

Hidden refusal. Name and *Sprachmagie* in Benjamin's theory of language

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Abstract Both in the essay *The Task of the Translator* (1921) and in *On Language as Such and on the Language of man* (1916) Benjamin draws on many sources, often in contradiction with each other and proceeds with a double step. He draws the concept of *Ursprache* (Original Language/Pure Language) explicitly on both the Romantic and Jewish tradition. Epistemologically, this operation is similar to that of the German Romantics, but substantially it is very different because the original language of Benjamin can be identified with the Adam language and therefore with the divine language. This reference to the Bible results in a change from a mythical context to a religious context, where the philosophy of the language changes its implications completely. The Adam language is based on naming things and animals: a translation from the language of things into that of man. The activity of translation is a *Umkehrung*, a “u-turn”, a change in direction from the original sin. The hunt from Eden caused the loss of the Adam language and the birth of languages confusion (the tower of Babel); however translation revitalizes the “splinters” of the *Ursprache* that have been caught up in the various languages. The “magic of language” would be the “immediacy” of the “correspondence” between name and named the one hand and between “nominating” and name on the other. However the pure language is inaccessible to each communicative language that contains only its splinters. One of the sources of Benjamin's thinking is Jakob Böhme and namely his book *Mysterium Magnum*, in which he speaks of “pure language” and “Adamic language” in terms quoted by Benjamin almost literally. Even if Benjamin uses sometimes in his writing mythical and “figurative” language, he never aims to claim a mythical or magic interpretation of world. He draws on Scholem's kabbalistic mystic and uses a mythical language to claim a theological truth.

Keywords: Philosophy of language, pure language, Jewish Tradition, magic language, Walter Benjamin

1. The hidden refusal

I would like to borrow an image used by Irving Wohlfarth a few years ago, that quoted the fairytale of Sleeping Beauty, also mentioned by Benjamin in a letter with regards to his lack of *Habilitation* (BENJAMIN, 1980, I.3: 901 s.). The naughty

witch, according to Wohlfarth (WOHLFARTH, 1983: 240), is the academic world that rejected *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and denied Benjamin *Habilitation*. But now Sleeping Beauty has to protect/defend herself from the prince. We are the prince, the current academic world, that re-habilitates Benjamin, but it interprets his writings in its own way and *pro domo sua*, often softening the provocative and “revolutionary” elements. A part of this “re-habilitation” process tends to place Benjamin inside a philosophic constellation that was completely antipodal to him. Since his thoughts were to be found at the crossroads of so many currents, from which he extracts conceptual “pearls” and then uses them in his own way in his philosophical discourse, it is easy to bring Benjamin back inside this or that heuristic system on the basis of the simple presence of a concept deriving from romanticism, from mythical thinking etc. A question that should be asked is the role that this concept or hypothesis plays within his philosophical discourse and then realize that very often it is not the same role that it played in the system from which it was taken, but it was very different or even opposing. Therefore, paradoxically, we can state that in Benjamin often the use of a specific concept is a “hidden refusal”: often the use of a mythical image or a concept taken from romanticism does not mean adhesion to “mythology of modernity” or “empathy with romanticism”, but the opposite: refusal of the mythical thought, of “romantic identification”. In the same way, in writings on the philosophy of language a whole range of assertions need to be untangled, often contrasting between them, originating from several traditions, but not connecting Benjamin *solely* and exclusively to one of these.

2. The Task of the Translator

The Task of the Translator was written in 1921 and published in 1923 as introduction to a German edition of several poems by Baudelaire of the *Tableaux Parisiens*. Even though it was based on the theoretical justification of translations, the essay does not theorize a translation practice, but it represents a true treatise on the philosophy of language. The theses expressed should be compared with other works by Benjamin on this topic, and in particular on the larger work *On language in general and on the language of men*, from which it collects the essential parts, written in 1916 and never published while the author was alive. Therefore we are participating in the paradox for which in *The Task of the Translator* Benjamin briefly supports the theses illustrated on a much wider level in *On language in general and on the language of men* and forces us to constantly refer to this much more articulated and larger essay. The allusive nature of his work is not only a question of style or method but it is also the practical consequence of constant reference to an essay that, in that period, were not of public domain.

Many literary critics say that it is an esoteric and hermetic essay, on the limit of understanding¹. An essay that had a very strange destiny. Literary critics at the time of Benjamin barely took him into consideration. I was not able to find even one

¹ «It is presented to the translator as a sealed treasure chest (the theoretical papers of Benjamin are difficult, sometimes even impossible to understand) that may even contain a magical key. On the other hand, for those examining the most influential document that states the final defeat of the translator » (DRUMBL 2003: 29).

comment in the apparatus of the *Gesammelte Schriften*. In the field of the philosophy of language and in the field of the theory of translation, in more recent years, this essay was however quoted very often and interpreted in so many different ways.

First of all it is important to understand Walter Benjamin's method and contextualize his assertions often radical, eccentric and provocative². We should then ask ourselves what this writing has to say, apart from the explicit assertions, what it implies, what cues it has to offer, beyond its literal meaning.

Benjamin's thought includes desired ambiguities and contradictions. This cannot be attributed to the Hegel logic, but to the Nietzsche approach: it does not "resolve" the contradictions, it does not search for a "synthesis" but rather it searches for "tension" between opposing poles without *Versöhnung*, without "conciliation". Therefore, from these constant displacements we need to find a radical solution. In this essay Benjamin refers to two different main sources, both mentioned very explicit. However, identification of the sources is not enough to clarify his position. Considering that these sources clash with one another, it is totally wrong to attempt to attribute his theory to one, excluding the other. From here the proverbial ambiguity of Benjamin: both trends, with all of the tension and contradictions that they include, co-exist within his philosophical discourse.

Benjamin's theory of language (and of translation) is not new, but it is individual and even eccentric. He uses sources that are all extremely different, combining them in an original way without even worrying about the tensions and the ambiguities that the montage of such conceptually different materials causes within his theory. Benjamin speaks of *Ursprache* as an original language, a "pure language", referring to the romantic theory that has characterized the birth of linguistics. There are specific references such as Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt, but perhaps the philosopher that he draws on (and also that esoteric tone that many critics refer to) is Hamann, who played a very important role in the formation of Benjamin's thought. (SCHEIBENBERGER 2014: 189 s.).

Within the romantic context, reference to *Ursprache* means Indo-European, as the mother of all languages, as a common language that has always historically existed. We know that this "original language" was a discovery of German Romanticism, a form of discovery in a general linguistic sense, as identified by Indo-European. Now, beyond attested languages, it is common opinion, even with today's linguists, that Indo-European has always been a historical language, even though not attested, but a language spoken by a community that has always historically existed, from which other languages have deriving. The fact, however, that Indo-European is not a attested language has also resulted in another hypothesis (frankly, less validated), therefore that it was a kind of common language, a common denominator among several languages spoken by different surrounding communities. As if it was an abstract language.

The second level of identification of *Ursprache* – in this essay and also in *On language in general and on the language of men* – refers to the Bible, the divine language and therefore not to an Indo-European field. The theoretical consequence is

² Hermann Schweppenhäuser insists on the paradox as a typical procedure of Benjamin. See: SWEPPENHÄUSER 1983: 53.

that Benjamin's thought only works if the biblical narration is accepted, that is the existence of a divine language, of an Adam original language, the hunt from Eden, the differentiation of languages with the tower of Babel.

If the romantic origin of his concept of *Ursprache* is out of doubt, the way that Benjamin uses and radically modifies this value is paradigmatic. All in all, even the Romantics have idealized a mythical "original language" spoken by a meta-historical community; Benjamin "transports" (and in German *übertragen* is a synonym of *übersetzen*) this *Ursprache* in a metaphysical or meta-historical dimension, finally in an Eden dimension. Epistemologically, this operation is similar to that of the German Romantics, but substantially it is very different because the original language of Benjamin can be identified with the Adam language and therefore with the divine language. In other words: this reference to the Bible results in a change from a mythical context to a religious context, where the philosophy of the language changes its implications completely. Indeed, in his philosophical reasoning, Benjamin refers to the method of debating of the Hebrew culture, not only constant referring to the Torah.

The divine language is the language that creates. God names heaven and earth, light and water and, just by naming them, they are created. The pure language is therefore the language of God and, as such, is inaccessible. However, once again in *Genesis*, we find an Adam language that is a kind of *imitatio Dei*: God himself, in fact, asked Adam to give a name to animals and things that, at that time, were called by the name given by Adam: «Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name» (Genesis, 2,19). This "naming" in German is called *Benennung*: the ability to name, to grant a name. From here the priority of the name compared with other linguistic forms in Benjamin's philosophy of language. Adam does not create human beings, but he gives them a name, in a kind of *second maker*, a linguistic demiurge, that translates the language of things into the language of men, this is the original translation that lies at the basis of the power to speak. But this is a metaphysical ability or, even, a meta-historical ability.

Duplication of the linguistic act as an original act (the divine language and the Adam language) is exactly the typical characteristic of the Hebrew tradition that Benjamin undertakes as a paradigm not only for his philosophy of language but also for all of his philosophical reasoning. Even this duplicity, this dual step, is a characteristic that Benjamin inherited from the Torah. According to the Bible the ten commandments were revealed by God to Moses twice: the first time verbally (Exodus, 20, 1-17) and the second time written by fire on a stone³. But when Moses descended from Mount Sinai he threw the tablets of the law against the golden calf and then transmitted once again the law to the population verbally. Moses finally returned to Mount Sinai and God dictated the ten commandments and other rules⁴ to him. This biblical story

³ «When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God» (Exodus, 31,18).

⁴ «Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel" (Exodus, 34, 27)

became a rule of Hebrew tradition: the law is based on Torah, on written tradition, but also on Talmud, on the verbal tradition that represents the interpretation and discussion of Torah that, in turn, became a written tradition, once again commented verbally (WITTE 2007). The consequence is that human writing is always a comment of law, re-writing of the Word of God expressed in the Torah, all-in-all, re-writing of the Great Code.

Throughout the procedure of Benjamin's philosophic discourse, we can find this double step of a dual tradition that comments itself in an entirely unusual version, as the theological element is commented and contradicted by the political element and vice versa, in a contrast full of tension. This traditions results in Benjamin from considering the *Ursprache* of a romantic nature as a "language without content" in other words "the language of God". He differentiates between "word" and "name" and focuses his attention in the passage of *Genesis* that tells the story of *Benennung*, in which God names heaven and earth and these, due to the fact that they have been nominated, become existing: «Fiat lux, et lux fuit». This "naming" also occurs in two times: God created things and animals and then told Adam to give them a name in his presence, imitating the divine gesture of creation limited to the creation of language. The Adam language is a vital gesture based on the attribution of a name to things and animals: a gesture that is defined by Benjamin as "*Übersetzung*", a translation from the language of things to the language of men. Therefore the translation is very important in Benjamin's philosophy of language, but in its theological context, it contains some radical implications. The nomination of things and animals excludes completely the possibility of pronouncing the name of God. In Hebrew religion, simply pronouncing the name of "He who is" is prohibited, it is a sin. Therefore the cornerstone of Benjamin's philosophy of language is the impossibility in translating the name of God, one of the basic concepts of monotheistic religions.

The activity of translation is a *Umkehrung*, a "u-turn", a change in direction from the original sin. The hunt for paradise on earth caused the loss of the Adam language and the birth of languages confusion (the tower of Babel); however translation revitalizes the "splinters" of the *Ursprache* that have been caught up in the various languages: «Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages to our answer. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form» (BENJAMIN 1996: I, 255).

With the original sin history invades in the theory of language (even in meta-historical form of the hunt for paradise on earth and the tower of Babel). The translation, in which the "method of thinking" itself becomes single thought, works to complete the languages with the "pure language". This completion should generate a kind of "compensation", a "convergence" of the two languages. Translating means tuning these fragments between the languages. Translation highlights the splinters of the pure language hidden in communicative languages.

The arbitrary "human word" that undermines the "purity of name" in paradise, "arouses" the "judging word" of God, that "hunts the first men from paradise on earth" and, through this, has an "immediate", therefore "magical" effect. The "magic of language" consists in the "immediacy" of "correspondence" between name and named on the one hand and "nominating" and name on the other. The language as a

“sign” that presumes a “judgment” is, initially, the consequence of original sin and the hunt from Eden. The “arbitrary human word” is functional to communicative language.

Translation highlights the common feature of all languages, namely their derivation from *Ursprache*, from the pure language that Benjamin intends as a divine language. However the pure language is inaccessible to each single language that only contains its splinters (BENJAMIN 1966: 259). This results in admitting that each translation is only a method, even if temporary, of dealing with the strangeness of languages. Therefore, Benjamin claims on the one hand the irreducible strangeness of languages (and the impossibility of translating names), but also the presence of something in common that consists in splinters of the divine language. The translation should passionately, and right down to each fine detail, recreate in the own language a way of meaning of the foreign language, so that both versions appear to be fragments of a larger language, just like the shards of the same vase (BENJAMIN 1996: 260). The true translation is transparent, it does not cover the original, it does not provide shade, it does not drop the light of pure language on the original as reinforced by its own mean.

Benjamin defines the unsaid as a “symbol”, perfectly in line with romantic tradition. In every language and in its creations, it remains beyond communication, something that cannot be communicated, according to the situation in which it is found, something as symbolizing or symbolized (*ibidem*). But immediately after he adds: «To relieve it of this, to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized itself, to regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation» (*ivi*: 261). Pure language, this *Ursprache*, is a language without content, it is self-referential, it is a language (of which the Adam language represents the parodic repetition or representation) that “nominates” and its names cannot be translated. But this relationship between translation and pure language is very weak, very “marginal”⁵: The ideal *topos* of the pure language is the “holy text”. The interlinear version of the Bible is the ideal archetype of every translation.

3. “Magic of language”

The sources of Benjamin’s theory of language start with Jacob Böhme, they pass through Hamann and romanticism and kabbalistic mystic, but there is never a historical use of such elements but a systematic-functional use (MENNINGHAUS 1980: 44). In the reinterpretation of *Genesis* and the original sin, in the distinction between the divine language and the Adam language, “translation” can be found (from the language of things to the language of men”), but the Adam language is almost a “parody” of the divine language.

In the essay of 1916 Benjamin is very explicit:

⁵ «Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point-establishing, with this touch rather than with the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity—a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux» (BENJAMIN 1966: 261).

All language communicates itself. [...] That which in a mental entity is communicable is its language. On this “is” (equivalent to “is immediately”) everything depends. Not that which *appears* most clearly in its language is communicable in a mental entity, as was just said by way of transition, but this *capacity* for communication is language itself. in *this* it communicates itself. Or: the language of a mental entity is directly that which is communicable in it. What is communicable *of* a mental entity, *in* this it communicate itself. Or more precisely: all language communicates itself *in* itself; it is in the purest sense the “medium” of the communication. Mediation, which is the immediacy of all mental communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, and if one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic. At the same time, the notion of the magic of language points to something else: its infiniteness (BENJAMIN 1979: 109).

Without the translation practice, romantics would probably not have been able to formulate the theory of *Sprachmagie* since the expressive non instrumental dimension of languages becomes explicit in the caesuras that open up between the languages (MENNINGHAUS 1980: 52). Translation expresses the total mediality of the language that contains fragments of the pure language (BENJAMIN 1996: 261). If the affinity of languages is expressed in translation, this does not occur for a vague similarity of reproduction and original. Every meta-historical affinity of languages consists in a science of them, pure as a whole, being understood as one and the same things, that however is not accessible to any of them individually, but only in the totality of their mutually complementary intentions: the pure language.

But in the reinterpretation of the original sin Benjamin introduces a “linguistic element” (*Sprachelement*) that is not a “translation in the name” – since the “knowledge of bad”, that the snake promises together with the knowledge of good, happened without any object (BENJAMIN 1980: II 153, I 407) to be “translated”. In the meantime this “linguistic element” is not introduced through the instant practical subjectivity of the name of God, but through a “parody” (BENJAMIN 1980: II, 153): the radical arbitrary (“spontaneous”) communicative “human word”, a “simple sign” (MENNINGHAUS 1980: 45).

There is a dual “magical” correspondence between he who nominates and the name on the one hand and Name and nominated on the other hand; a dual division in Judging and subject of the judgment on the one hand and the logical subject of the judgment and predicate on the other hand. Regardless of how it is justified in the history of original sin, this “re-use” of *time* polarity of Adam nomination and divine judgment, the analogy with theological events allows Benjamin to attribute to the “abstract linguistic elements”, to the arbitrary “word” as a “simple sign”, a non instrumental dimension, an “immediacy in abstraction” together with a specific “magic”. Benjamin does not provide any reasons for this assertion or any clarifications. This conception of arbitrariness of the sign appears to be the presupposition of abstract arbitrariness of the allegory. Despite its arbitrary nature, this is not only a “simple way of naming” but it represents an “expression” (BENJAMIN 1980: I, 339) of itself and immediately non-instrumental (this means the discourse of a specific “magic” of the “abstract linguistic elements”), it is the core of various theories of the allegory of Benjamin (MENNINGHAUS 1980: 47).

Giorgio Agamben excludes that Benjamin's concept of language coincides with that of the Kabbalah, because he is convinced that it has "forced the chains of writing" and it is a "not written but joyfully celebrated" language⁶. But, as indicated by Menninghaus, the many sources of Benjamin's thought on the theory of language also include Jakob Böhme and his book *Mysterium Magnum oder Erklärung über das ertse Buch Moses*, of which a diffused edition dating back to 1730 exists. In the "explanation" of the *Genesis* a large part is dedicated to the "pure language" and the Adam language in terms drawn on, almost literally, by Benjamin. The tetragrammaton, of which Böhme speaks, does not only include the writing, but the name of God as such, his evocation, it is the reply of the "voice" to the question of Moses on Mount Sinai, in line with the dual tradition of law: verbal and written.

The story of the *Genesis* in Christian and theosophical terms almost becomes a morphology of creation⁷. The platonic and Gnostic layout, from which Böhme starts, is the common denominator that bonds it to the cabalistic speculation. Böhme speaks indeed of separation of One-Whole in the act of creation, but also of an implicit promise to apocatastasis. Here, opposing the Scholasticism philosophy, the bad, the "nothing" is not declared "inexistent" or "non substantial", but it is identified as a self-limitation of God, His "withdrawing" in the act of world's creation, that implies a "re-composition" as mentioned. Böhme starts with the canonic distinction between the visible and invisible world, between verifiable materiality and spirituality of souls. But he uses constantly metaphors: "Licht" (light) and "Feuer" (fire) correspond, with regards to the theory of similarity, to that of *Erklärung* evoked in the title, contrasted by *Finsterniss* (darkness) of "nothing"⁸. But God is "hidden" in the visible world. Therefore "revealing" the "mystery" means recognizing its presence in nature. The word and power of God are hidden in the sensitive and visible elements, they "live" in these elements and affect the sensitive life and essence of things. The creation is therefore a *Wirkung* (effect) of the "invisible power of God". The "reversal" of invisible into visible reminds us of the reversal of theological into political of Benjamin's *Theological-political Fragment* of 1920. The creating "power" of God is in some way transmitted to man as a language:

Thus man has now received ability from the invisible Word of God to the re-expression: that he again expresses the hidden Word of the divine science into formation and severation: in manner and form of the temporal creatures; and forms this spiritual Word according to animals and vegetables; whereby the invisible wisdom of God is portrayed and modellised into several distinct

⁶ «While the mystic and insignificant character of the name of God is connected, in the Cabbala, as in the grammar version, his being constituted in pure letters, Benjamin specifically affirms that the language of redeemed humanity "has forced the chains of writing" and is a language "not written by joyfully celebrated". Writing this that has never been written of the cabalistic method is contrasted with reading something that has never been written» (AGAMBEN 1983: 77). See also AGAMBEN 1979.

⁷ BÖHME 1656: part I, *Author's preface* 6, p. 2.

⁸ «When we consider the visible world with its essence, and consider the life of the creatures, then we find therein the likeness of the invisible spiritual world, which is hidden in the visible world, as the soul in the body; and see thereby that the hidden God is nigh unto all, and through all; and yet wholly hidden to the visible essence» (BÖHME 1656: I, 1).

forms: as we plainly see, that the understanding of man expresses all powers in their property, and gives names unto all things, according to each thing's property.⁹

The man, repeating the gesture of God, gives a name to things and pronounces the “hidden word” in the forms and in the determination of things. Therefore the *imitatio Dei* is a parody but it “highlights the God hidden in the world of things”, at least in terms of language, of “nomination”. The name of God, beyond time and nature, creates time and nature because outside of him there is nothing. Böhme speaks of “Auge des Ungrundes” (Eye of groundless), in the self-reduction of God, by similarity, reminds us of the *tsimsum* of the Kabbalah¹⁰. But it also reminds us of the absence of grounds, the “groundlessness” that Benjamin speaks of in his autobiographical Fragment.

But Agamben touches a decisive point in Benjamin’s theory of language that makes his concept problematic, at least in this young phase. It is, in fact, that “joyfully celebrated” that reminds us of a “mythical” concept that clashes with the religious vision¹¹. It is difficult to understand what that “magic” of language actually consists of. The fact that God created the universe only by naming it may be a “mystery” but defining it as “magic” means bursting into theology with a whole range of mythic components (or mythic-magical) that belong to a heuristic system that clashes with the religious one. As Scholem writes:

The philosophers and theologians were concerned first and foremost with the *purity* of the concept of God and determined to divest of all mythical and anthropomorphic elements. But this determination to defend the transcendent Got against all admixture whit myth [...] tended to empty the concept of God. [...] The price of Gods purity is the loss of His living reality. [...] The history of Judaism, perhaps to a greater degree than of any other religion, is the history of the tension between these two factors – purity and living reality – a tension which has necessarily been heightened by the special character of Jewish monotheism (SCHOLEM 1965: 88-89).

If, in light of the Scholem theory, we can state that one of the crucial characteristics of Kabbalists was “passing down” and commenting a tradition, that they “never

⁹ BÖHME 1656: I, *Author’s preface* 6, p. 2.

¹⁰ «Perhaps there is no other more significant example of this same dialectic than the religion of Jacob Böhme, whose affinity with the world of Kabbalism was noted by his earliest adversaries but, strange to say, has been forgotten by the more recent writers on Böhme» (SCHOLEM 1965: 99).

¹¹ «The original religious impulse in Judaism, which found its valid expression in the ethical monotheism of the Prophets of Israel and its conceptual formulation in the Jewish philosophy and religion of the Middle Ages, has always been characterized as a reaction to mythology. In opposition to the pantheistic unity of God, cosmos and man in myth, in opposition to the nature myths of the Near-Eastern religions, Judaism aimed at a radical separation of the three realms; and, above all, the gulf between the Creator and His creature was regarded as fundamentally unbridgeable. Jewish worship implied a renunciation, indeed a polemical rejection, of the images and symbols in which the mythical world finds its expressions» (SCHOLEM 1965: 88).

wearied of affirming”¹², with the language of the myth to provide a certain pathos to the religious discourse, in summary: to pronounce with passion and with “warmth”, also with a mystic touch, the name of God, the worrying aspect of the texts on language written by the young Benjamin is that they refer explicitly to a “Sprachmagie” that is no longer just a question of style. And this “magic” emerges in the definition of the Adam language too. Adam, by “naming” animals and objects, translates the language of nature into the language of men and this is defined by Benjamin as “Sprachmagie”. Böhme too, in his *Mysterium Magnum* refers to *magiae divinae* and *magiae naturalis* that appear to correspond to the “pure language”, therefore to the divine language and to the Adam language¹³. It is true to say that Kabbalah as well as theosophy have in common the ancient sources and, especially, Gnosticism, but the special role to be assigned to magic and to the mythical world (a purely metaphorical or a substantial role) make these philosophical discourses drastically different. The “divine magic”, of which Böhme speaks, refers to theurgy and gnostic doctrine, of a neoplatonic origin, in particular the *Chaldean Oracles* by Julian the Chaldean (II century), also known as the Theurg, but emphasizing the mystic nature through “holy fire”. Böhme sees the operating power of the will of God (defining the “expressed word” or “engrafted word” or simply “God’s word”) as a “magical power”.

Böhme narrates the creation according to the theosophical layout for which God had created the universe through the four main elements (KLIBANSKY, PANOFISKY, SAXL 1964). In the act of “nomination” by Adam, Böhme sees a “*Gleichnis*” (parable), even if internal to a neo-platonic concept, but interpreted as a metaphor, as a vital layout of linguistic expression and that becomes, in the eyes of Benjamin, the grounds of the allegory.

The divine language, which is able to create, is inaccessible to man and unexplainable – from here the “mystery” and the “magic” that the Kabbalists, the mystics and the romantics refer to. It is a deployed language and not exploited. Therefore the language, representing the instrument of knowledge, is paradoxically based on the abyss on the *Ungrund*, the absence of grounds, the “medial immediacy of all mental communication”¹⁴. Schweppenhäuser emphasizes the fact that, through this procedure, Benjamin not only transforms the paradox into a working method but also into a theological gesture. The paradoxical approach of Benjamin to the theoretical questions is a method to highlight what appears to be hidden¹⁵. The

¹² «In its first and crucial impulse the Kabbalah was a mythical reaction in realms which monotheistic thinking had with the utmost difficulty wrested from myth. Or in other words: the lives and actions of the Kabbalists were a revolt against a world which consciously they never wearied of affirming. And this of course led to deep-seated ambiguities» (SCHOLEM 1965: 98).

¹³ BÖHME 1656: II, chap. 35, 3, p. 6. “Divine magic” and “natural magic” in the English translation.

¹⁴ BENJAMIN 1979: 109.

¹⁵ «Benjamin leads us to the edge of this abyss – a paradox that is misinterpreted. The immediate is mediation (the “medium”) and (dialectically) unrecognised as such (not dialectically) “magic”. This phenomenon of communication leads us right to the paradox, unless we undertake the following point of view, intricate and distorted: there is nothing for us that is so paradoxical that through this paradox does not become perfectly clear. The power of appearance that can only be broken with difficulty reigns: the magical power that determines that logic» (SWEPPENHÄUSER 1983: 53).

“magic” of language is therefore “the power of appearance”, the a-dialectic refusal of the paradox.

What bonds Benjamin to the kabbalistic mystic and theosophy is not the question of the tetragrammaton as a written or pronounced word, but the “magic of language” that refers to the “*magiae divinae*” and the “*magia naturalis*” left as “splinters” in the philosophy of language. The echo of this “magic”, that is not explained or illustrated, but simply “evoked”, places Benjamin once again on the threshold of “hermetic” thought (as defined by Scholem), but always in the field of religious tradition. Even if Benjamin uses sometimes in his writing mythical and “figurative” language, he never aims to claim a mythical or magic interpretation of world. He draws on Scholem’s kabbalistic mystic end uses a mythical language to claim a theological truth¹⁶. In the same way, his use of romantic concepts has to be interpreted as a “hidden refusal”. The “dual” step of Benjamin’s thinking, that plays with the mythical-magic terms, must to bring back to the “analogical” methods of Gert Mattenklott (FUNK, MATTENKLOTT, PAUEN 2001), and read in light of the “dialectics of the paradox”, of which Schweppenhäuser speaks (SWEPPENHÄUSER, 1983). The “mythical” words that emerge in his writings are a “metaphorical epithet”¹⁷, an expressive form to “enhance” the religious discourse but they do not intend to open the way to a “mythology of modernity”.

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¹⁶ «The first point to be mentioned in this connection is the conflict between conceptual thinking and symbolic thinking, which gives the literature and history of the Kabbalah their unique character. Beginning with its earliest literary documents, the Kabbalah expressed itself essentially in images, often distinctly mythical in content» (SCHOLEM 1965: 96).

¹⁷ John Osborn translates «metaphor» (BENJAMIN 1998: 31), but Benjamin wrote «methaphorisches Epitheton» (BENJAMIN 1980: I.1, 211).

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