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The Messianic Event, in a Word

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That which happens, takes place, comes about in general, that which is called event, what is it? Can one ask with regard to it: "What is it?" It must not only surprise the constative and propositional mode of the language of knowledge, but must also no longer let itself be commanded by the performative speech act of a subject.

-Derrida, *The University without Condition*

All human language is only a reflection of the word in name. The name is no closer to the word than knowledge is to creation. The infinity of all human language always remains limited and analytic in nature, in comparison to the absolutely unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word.

-Benjamin, *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*

The word has meaning from the moment adoration is produced in this world, where a finite being stands before something which goes beyond him...

-Levinas, *Messianic Texts*

For the messianic idea is not only consolation and hope. Every attempt to realize it tears open the abysses which lead each of its manifestation ad absurdum. There is something grand about living in hope, but at the same time there is something profoundly unreal about it. It diminishes the singular worth of the individual, and he can never fulfill himself, because the incompleteness of his endeavors eliminates precisely what constitutes its highest value.

-Scholem, *Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea*

...In turn... In the name of a re/turn, an im-possible discovery, a taking leave of the word that brings its gift not to light but to the question of disquiet, a disquieting question of the word's taking place, the question of a movement that beckons faith in a "recognizability," a word that cannot be an event, a word without ontology's narrative or the forever too late testimony of *homo narrans*.¹

The urge to define the event beckons the problem of whether the word can (yet) surprise itself. Just here, for a just hearing, the messianic idea calls forth the question of the word/Word as event in the same breath that the event asks after the redemption of the word's question-ability. A bond then, perhaps something shared – the event and the messianic held (together) by (their) trauma, a mutual (and self-confounding) wound that is felt not least as the wish to define confronts the risk of "dumb recognition" (Derrida: "An event is traumatic or it does not happen, does not arrive."), not least as the arrival of the word betrays that mythic violence which underwrites the liberation promised by knowledge (Benjamin: "Knowledge of good and evil abandons name; it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the created word").² Amidst the arrival of the event and the messianic age there abides an unspeakable catastrophe that may neither fate nor foreclose so much as "blast" open the continuum of history.³

¹ Benjamin, *Arcades*, 463.

² Benjamin, *On Language as Such*. Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2), 136; Derrida, *A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event*."

³ Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 395.

Experience remains. About this, Derrida seems certain – “No event without experience...” – even as this seemingly impossible demand, this demand for the im-possible that gathers the im-potential of an “event-saying” may rest quietly on Benjamin’s faith in a mode of experience (*erfahrung*) in which are held his infamous “chips” of messianic time, a now-time (*Jetztzeit*) in which experience is a struggle with language as such, a struggle with and within the suffering (of) language; there is, for Benjamin, a word that discloses to us, in which we are cast into an experience of the way in which “there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”.⁴ From the very start that defies beginning (Benjamin’s inquiry into how *trauerspiel* calls forth the question of the word beyond the figure of the tragic), this suffering manifests before the “taking place” of language, the taking place of a gift beyond (our) means which has yet (or still) been ungraciously taken out of place and taken for granted, an appropriation dedicated to fueling the machine of exception that grants the speaking subject the sovereignty of its “I” at the cost of understanding beyond the precedent of the contract’s mediating logic.⁵

For now, the messianic event: the happening of the messianic word is the event that “flashes” before us, whose brilliance calls forth an arrival and a departure, the appearance of a turn that confounds *theoria*’s gaze and returns the question of its movement, a calling to depart from law’s words (and the word of law) and undertake a discovery that relinquishes the demand for recognition and abides instead in the movement of recognizability, a becoming beside oneself, unable to offer full account, and thus encountering not a hospitable word but the ethical wonder of why it remains so difficult to speak to our words in a hospitable way (as a gift wherein there can be no sanction for lying)?⁶

[...]

Of the word’s arrival...What next? When? The oft-heralded “happiness” that allegedly attends the event’s unconditioned happening and the pure hope of the messianic ideal cannot likely shed the danger of a deep piety – I will make the impossible possible, if you will only wait; this is not the real (enough) event; the redemption of the good word is around the corner. As Derrida puts it, the machine will not be overcome. A decision remains and abides. For now, this decision holds out a question of im-potentiality, a power that arrives in standing before the word and hearing its expression as not for us to assume, as not a promise that hinges on sacrifice but a “suddenly emergent” legibility, an appearance for which there may only be an interlinear translation.⁷

⁴ Derrida, Typewriter Ribbon, 72. Benjamin, On the Concept of History, 392.

⁵ Agamben, Language and Negativity.

⁶ Benjamin, Critique of Violence, 244.

⁷ Benjamin, Task of the Translator, 263.