive) desire *qua* inner utopian tension in Being itself – enables a change of attitude towards historical reality. While from the transcendental ban on unity and identity only a practice of subtraction ensues, a different stance follows from this positive appropriation of weak messianism: the possibility and (ethical) necessity of mediation with social and political reality. The subtle position earned through the balancing of a teleological element and an eschatological tension translates into the ethical-political imperative: determining, in every moment, the discrepancy between what there is and what there should be.

The extra-historical positioning allowed by the eschatological overtone of messianism entails not the Taubesian lack of "spiritual investment" but, on the contrary, an even more engaged commitment towards the current political situation. In regard to what can be called with Roberts "a position of 'weakness' and disengagement,"[112] here we face the opposite: a call to act in a non-identitarian or essentialist way *within* the current (old) structures of identitarian politics. It is important to note, however, that mediation, taken in this meaning, is not an act diametrically opposite of that of subtraction. While the latter consists in a withdrawal from *reality* in search for a *real* conceived as a gap, a fracture or a tear in the impervious social fabric, mediation thinks of the *real* as a force capable to permeate the inevitably porous fabric of *reality.* And

[111] We parenthetically observe that recent attempts to theorise anticipation as an inherent aspect of all forms of life have been advanced in the realm of biology as well as social sciences. Cf. Rosen, *Anticipatory Systems*; Poli, *Introduction to Anticipation Studies*.

[112] Roberts, 'The "Returns to Religion"', 95.

this because the *real* itself, the transcendental character of being, is imbued by the utopian *desire* for completion, by not-yetness oriented to the good outcome. As a result, mediation calls for bursting in and subverting from inside the legal, gender, ethnic, etc. structures, rather than sneaking out of them and acting in a supposed suspension of their hegemony, as subtractive politics too often risks hinting at. The movement of mediation can be thus seen as a slight correction or necessary complement to that of subtraction: without renouncing the entelechy, without abdicating the imagination of the (utopian) goal, but thinking its predicates in a non-teleological way, always kept open to further rearrangements – in short, thinking its being as not-yet-being. Here lies the active preparation for the advent of the Messiah, as it were, here one finds the positive side of weak messianism in action.

In all its tentativeness and provisional nature, an indication of the form that human relations ought to take on, a picture of communal life freed from oppression is needed, if marginalised groups are to get their agency back and if the majority is to realise – to paraphrase the motto of the *Fórum Social Mundial* – that another world is *really* possible. The positioning of underprivileged groups depends in fact on the construction of a horizon of possibility that acquires its cogency only through a specific, provisional, claim to an identity. This is why it is necessary not only to lift the flag of human dignity within the social and political environment, but also and above all to paint it with the colour of solidarity, that cannot surrender demands for equality and end of oppression. Once again following Bloch's steps, an appeal for structures of solidarity inside the various bodies of a society is the first and foremost political imperative. This is how messianic eschatology as a function is performed as mediation with the real, as commitment to actual needs – and it is perhaps from here that the search for the *sufficient condition* of an answer to the impelling political demands of the current age could start. One may ask at what level should this imperative find its own application. Differently from a politics of subtraction, that is compelled to act from outside the contours of political representation – and is therefore forced to undermine its foundations or to escape them – a politics of mediation finds its application regardless of the political space where one acts. Since the potentiality of the good outcome of the process lies in the ontological substratum of whatever being, any being can be subject to its own improvement towards its own *bonum*, as it were. Differently from the tradition of liberal thought (and its intrinsic institutional conservatism), however, a messianism of mediation does not fail to recognise that some beings – some state institutions, some economic subjects, some bureaucratic realities, some criminal organisations – reach their optimal status in *non*-existing anymore. With this proviso, mediation is not restricted to an anarchistic tactic and is not a prerogative of movementism. While it may be adopted from

outside the realm of representative democracy, it can also act inside its borders, redefining its power relations, or also demanding the enlargement of the basis for democratic participation. The broad range of political reverberations of a positive weak messianism such as the one sketched just above reflects yet another consequence of this political-theological perspective. As every theologico-political stance, a messianism of mediation implies the breaking down of the contours of the political as described in western political science: in particular, the epistemological autonomy of the study of politics – an independent political theory – is put into question. If one follows the ontological perspective traced above, political action, to the extent that it is informed by its own principle – according to which inherent in a being is its striving to its good completion – must contain an element of ethical discernment. The recognition of the *bonum*, the setting of the direction of political action, cannot disregard a general consideration about human desires, human happiness, human satisfaction – in short, cannot overlook considerations of material ethics. Politics thus loses the status of a separated human activity capable of being regulated by autonomously derived rules and comes to be comprised within the boundaries of a broader practical philosophy, since it is but one of the many human activities. But what differentiates it then from other human enterprises? The political space cannot be defined by the polarization into friend and enemy – as Schmitt would put it – nor by the "basic conflicts of the social whole"[113] – as a Marxist standpoint would have it –, but must be described by an altogether different criterion. Following a positive weak messianism, politics is the space of the realisation of a common goal. Good politics, therefore, takes place when the common striving points towards the full realisation of each being's utopian potential. The moment of surpassing the interests of the individual corresponds to the incorporation of the principle of solidarity: a synergic effort in which the depiction of a common aim finds its space. Needless to say, such a space is not devoid of conflicts and is far from being a monotone affirmation of the one single and unchanging goal. Conflicts may well arise out of the divergence of interests, but milder contrasts might also originate from the will not to partake in the common project. It is not, however, by the emergence of such conflicts, or by the norm that deters them, that the political nature of the space is defined, but by the fact that many choose to share the same objective and act towards it. In so far as the goal is kept open and never crystallised, the many actors are free to move in the direction of their choice, even in that of the non-participation, of the subtraction from the work towards the shared goal.

[113] Callinicos, '4. Marxism and Politics', 55.

A political space defined by a common orientation does not imply a totalitarian compulsion to join the enterprise, provided the absence of a fixed telos constraining its members.

The assumption of this redefined political ontology implies a re-politicization of many areas of interest that are now conceived and treated as the prerogative of the economy or are relegated to the individual sphere. The governance of the commons within a horizon of social, political and environmental sustainability requires the falling away of the separation of politics and economy, and of the simplistic contrast between the public and the private spheres. The claims of race- or gender-related marginalised groups also imply a porosity between the individual and the political. In short, the areas where weak messianism finds application in political engagement – mediation with the reality – are innumerable and only defined by the choice of converging towards a shared aim. Lastly, posing a messianic principle at the heart of politics also means that any attempt to act politically entails a hazardous enterprise, subject to the risk of failure, a risk which no institution can ultimately ward off. The common project can be at any point shattered by epistemological fallacies, technical flaws, lack of motivation, and not least, by its despotic degeneration. It is only by choosing to take this risk that hope may find its ways in this difficult world.

With this I have concluded to trace the outline of an alternative to the existing, negative accounts of weak messianism. The one sketched in these last pages may be labelled weak since it does not consist of a new myth or a new ideological construction, nor in a novel dogmatic belief; it rather presents an inheritance of mythologems in transcendental form, as principles that inform political action. Its weakness does not assume a renunciatory or nihilistic character but is on the contrary nourished by the constructive striving for a common goal. At its core one finds the appetitive dimension of being itself – its inner stirrings, or: the not yet achieved goodness of the thing. This desiring character endows the political subject (the one who embodies the striving) with the necessary force to combat and overturn the current oppressive structures of power and in turn construct a space of solidarity, an image nurtured by the reference to the ultimate utopian dimension, by an inherited messianic *eschaton*.

Conclusion

At the end of our intellectual journey inside and across Bloch's practical philosophy, we are in a better position to offer an answer to the question of the 'messianic now'. As I hope I have made clear, although the protean nature of the messianic eludes straightforward definition as to what it is, its performative value may be detected in what it does. Current reflections on the topic show that it allows us to adopt a critical stance towards the political, to better appraise and to judge it from the vantage point of political theology. The messianic furnishes a powerful instrument for rethinking the political sphere and its institutions, rediscussing the foundations of a political discourse, shaking the common understanding of subjectivity and the conventional views on the world. This in turn requires an exploration and a redefinition of the core ontological notions we work with, and contemporary thought has often shattered the crystallised essentialist conception of being, prying into the cracks and opening up new possibilities. Often, these are unveiled as possibilities of an impossibility, and the gaps that current thought opens up are but void fractures in being.

However, critique is not the only tool the messianic equips us with. A bolder appropriation of the messianic trope might allow us to redesign the contours of the political altogether, reconstructing it from a different ontological basis. To do so, however, one needs a thought that is not neglectful of the appetitive dimension of being. Hence a crossing through the many facets of Bloch's philosophy, a better understanding of its usage of the messianic trope and its theoretical implications, was a necessary path to be taken.

To do so, a more ductile notion of 'messianism' was necessary, a notion that we let emerge out of the history of the modern usage of the term. Its surfacing out situation of distress and unease as a response to these was a clear insight as to its usage; the many ways it was bent towards indicated a polemical performativity of the messianic trope, inseparable from its political connotation. On this basis, we ventured into the disentanglement of the multifarious mythologems one finds inside Bloch's messianism, casting light on his original blend of Christian, Jewish and Gnostic imagery. The question about the role played by messianic imagery obliged us to clarify Bloch's notion of politics, which he stretches beyond its customary borders, setting his thought on the pre-political and meta-political margins. Here Bloch conducts his skilful operation of inheritance, dissecting ancient mythical lore, unearthing its progressive contents and re-composing them in a newly fashioned narrative. In this new context they serve as a figurative counterpart of the principle of hope, a principle of personal and political action. An inspection into the newly configured play of mythologems showed that

Bloch's messianism must be understood within the frame of a practical philosophy. Here his adoption of the messianic trope is recast in an atheist and Gnostic fashion, and engenders a political theology best described as a theocracy from the bottom. Lastly, we have noted that Bloch's politico-philosophical operation has a bearing on the cardinal metaphysical structures of Western thought. His messianism penetrates the core of ontology, describing being in terms of not-yetness, a setout that allows for a constructive, positive yet emancipatory and progressive political theology.

Crucially, the understanding of the messianic as a theocratic principle means: admitting that there is a dimension – in Bloch, the 'spirit of utopia' – that precedes and goes beyond the politically constitutive act. In other words, taking the messianic seriously in all its reach implies a thorough redefinition of political ontology. This in turn requires a reformulation of the specific categorial set that western philosophy has constructed to think the political, starting from its metaphysical pillars. Disentangled from the dogmas of faith and translated from the theological to the metaphysical sphere, the messianic is bequeathed to us as a principle innervating the basic categories of thought down to their core. This inheritance opens up a wealth of possibilities, but, if accepted, compels us to thoroughly rethink the transcendental constitution of being within western thought. As daunting as such a task may appear, it is a necessary endeavour to grant contemporary though the concrete possibility of devising new ways, political and meta-political, for our embodied togetherness: a communal life of solidarity, indeed a *messianic* goal.

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