

Syracuse University

**SURFACE**

---

Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics

College of Arts and Sciences

---

March 2011

## Introduction: Thoughts Unfinished and Messages Undelivered

Solibakke Ivan Karl  
*Syracuse University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/III>



Part of the [German Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Karl, Solibakke Ivan, "Introduction: Thoughts Unfinished and Messages Undelivered" (2011). *Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics*. 9.

<https://surface.syr.edu/III/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

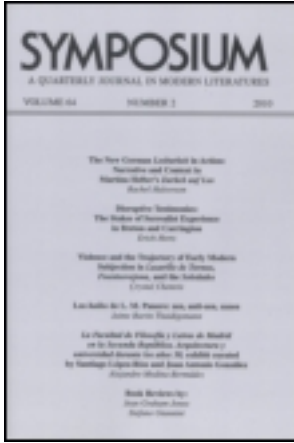
This article was downloaded by: [Syracuse University Library]

On: 25 February 2013, At: 09:40

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vsym20>

### Introduction: Thoughts Unfinished and Messages Undelivered

Karl Ivan Solibakke<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Syracuse University

Version of record first published: 31 Mar 2011.

To cite this article: Karl Ivan Solibakke (2011): Introduction: Thoughts Unfinished and Messages Undelivered, *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 65:1, 1-4

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00397709.2011.552843>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages

whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

KARL IVAN SOLIBAKKE

---

*Syracuse University*

## **Introduction: Thoughts Unfinished and Messages Undelivered**

At the opening of “Messianism and the Law,” an international symposium organized and conducted by the Institute for Jewish Studies at the University of Antwerp in 2006, the institute’s director Vivian Liska reported that she had been torn among three approaches to her topic. The first involved a broad selection of interpretations reflecting recent scholarship on historical manifestations of messianism and their relationship to the law; the second aspired to reevaluate messianic thinkers in the first half of the twentieth century—among these Gershom Scholem, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Franz Rosenzweig, Hermann Cohen, and others; and the third aimed to adopt an innovative point of departure designed to examine contemporary occurrences of messianism. Unveiling a spectrum of messianic thought from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century, Liska decided to focus on all three approaches. By doing so, she was able to draw attention to the significance that messianic and eschatological discourse has taken on in a postmodernist age distinguished by a restoration of fundamental religious dogma. In view of the fact that the first decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed a resurgence of religious fanaticism, this trend calls for evaluation within a broader context of ideas focused on messianic thought today.

Also present at the conference, Moshe Idel unfolded a multifaceted assessment of messianic theory that respects religious observance and allows for political entitlements. In terms that are recognizable for anyone conversant with Walter Benjamin’s views on theology, he asserts, “We have to take into consideration that many discussions of Messianism in a religious framework are complex discourses, complicated by the existence of two different temporal vectors: on the one hand an effort to depict a better, utopian world while, on the other hand, a reluctance to weaken or invalidate the religious structure, in the past and in the present, within which these discourses take place” (Idel 212–13). The fissure dividing the temporal

vectors impacts meanings derived from reading the signs embedded in existent and future constellations of time. Surfacing as discrete flashes of wakefulness, the past is no longer bound to schematic principles that make allowances for the principles of predictability. Rather, the flashes disclose ruptured epiphanies and allow for montages that challenge cultural traditions as well as spatial and temporal expectations. Fragments of truth and debris, which may or may not conform to existing rules and regulations, these discrete signifiers mold today's global cultures by reconfiguring signs of the past and the present into dialectical images, which are, without doubt, the centerpiece of Benjamin's contributions to twentieth-century epistemology. At once deconstructionist and phenomenological, Benjamin's stance on temporal vectors can be likened to the sporadic elements of experience heralded in a perception of the now that invalidates the linear continuum of history. Exploding the past is equivalent to imploding the formations that were once the backbone of historiographies, especially when the logic lodged within the concept of time is sacrificed for an inchoate mass of signifiers. If, as a consequence, historiographies lose their influence on what was once the telos of social and cultural progress, then the concept of progress runs counter to a legendary inception and a messianic end of time.

What is more, the dialectical images underlying messianic thought and secular world orders kindle conflicting appraisals of theological thought in a global context. Closely intertwined with one another, the cataclysm of the messianic on the one hand and the corrosion of legal norms on the other not only shed light on terrorist activities in the wake of 9/11, but also help interpret clashes that trigger unrest between the West and East, as well as economic disparity on a global scale. Applying the notion of profane illumination to the upheavals that beset European cultural thought in the baroque era, in nineteenth-century Paris, and during the brief heyday of the surrealist movement in the 1920s, Benjamin suggests that mythological and theological principles were reinstated long before they were deposed by the secular pragmatism brought about by political materialism. As the five articles in this special issue of *Symposium* demonstrate, Benjamin's legacy is explored against the backdrop of messianic promise and profane convictions, of messages delivered and undelivered, of thoughts that are not final and still awaiting closure.

According to Bernd Witte, author of the first contribution, Benjamin derives his conceptual stance on cultural transmissibility from specific commentaries on canonical texts, rather than from a systematic standpoint. Likewise, the dialogue with the past in the literary medium provided him with the analytical categories to form opinions about the social and political events of his own lifetime. This sets him apart from Carl Schmitt, a staunch Catholic who grafted theological models onto modern political orders and whose notion of the sovereign in secular

paradigms is derived from the vision of God's omnipotence. According to Witte, Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* and his essay *Capitalism as Religion* afford essential insights into the anthropological foundations underlying the political, religious, and economic challenges facing global cultures today.

Vivian Liska claims that Benjamin's literary, phenomenological, and analytical approaches to the concepts of attentiveness and concentration reveal how unmistakably his critical thinking was attuned to new forms of worldly perception. Rather than relying on philosophical traditions, he envisages a radical attentiveness that enlists the potential of habit. Liska traces the development of this concept from the early to the late works and brings to light that Benjamin's attentiveness operates within a liminal space defined by worldly devotion on the one hand and worldly access on the other. Ultimately, she argues that his approach is aligned with a presence of mind that redeems the meaning of life in modern contexts by providing opportunities for pragmatic action.

Gerhard Richter limns the coordinates of secularized, posttheological thinking in Benjamin's writings, challenging them as erroneous at the same time that the author struggles to dismantle the political, cultural, and aesthetic ramifications of the theological in a modern world. Richter contends that Benjamin's theological remnants should be considered in relation to passages and contextual re-inscriptions that single out a distinctive framework of thought. Rather than leaving theological discourse behind, as is usually asserted for Benjamin's later works, the inscriptions substantiate transformations that ultimately restore theological premises. Strangely enough, Benjamin's attempts to demonstrate that theology had been overcome by renouncing divine commitments may have been nothing more than an intellectual gambit in an age that sought consolation in critical materialism.

Karen Embry explores the question as to what can be ascertained from the startling implications of Benjamin's concluding sentences. She investigates the significance behind each moment, each sentence, when these become final declarations. Any indebtedness to the usual functions that closing sentences exhibit is offset by the rhetorical gestures concluding Benjamin's most celebrated texts. Embry explains that the closing phrases encapsulate a comprehensive image of the questions posed by the cultural critic during his lifetime. Textually and contextually eschatological, Benjamin's closing sentences are expressive of the state of emergency that arises when final thoughts are cast as an anacoluthon and messages that were intended to reach their audience are still underway and will remain in transit forever.

The enigma of delivery and completion is central to the missive that the dying emperor dictates to his messenger in Franz Kafka's "Imperial Message." Although seemingly indefatigable and strong, the messenger never succeeds in

penetrating the walls of the palace, so that the intended recipient is left sitting at the window dreaming of the day when the final utterance from a dying man, his testament, would reach the one to whom it is addressed. Benjamin conjectures that the recipient of the message is the author himself, waiting for messianic instruction and inspiration. By the same token, the author is also the reader, and in this dual role a liminal space between production and reception is conjured up that is at once messianic and eschatological. In the spirit of temporal vectors that have gone and will come again, pasts and presents that belie codification and preclude closure, Karl Ivan Solibakke considers Benjamin's and Kafka's approaches to messianism within the dialectics that make divine justice and profane power fundamental components of cultural theory in the twenty-first century. In its approach to past and future, Benjamin's thinking incites the notion of relentless emergence, of a continual stream of fragmentary ideas and statements still in transit, implying that Benjamin's "now of a particular recognisability" (Benjamin 493) is as elusive as Kafka's "Imperial Message."

### Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2002. Print.
- Idel, Moshe. "Torah Hadashah"—Messiah and the New Torah in Jewish Mysticism and Modern Scholarship. In *Benjamin—Agamben: Politics, Messianism, Kabbalah*. Ed. Vittoria Borsò, Claas Morgenroth, Karl Solibakke, and Bernd Witte. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2010. 175–217. Print.

Karl Ivan Solibakke is Associate Research Professor for modern German literature and culture as well as Assistant Dean for finance and long-range planning for the College of Arts and Sciences at Syracuse University. In addition to his monograph on Ingeborg Bachmann and Thomas Bernhard, he has also edited volumes and published articles on Benjamin, Jelinek, Heine, Uwe Johnson, Goethe, Schiller, Kafka, Bernhard, and Gustav Mahler. General manager of the *International Walter Benjamin Society* from 2002 to 2010, he continues to serve as coeditor of the society's publication series, *Benjamin Blätter*.