



# Melancholia and its theopolitical discontents

Gillian Rose's and Daniel Bensaïd's debates on Benjamin's messianism

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**ABSTRACT** • The English-born philosopher and sociologist Gillian Rose (1947–95) and the French Trotskyist and philosopher Daniel Bensaïd (1946–2010) were born a mere year apart. While their work departs from the respective strands of Western Marxism and its focus on aesthetics and philosophy versus a Trotskyist preoccupation with economics and politics, they both engaged with Walter Benjamin's work on messianism, melancholy and Judaism in the early 1990s. This article argues that Rose's and Bensaïd's heterodox Jewish identities and identifications with Rabbinic Judaism and Lurianic Kabbalah in their respective memoirs parallel what I articulate as their Jewish-inflected dialectical 'containers' for Benjamin's melancholy. My reading stages an imaginative dialogue between the two thinkers in which their disagreements about Benjamin as melancholically politically disengaged (Rose) or as revitalizing Marxism through a melancholy messianic wager (Bensaïd) are explored in this context.

## Setting the scene

**T**HE ENGLISH-BORN PHILOSOPHER and sociologist Gillian Rose (1947–95) and the French Trotskyist activist and philosopher Daniel Bensaïd (1946–2010) were born just one year apart, but probably never met one another, nor were they likely to have wanted to after reading each other's works.<sup>1</sup> Gillian Rose was born in 1947 to a secular Jewish family in London. She studied philosophy at Oxford, Freie Universität Berlin and City University in New York, at the latter institutions becoming acquainted with the work of the Frankfurt School. Rose wrote her dissertation on Adorno, which was published in an altered form in 1978 under the title

*The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor Adorno* (2014). Teaching at the University of Sussex from 1974 until her appointment as Chair in Social and Political Thought at University of Warwick in 1989, Rose's writings deal with philosophy, critical theory, architecture, Christian and Jewish theology, Jewish Studies, sociology, cultural studies and literature. Adorno, Kierkegaard and Hegel are constant threads throughout her work, a particular interpretation of the latter being used to ground Rose's vision of speculative dialectics (Rose 1991; Rose 1992; Rose 1996; Rose 2009; Rose 2011; Rose 2014; Rose 2017). The extent to which Rose was speculative, negative or politically engaged remains a heated debate today, some arguing for her critical Marxism to be understood as an aporetic philosophical method (Lloyd 2009; Lloyd 2001; Williams 2015; Scott and Finlayson 2024), and others that Rose's work

1 I wish to thank Jayne Svenungsson for introducing me to Daniel Bensaïd's work and thank her, Sophie Poussette, Ulrika Björk and Elad Lapidot for their help with this article.

stopped engaging with critical Marxism upon the entrance of the theological themes (Jay 1997; Osborne 1982; Osborne 2015; Gorman 2001).

Such an entrance of the 'theological' did occur in Rose's work, notably with engagements with Kierkegaard in *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (1992), as well as her *Judaism and Modernity* essay collection (1993) and *Mourning Becomes the Law* (1996). The second volume brings together lectures that Rose gave on major figures in and adjacent to modern Jewish thought, including Hegel, Adorno and Benjamin, as well as Levinas, Weil, Derrida and Rosenzweig. Diagnosed with ovarian cancer shortly after assuming her post at Warwick University, Rose received popular acclaim late in life for her philosophical memoir, *Love's Work* (2011). Framed as a companion piece to *Mourning Becomes the Law*, *Love's Work* dealt with Rose's speculative dialectics in lived experiences of loving, heart-break, spirituality and terminal illness. Shortly before her death, Rose converted to Anglican Christianity. While her conversion is the subject of much debate (Jay 1997; Osborne 1982; Osborne 2015; Gorman 2001), Rose's work questions the intersection of Christian and Jewish thinking and points to a syncretic approach in which her conversion might be understood as a heightening of her Judaism.

The biography of Daniel Bensaïd, born in 1946 in Toulouse to an Algerian-Jewish father and French mother, is as heterodox as Rose's. Raised in his parents' bar that catered to workers, Bensaïd was immersed in a Communist atmosphere from an early age. He joined the Union of Communist Students in 1961, his political fervour sparked by the Charonne massacre of Algerians in Paris that year. He quickly joined a dissident group within the party, led by Henri Weber and Alain Krivine, which was expelled in 1966. That year he started studying philosophy at the École normale supérieure de Saint Cloud, where he helped found the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire

(JCR), an organization that became the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR). Later moving to Paris, Bensaïd became well known in 1968, when he and Daniel Cohen-Bendit formed the 22 March Movement in Nanterre, which helped spark nation-wide protests that spring. Throughout the seventies and early eighties, Bensaïd focused mainly on his political writings and commitments (Bensaïd 1968; Bensaïd 1980; Bensaïd 1982). As leader of the Fourth International affiliated LCR, he often travelled to Latin America, especially Brazil, where he helped organize the Worker's Party, unofficially founded and led by Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva.

In the late eighties, Bensaïd became a professor of philosophy at Université Paris VIII (Vincennes-Saint-Denis), where his work concentrated on Marxist theory, political philosophy and critical theory through the Frankfurt School, especially Walter Benjamin (Bensaïd 1990; Bensaïd 2013; Bensaïd 2020). As Tariq Ali writes in the introduction to Bensaïd's memoir, *An Impatient Life* (Bensaïd 2013), he became known as a leading intellectual in France, and as one of the few who remained steadfastly committed to Communism after 1989. Bensaïd's engagement with Trotskyist Marxism was always critical, but after the fall of the USSR he increasingly turned to Jewish sources through a 'secular' reading of Benjamin, to provide an alternative path to possible revolution.<sup>2</sup> Amidst Bensaïd's numerous political writings, books such as *Walter Benjamin, sentinelle messianique* (1990) and *Marx l'intempestif: Grandeurs et misères d'une aventure critique (XIX<sup>e</sup>, XX<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (1995) addressed his particular aim to turn to Benjamin for new solutions. Bensaïd died in 2010 after a decades-long struggle with AIDS.

2 While such a 'secular' engagement with Judaism is posited by many of Bensaïd's interpreters such as Traverso, Rosso and Querido, both this article and Jayne Svenungsson's will complicate such a reading.

## Border crossings

Both Rose and Bensaïd departed from particular traditions early in their careers and later turned to more hybrid styles. Rose's roots were in Frankfurt School critical theory, mixing Marxism and aesthetics; Bensaïd's were in classical Marxist and Trotskyist thought grounded in political activism. Each of them wrote a memoir towards the end of their lives in which they discuss their philosophical journeys and respective engagements with a heterodox Judaism (Rose 2011; Bensaïd 2013). In these memoirs, both thinkers firmly reject a static identity-politics in which one speaks first and foremost as a Jew, and likewise a post-war Judaism mainly defined by the trauma of the Holocaust. Both likewise propose a heterodox Judaism as intertwined with a rethinking of politics.

In his intellectual biography of Bensaïd (Roso 2023), Darren Roso divides his work into two stages, the 1960s to 1988, and 1988 to his death in 2010. Roso argues that Bensaïd's most insightful contributions came about in the second period of his work, in which he reinterpreted thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Charles Péguy and Auguste Blanqui. In *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (2016), Traverso uses the term 'border crosser' to describe Bensaïd's renewed exploration and revision of his Marxism in the wake of 1989. He writes that Bensaïd both looked for resources outside Bolshevism and sought to expand his readership (Traverso 2016a and b). Through his writing and dialogues with thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Alain Badiou and Tony Negri, Bensaïd aimed to bridge the gap between Trotskyism's traditional focus on politics and economics and Western Marxism's traditional preoccupation with philosophy and aesthetics. In parallel, Bensaïd mediated between different generations of activists: those who participated in '68

and nineties anti-globalization protests, as well as movements between western Europe and Latin America.

In *An Impatient Life* Bensaïd (2013) alludes to Marx's infamous 1843 'Zur Judenfrage' essay (Marx 2022), which posits that Judaism will eventually be assimilated into broader humanity. Bensaïd positions himself in the lineage of secular Jews attracted to Communism (Bensaïd 2013, 274), including his father, of whom Bensaïd writes, 'He was a non-Jewish Jew, free equally from denial and anti-identitarian panic' (Bensaïd 2013, 273). The term 'non-Jewish Jew' originates from the Marxist Jewish thinker Isaac Deutscher's 1958 essay of the same title, in which he sketches a lineage of revolutionary Jewish thinkers who rejected their particularist ethnic and religious identity in favour of universalist revolutionary ideas (Deutscher 2017). Bensaïd himself turns to many of the same thinkers, such as Spinoza, Marx and Luxemburg, underlining that 'elective genealogies are worth more than unchosen heredity' (Bensaïd 2013, 274).

Bensaïd positions himself against post-war Jewish thinkers such as Levinas, who he argues uphold an inescapable form of ethnic Jewish chosen-ness, and rather emphasizes Deutscher's warning that the horrors of the Holocaust created a nation-state founded in trauma (Bensaïd 2013, 278). Bensaïd describes himself as an atheist internationalist disturbed by 'Jewish memory erected into state memory [which] becomes sadly selective. Under the grip of the state, the culture of exile and wandering has become petrified into official history and *raison d'état*' (ibid.). He also notes that while he and many other children of Holocaust survivors were visible presences in post-war student uprisings, there were disagreements regarding their stances on Israel. For Bensaïd, the well-spring of his 'non-Jewish Jew' tradition meant standing up for the oppressed, which led him to emphasize his Jewish identity,

with calls of ‘not in my name!’ in protests against Palestinian oppression. Both Rose and Bensaïd expressed discomfort with one-sided discussions of Holocaust trauma in a post-war context, with Rose coining the term ‘Holocaust piety’ to describe uncritical engagements with the Holocaust in the philosophical companion to her memoir, *Mourning Becomes the Law* (1996).

Bensaïd writes that already in the 1970s, he began to explore Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism, which led him to modern Jewish thinkers and those affiliated with Jewish themes such as Scholem, Benjamin, Landauer, Rosenzweig, Bloch, Lukács and Tucholsky. Encounters with Benjamin then led him to Blanqui and Péguy, while the latter led to Georges Sorel and Bernard Lazare. Writing of his motivations in undertaking these new research directions, Bensaïd notes that ‘faced with the collapse of the former perspectives, we needed an aleatory materialism, allied with the subtleties of messianic reason’ (Bensaïd 2013, 285). While he does not elaborate further on his idea of Kabbalah, Bensaïd’s messianic emphasis recalls seventeenth-century popularized messianic interpretations of Lurianic Kabbalah. The sixteenth-century school of the Kabbalah named after Isaac Luria was known for its interpretations of the Zohar that revealed new origins of creation, chaos and repair and were later popularized to form the basis for heretical and mainstream popular Jewish mysticism, namely seventeenth-century Sabbateanism and eighteenth-century Hassidism (Magid 2008).

In his broader search for new forms of messianic materialism, Bensaïd writes of his attraction to ‘the impatience of popular heresies’ (Bensaïd 2013, 287) of the Lurianic-infused Sabbatean movement. That said, Lurianic Kabbalah for Bensaïd in this context is representative of messianic fervour for revolution rather than a detailed and specific doctrine. This is further fleshed out in his idea

of the Marrano, namely his interpretation of Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (1993) as a veiled allusion to this term. Derrida argues that after 1989, Marxism is outwardly absent, but remains hidden and internalized within political and economic traditions. While Bensaïd simply alludes to *Spectres of Marx* to discuss his own idea of the Marrano, Derrida does not explicitly mention the term in this text, but rather on film in *D’ailleurs, Derrida* (dir. Safaa Fathy, 2000). Taking the figure of the Marrano beyond its original Jewish/Christian context as a metaphor for a hidden inner identity and public outer identity (Yovel 2009; Bielek-Robson 2023), Bensaïd speculates on the Marrano:

The hasty Marrano ... An inheritance that cannot be used, on which, Derrida said, one is summoned to take a decision, resisting it all the better to test it. This dialectic of faithless fidelity is opposed to any fantasy of purity, any kind of fundamentalism. Perhaps political Marranism leads in this way to an outcome between identitarian panics and the undifferentiated diversity of commodity cosmopolitanism. To a re-invented internationalism. (Bensaïd 2013, 284)

One conclusion of these reflections is that the Marrano’s dialectical, perpetually bifurcated identity is a means of resisting religious and political fundamentalism. The messianic-Lurianic tint of Bensaïd’s Marrano stands in sharp contrast to Rose, whose strong attraction to the law is bound with a deep affinity for Rabbinic Judaism, the mainstream orthodox form of Judaism following the 6 CE codification of the Babylonian Talmud and rooted in the Halachic legal tradition of rabbinic interpretive authority (Schiffman 1991). Such a tradition is characterized by a reticence towards the apocalyptic messianic and emphasis on redemption as a gradual process based on collective observance of *mitzvot*, or ethical commandments.

In her memoir, *Love's Work* (2011), Rose writes that her relationship to Judaism was characterized by her middle-class family's reticence towards talking about religion and their Holocaust history combined with her passion for learning. Rose underlines that she rebelled against the 'disastrous Judaism' of her father, stepfather and wider family by turning to 'a personal, protestant inwardness' (Rose 2011, 40). She writes that:

These return journeys between protestantism and Judaism defy any idea of 'ethnic identity'. My protestantism has been imbibed with the vapours of the culture; my learning helps me describe it. My Judaism is cerebral and consciously learnt; it permits me to develop a perspective on quandaries which would otherwise remain amorphous and alien. (Rose 2011, 57)

Like Bensaïd, Rose rejects an ethnic kind of Jewish identity, also emphasizing self-selected affinities. Her Protestantism is 'imbibed ... my learning helps me describe it' (Rose 2011, 57) versus her Judaism is 'consciously learnt'. In contrast to Bensaïd's formulation of 'Jewish by choice but without knowledge' (Bensaïd 2013, 283), for Rose knowledge is the main choice. This is echoed in her simultaneous embrace and wilful defiance of Jewish Rabbinic tradition, such as how, in her thirties, 'I approached my father and urged him to give me a set of Rashi, the great medieval Talmudist. I explained to him that it is traditional for a Jewish father to give the set of five volumes to his son' (Rose 2011, 50). By wilfully defying and intervening in a tradition of legal learning geared towards men, Rose emphasizes the power of learning about the law as a chosen Rabbinic Jewish heritage.

Protestantism for Rose in this context is not a formal Christian religion but rather a metaphor for turning inwards, thus creating

a relationship with her Judaism that parallels Bensaïd's Marrano dialectic. While at first Rose frames her long struggle with dyslexia as 'blind protestantism, an unconscious rebellion against the law, against the tradition of the fathers', she later describes German philosophy as her means of returning to Judaism and the law (Rose 2011, 37). Teaching herself German through Adorno, Rose asks herself: 'Was this recalcitrant medium, whose rigours I had willingly assumed, a legacy, a return to ancestral tradition, and not, as I thought, the channel for my protestantism against the broken promises of the mother-tongue?' (Rose 2011, 58). Rose's constant wavering between these two seemingly irreconcilable traditions echoes both her ethical vision of the broken middle, discussed shortly, and Bensaïd's Marrano play of faith/faithlessness. In the next sections I will elaborate on these struggles further by bringing Rose's and Bensaïd's engagements with Benjamin into dialogue.

### **Divine violence and melancholy angels**

Benjamin's notion of divine violence is most prominently thematized in his 1921 work 'On the Critique of Violence' (Benjamin 1996). It is underpinned by the idea that there are two kinds of violence, mythic and divine. While mythic violence is found in immanent institutions such as laws, states and nations and undergirds their orderly functioning, divine violence is a transformative, destructive violence that wipes everything away. This is developed further, especially through the motif of angels, in works such as his *The Origins of the German Trauerspiel* (1925) and 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940). In *Trauerspiel*, this is reflected in the unredeemed world in the baroque Trauerspiel play that can only be broken by an instance of divine violence (Benjamin 2022). Angels appear as fractured presences in a ruined world, in which melancholy reveals a sense of stasis; the angels

reflect divine justice, but they are incapable of enacting it.<sup>3</sup> In ‘Theses’, this is developed through endless, homogenous time perpetuated by institutions of state power (Benjamin 2020). The angel of history, inspired by Klee’s *Angelus Novus* painting, is caught in a stasis similar to that experienced by the angels in *Trauerspiel*: held in inaction, he looks back over the wreckage of the past. Only a revolutionary moment of divine violence can break this impasse.

Referring to ‘Theses’ in her 1992 essay ‘Walter Benjamin: Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism’, Rose contrasts two of Klee’s angels in Benjamin’s work: *Angelus Novus*, the new angel, and *Angelus Dubius*, the dubious angel. These categories are used to emphasize Rose’s broader critique of philosophy after Kant, and especially following the Second World War, as characterized by what she deems a cleft between law and ethics. The new angel is trapped in this division, while the doubting angel ‘continues to try to do good, to run the risk of idealisation, of abstract intentions, to stake itself for ideas and for others’ (Rose 2017, 10). The notion of melancholy enters Rose’s essay as a means to explore the new angel in Benjamin’s broader corpus, particularly in relation to political action.

This first unfolds through Rose’s aim to ‘yield the difficulty of his [Benjamin’s] relationship to Judaism’ (Rose 2017, 177). In her wider writing and in this essay, Judaism finds its place in reactions to the collapse of modernity. Rose charges that post-war continental philosophy indicted rationalist, Enlightenment, Kantian thought that seemed to lead up to rational machines of war and genocide. In the early nineties, writing after the ‘triple loss of authority, of Marxism, of Heideggerianism’ (Rose

1996, 2), she argues that philosophy responded to such traumas by likewise indicting any idea of the universal, attempting to escape the challenge of mediating rationality and ethics by turning to modern Jewish thought as a site of pure ethics, rooted in the idea that post-Second Temple Judaism was divorced from political power. While the first loss of ‘authority’ refers to Rose’s polemic against post-structuralism, the loss of Heideggerianism and Marxism refers to shifting post-Second World War and 1989 philosophical and political terrains. Rose argues that the turn to a new ethics as the site of absolute answers to the pressing questions of post-modernity seeks an untainted morality, whether through an unsullied ethics or a transcendent idea of justice. Furthermore, Judaism contains no such pure source, but is rather an implicated, worldly actor. As Rose underlines in a 1995 interview, ‘Judaism is part of the modern world. And it suffers like the rest of the modern world from the painful opposition between power and love’ (Lloyd 2008, 209).

This argument stretches back in Rose’s work, and is particularly visible in *Hegel contra Sociology* (1981), which critiques what she describes as a centuries-long neo-Kantianism that laid the ground for a cleft between judgments of the immanent and transcendent. The cleft is especially underlined by Kant’s idea that the moral will must come from within individual consciousness. This limits what one can know beyond the immanent world, which likewise impairs thinking about the political. Rose argues that the transcendent must be conceptualized in dialogue with the immanent in order to think of how to change social and political structures. In *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (1992), she introduces her solution: a reworked Hegelian speculative dialectics that privileges an unresolved (‘broken’) space of mediation over synthesis. This vision rejects a teleological progression towards the Absolute, but rather revels in the

3 For close readings of Benjamin’s conception of melancholy in comparison to Freud’s, see Ferber 2013; Björk 2015.

unending, unfolding process of mediation. It entails unresolved arguments in the dialectical mediation of individual and state, immanent and transcendent, and most importantly, ethics and law.

These dynamics appear in Rose's Benjamin essay via her interpretation of Hegel's idea of the beautiful soul, a concept drawn from Goethe's 1796 *William Meister's Apprenticeship* (Goethe 1997). In the latter's autobiographical 'Confessions of a Beautiful Soul' section, an unnamed woman recounts a spiritual awakening that led her to withdraw from the world and pursue a personal connection with God. In Hegel's 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 2018), the beautiful soul appears late in the book, after much of the progressive journey of consciousness has already unfolded. This seems to imply that a certain level of self-consciousness has indeed been reached, but it is shown that the beautiful soul errs in its attempt to achieve such a pure level of morality that it deems worldly affairs too messy for intervention and thus turns inwards. Unlike the positive connotations of *Apprenticeship*, Hegel's beautiful soul illustrates the pitfalls of an inward spiritual relationship. Hegel sets it in a dialectical relationship with another beautiful soul who rushes to action without reflection, contrasting a beautiful soul who finds every political action tainted with the one who touts the necessity of action for societal betterment while only thinking of itself.

Hegel writes that 'In both of them, the aspect of actuality is equally distinguished from that of speech; in one, through the *self-interested ends* of action, and in the other, through the *lack of action* at all, action of which the necessity lies in talking about duty itself, for duty without deeds has no meaning at all' (Hegel 2018, 384). Both of these entities are locked in tense battle, each accusing the other of hypocrisy. Yet both are right in that in each case 'actuality is equally distinguished from that of speech',

or action is distinguished from its stated justifications. This is set within Hegel's broader argument that morality, defined as the freedom of conscience, can only function within ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), or the individual's relationship within the social whole. Both actors do not participate in broader society, one by withdrawing into itself and the other by acting only in its own interests. At the end of the chapter, this standstill collapses when God enters: 'The reconciling *yes*, in which both I's let go of their opposed *existence*, is the existence of the *I* extended into two-ness, which therein remains the same as itself and which has the certainty of itself in its complete self-relinquishing and in its opposite. – It is the God that appears in the midst of those who know themselves as pure knowing' (Hegel 2018, 389). Thus ends the Spirit chapter, leading to *Phenomenology's* second-to-last section on religion, which eventually yields to the absolute knowing of philosophy.

It is in this context that Rose's reflections on Benjamin's relationship to melancholy gain contours. Rose argues that: 'The concentration on the image of "the beautiful soul" exhibits what Benjamin called dialectics at a standstill, for she bears no fruit – her body disintegrates as her soul swells – and she returns in death to fallen nature, neither realised nor redeemed' (Rose 2017, 178). In her reading, this concentration underlines the Hegelian argument that individual morality must be positioned within a broader societal context or else its dialectics are frozen. It thus seems to assert that Benjamin is implicated in Rose's broader critique of modern Jewish thought, with Levinas at its seething centre, as a beautiful soul-esque site of pure ethics. Yet some interesting caveats emerge as one reads further.

Rose's vivid description of a 'body that disintegrates as her soul swells' connects to Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*, which charts the crises of signification for emerging capitalist

modernity (Cohen 1998; Benjamin 2022). This gains more definition in Benjamin's depictions of high capitalism in writings such as 'On Language as Such and On Human Language' (Benjamin 1996), 'The Critique of Violence' (Benjamin 1996), and 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (Benjamin 2012). In these essays, Rose (2017) finds modernity revealed as mired in a state of spiritual, linguistic and auratic deterioration; disconnected from revelation, it yearns for redemption without any promise of such. For her, this yearning and decay signal a kind of stasis that she interprets as similar to the Jewish category of the messianic, one for which she does not detail varying understandings such as those conceptualized by Gershom Scholem (1995).

Rose defines Jewish messianism as characterized by a disjunction, a 'disgrace or disorder', in relation to revelation, understood as the written and oral law. As will be discussed shortly, this differs significantly from Bensaïd's attraction to heretical Jewish messianism, in which one waits for a revolutionary moment sparked by a force akin to Benjamin's notion of divine violence. In contrast, 'the object, style, and mood of Benjamin's philosophy converge', Rose argues, 'not in the Christian mournfulness or melancholy, discerned from Baroque *Trauerspiel* to Baudelaire, but in the Judaic state of desertion – in Hebrew, *agunah* – the stasis which his *agon* within the law dictates' (Rose 2017, 181). Benjamin is thus not a revolutionary waiting for the Messiah to enter, but rather subsumed in such stasis because of his lack of faith in the law.

Rose argues that 'Benjamin displays the same unease with the traditional conceptuality of Torah. He, too, conceives all law as pagan, mythic violence, as law-making and law-preserving violence; but, to my knowledge, he is the only modern, Jewish thinker who is consistent enough to realise that this violence in law has implications for the idea of

God' (Rose 2017, 188). Benjamin sees 'all law as pagan, mythic violence' and is thus unable to intervene in worldly politics, rather remaining mired in static waiting for divine intervention. Yet, Rose underlines, Benjamin is unique in the realm of modern Jewish thought because he at least recognizes that he is in stasis, whereas other thinkers, such as Buber, Rosenzweig and Levinas, valorize such a condition as pure ethics. In contrast:

melancholy is the logical outcome of Protestantism ... the denial of good works in the doctrine of justification by faith alone affirmed the secular and political world as the demonstration of obligation, 'but in its great men it produced melancholy'. For life is deprived of all value. (Rose 2017, 194)

Rose juxtaposes *agunah* and melancholy by posing them as two states related both to Judaism and Christianity and Hegel's two respective beautiful souls. Here Rose seems to position the inward beautiful soul as a Jewish matter rooted in a supposedly ethical interior turn towards the divine that abandons law's power to mediate the world.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, a melancholy Protestantism of 'great men', quoted from Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*, signals a means of action supposedly ethical but actually defined by self-interest. Yet while Hegel's beautiful souls and Rose's Protestant example imply a conscious choice, *agunah* implies none. Namely, the beautiful soul chooses not to participate or self-interestedly participate in the modern state, whereas the *agunah* is stuck in the stasis of a suspended law, indefinitely chained in one place. One possible answer to this issue is found in Rose's insistence on

4 I am inspired by Agata Bielick-Robson's idea of the Jewish beautiful soul here (see Bielick-Robson 2024).

Rabbinic law. She writes:

Benjamin comes nearest to Talmud Torah when he contrasts the commandment as a guideline (not a criterion) and its educative potential with the versatility of mythic law-making violence, which invests people with guilt not punishment. But he maintains the strict opposition between the pagan feast of law-making violence, ranging from the Greek to the modern state, the violence in law, and divine violence ... Consequently, the idea of mediation or negotiation which lights up the idea of the commandment is quickly extinguished. (Rose 2017, 188)

Rose emphasizes that although Benjamin's work provides a possibility for dialectical engagement with the law, he negates this by deeming immanent law violent and divine apocalyptic violence as a means of freedom. Rose's mention of the Talmud here is important, because it is a Jewish tradition of legal interpretation that began within the historical context of post-prophetic Judaism. Rose takes the oft-commented situation of human interpretation seemingly privileged over divine revelation (Schiffman 1991; Walzer, Loberbaum and Zohar 2000) and turns it into a proposition outside the confines of Jewish tradition. She thus injects some choice back into the *agunah*: such utter desertion is based not on irrevocable fate, but on a lack of willingness to engage with the law.

In Rose's earlier description of her Protestantism as 'imbibed' versus her Judaism as 'consciously learnt', she understands Judaism as rooted in a conscious process of learning that dialectically engages with an inherited Protestant inwardness. She upends these distinctions in her essay on Benjamin, instead revealing a Judaism turned inwards in pure ethics and a Protestantism inwardly selfish in its outward worldly actions. Rose critiques

Benjamin to argue that modern Jewish thought and continental philosophy should take up an ethics inspired by the Talmudic tradition of perpetual legal learning, dialogue and negotiation rather than apocalyptic messianic intervention or revolution.

### Bensaïd's melancholy Wager

Fabio Mascaro Querido writes about Bensaïd's 'dissident Judaism', or a secular reappropriation of Jewish sources for revolutionary Marxist ends in the tradition of non-Jewish Jews (Querido 2023, 355). Traverso emphasizes that Bensaïd's focus was on Spinoza and Uriel da Costa, 'two heretical Marranos to whom he felt very close but who are almost unnoticed in the writings of Benjamin' (Traverso 2016a, 230). Such a chosen lineage, Traverso writes, underlines Bensaïd's mediation of messianism and historical materialism. Daniel Roso calls this Bensaïd's 'subterranean Judaic messianism', which combines an unknowable Messiah and 'a messianic approach to the content of history joined by the images of eternal recurrence, melancholic constellations, twin stars, elective affinities and bifurcations able to open those narrow paths of history yet to be explored' (Roso 2023, 190). Querido glosses this as 'radically immanent' (Querido 2023, 356), and finds it reflected in Benjamin's focus on fragments and small histories and rejection of linear historical narratives.

Michael Löwy gives more space to Bensaïd's relationship to Jewish sources, noting that the starting point for his concept of the melancholic wager lies in biblical prophecy as a space of conditional anticipation rooted in action (Löwy 2016). Jayne Svenungsson likewise points to a Rabbinic Judaic connection. She argues that despite Bensaïd's professed aversion to a particular kind of theology, his 'prophane politics' actually 'shares essential features with the rabbinic discourses ... such as the rejection of any recourse to a sovereign divine

authority beyond the law or the affirmation of imperfection and uncertainty as the very condition of possibility for justice' (Svenungsson 2024, 13). Such an argument is echoed in her article in this issue, 'Prophetic Political Theology: Daniel Bensaïd's Alternative Radicalism', which highlights Bensaïd's 'prophetic political theology' (Svenungsson 2025, 47). This is a particularly interesting point given Rose's aforementioned critique of Benjamin, and Bensaïd by association, for engaging in a binary relation with the divine that precludes the immanent political-legal configurations of Rabbinic Talmudic dialogue.

Bensaïd discusses Benjamin in many writings, especially in *Marx for Our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*, published as *Marx l'impestif* in 1995. In it, Bensaïd frames the eighties as 'times of counter-reformation and neo-liberal reaction' in which Marx was 'under attack from all sides' (Bensaïd 2020, I). He describes the period of mourning that followed in which the end of history and the end of Communism was declared. Yet, turning to Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, he writes, 'By 1993, the labour of mourning was over. There would, Jacques Derrida wrote in his *Spectres of Marx*, be "no future without the memory and the inheritance of Marx: in any case of a certain Marx ... [and] at least one of his spirits"' (Bensaïd 2020, x).

As mentioned earlier, Bensaïd understands his idea of Marranism as departing from Derrida's use of the term to refer to a hidden Marxism. In *Marx for Our Times*, he both underlines Derrida's emphasis on multiple spirits of Marxism and describes this as a means of reading history against the grain via Benjamin and Gramsci. 'Their tragic destinies as outsiders', Bensaïd writes, 'enabled them to hear what remained inaudible to the majority of Marx's professed disciples, anxious to translate his unusual words into a familiar language, which was inevitably that of the dominant

ideology' (Bensaïd 2020, 4). Mourning here signals the end of the post-1989 'left melancholy', a term originally coined by Benjamin and later used to describe the inward turn of leftists grappling with remaking their political life after tragedy, and points to voices outside of the canon of Marxist thought.

Bensaïd uses Benjamin to reread Marx's version of history in a heterodox manner in which historical materialism, or material conditions and economic relations, and politics are given equal weight as driving history. He focuses on moments in Marx's writings in which he acknowledges the power of politics to shape history, namely in his emphasis on the power of revolution (Bensaïd 2020; Marx & Engels 2024). Quoting Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, Bensaïd writes that here 'politics gain primacy over history' (Bensaïd 2020, 70; Benjamin 2020). In this context, Bensaïd sets out Benjamin's idea of history as a critique of historical reason that leads "from a time of necessity to a time of possibilities": a secret history, whose messianic potentialities subvert the fatality of appearances, and where each present instant and every commemorated expectation is laden with a particular meaning' (Bensaïd 2020, 88). In messianic intervention, histories of the defeated gain political agency.

Such an understanding is positioned within Benjamin's famous broader idea of re-reading history 'against the grain' (Benjamin 2012). In his notion of history, the new angel described by Rose looks back on the rubble of history as a series of defeats, losses that rise to attention as one reads against the grain. Yet this can only truly come to fruition with divine messianic intervention, which can happen at any moment, causing such instances of defeat to rise up in flashes of revolutionary potential. As Traverso notes, Bensaïd's interpretation of Benjamin is not primarily characterized by its originality but is rather notable for his attempt

to respond to the crises of remaking Marxism in real time. His texts were often dashed off quickly, racing against the clock of both political conditions and personal illness.

Accordingly, I seek less to unpack Bensaïd's interpretation of Benjamin as such than to ask what his aforementioned heterodox understanding of Judaism *vis-à-vis* Benjamin could mean for positioning his and Rose's rethinking of Marxism and Judaism, and their interconnection. In this spirit, I turn to Bensaïd's memoir, in which he describes a heterodox Marxism, especially via Benjamin, as intertwined with melancholy politics:

Melancholy politics, the melancholy of politics: in the absence of any divine command or last judgement, faced with the uncertainty of one's own result, decision inevitably assumes the form of a wager. It becomes melancholy when the necessary and the possible diverge ... The strategic calculation of probabilities makes the difference between legitimate will and arbitrary voluntarism, between a reasoned wager, which is the political condition of man without God, and an act of faith. There is no ultimate certainty on which to base judgement. We are embarked, as the subtle Pascal put it. It is impossible to escape the tough duty of deciding. So we have to wager. (Bensaïd 2013, 318–19)

Bensaïd understands melancholy in a completely different sense from the Freudian term mentioned earlier. It is not about a loss that has been internalized and distorted in a negative sense, but rather one focused on reappropriating loss, defeat and sadness as a resource for future revolutionary action. One thing that also jumps out in this understanding of melancholy is how often Bensaïd emphasizes that it is empty of theological content and divorced from the law.

He begins by noting that this melancholy wager takes place in 'the absence of any divine command or last judgement'. Yet such a melancholy 'act of faith' is then juxtaposed with 'the political condition of man without God', who makes a rational wager. Pascal is mentioned for his notion of the wager that lacks rational proof, but is ultimately an affirmation of faith. The infinite happiness of believing in God in the immanent world far outweighs the despair of a rational life without divine guidance. Löwy notes that Bensaïd was inspired by Lucien Goldmann, whose 1955 *The Hidden God* compares Pascal's and Marx's wagers as transcendental versus immanent and historical (Löwy 2016). But for Bensaïd, such wagers are notable as melancholy (faith-filled) versus rational (Godless), thus complicating understandings of him embodying a strictly 'secular' Judaism (Traverso 2016a; Querido 2023; Rosso 2023). While interpreters who see him as secular position this faith in the hope of a Marxist revolution, it is interesting that Bensaïd juxtaposes his argument for choosing the melancholy wager embodied by Benjamin with the rational, Godless man.

Bensaïd's understanding of faith rooted in a sense of hoping and waiting without knowledge or guidance recalls Rose's idea of *agunah*, but it is invested with quite a different value. Namely, for Bensaïd such waiting without divine command is part of the revolutionary struggle: one must wager upon (messianic) revolution without its certainty. In contrast, Rose interprets this situation as an absence of legal guidance that creates a state of desertion, one that is in fact worse than what she sees as melancholy's fruitless search for moral purity.

Yet for Bensaïd, 'Messianic anticipation is never the passive certainty of an advent foretold, but akin to the concentration of a hunter on the lookout for the sudden emergence of what is possible' (Bensaïd 2020, 84). What seems empty to Rose is full of promise for

Bensaïd. This brings up Svenungsson's earlier gloss of Bensaïd, namely his practice of prophetic politics. She ties his idea of anticipation without surety to rabbinic proclamations that the law is fundamentally uncertain and there is no transcendent authority beyond it. This is similar to how Rose sees rabbinic dialogue, namely as an ongoing debate that overrides any final law, which connects strongly to her idea of the broken middle. In this sense, Svenungsson and Rose both agree that dialogical rabbinic law could be a powerful resource in contemporary politics, yet they disagree as to whether it gains contours within Benjamin's thought. Such a reading also blurs the lines between Lurianic kabbalistic and Rabbinic Talmudic legal understandings of messianism. Just when he seems to veer off the rails, Bensaïd indeed makes a link to the law:

the 'messianic concept' expresses the tension and anxiety of what is merely possible. Like commemoration, which has the curious ability to modify what science has observed, its anticipation is active ... The inspired 'remembrance' of the Hebraic tradition is thus inscribed in the stake of the event: for Benjamin, memory is always at war. (Bensaïd 2020, 88–9)

Here Bensaïd not only defends Benjamin's messianic vision against Rose's charge of passivity, but brings it back to Rabbinic tradition. It is notable that throughout his various writings, Bensaïd repeatedly glosses Benjamin as a secular thinker who drew on Jewish resources in a profane manner that emptied them of any theological contents. He thus places an avowedly secular revolutionary in dialogue with Jewish law, recalling the aforementioned tension of the Marrano's play between faith and faithlessness.

Whereas Rose critiques Benjamin for not considering a Talmudic dialectic, Bensaïd

points to the importance of the Hebrew Bible's oft-repeated command to remember, *zakhor*. The historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi famously argues that this command to remember is an active process tied to various cyclical holidays and rituals and imbued with moral and political urgency (Yerushalmi 2005). Bensaïd sees Benjamin's remembrance as active, political and morally significant? He emphasizes that while this is inspired by Hebraic tradition, it is not religious. 'Without the least nostalgia for a hidden God, or the slightest temptation to piety, Benjamin opposes to the fetishism of history its profane politicization' (Bensaïd 2020, 89).

Such a back and forth suggests a struggle within Jewish tradition between Bensaïd's messianic Marrano yearning for revolution, Rose's Protestantism and Judaism struggling between ethics and law within her body and soul, and their productive overlaps. This recalls Derrida's idea of a hidden Marxism: a tradition that gains its efficacy from being obscured under the surface of a seemingly non-threatening political tradition. But there are always many spectres, and they arrive in different forms.

## Concluding remarks

For Rose and Bensaïd, Benjamin serves as a container for their own reflections on political agency, especially in the climate of post-1989 Marxism. Their respective interest in how melancholy functions in Benjamin serves as a jumping-off point to explore his understandings of Marxism, Judaism and messianism. I argue that this is brought into contrast through how Judaism enters the conversation for Rose and Bensaïd, particularly in how their respective memoirs set out hybrid Jewish identities that parallel their later applications of Jewish themes to Benjamin. In *Love's Work*, Rose describes herself as the 'container' of an unconscious Protestantism and learned Judaism

(Rose 2011) identified with Rabbinic Judaism, whereas in *An Impatient Life*, Bensaïd draws upon the figure of the Marrano as a means to conceptualize a hidden Marxism recalling Lurianic Kabbalah (Bensaïd 2013). The dividing point between such understandings plays out most prominently in their understandings of messianism as a gradual ethics (Rose) or revolutionary intervention (Bensaïd).

In their later interpretations of Benjamin, both thinkers return to a hybrid, split Judaism. Rose reads Benjamin's ideas of divine messianic intervention as actions of an inward, melancholy Protestantism that retreat from political action. Benjamin is resultantly stuck in extreme melancholy, which Rose deems *agunah*, using the Hebrew term for a woman in legal stasis (Rose 2017, 182). For Rose (2011; 2017), the solution to such a state of affairs can be found in the Talmudic tradition as an ongoing legal dialogue that contains such hybridity, on the one hand escaping the desolate *agunah* while remaining in dialogue with both the modern state and the concerns underlying the Jewish and Protestant beautiful souls of inwardness and self-interested action. In contrast, Bensaïd interprets Benjamin as a fellow Marrano connected to a hybrid, secular Judaism as a means to revitalize post-1989 Marxism through the promise of messianic intervention. Such a promise is 'melancholy' because one yearns for revolution despite the knowledge of its likely failure.

For Rose and Bensaïd, such conjunctions of Benjamin, Judaism and melancholy form the core of their reflections on what role Judaism could play in worldly politics, especially after the loss of hope in Marxism after 1989. I argue that each thinker reworks Jewish tradition in a hybrid manner to reformulate their own version of a new politics able to withstand a widespread loss of hope. While Rose and Bensaïd disagree on Benjamin's political valency in this context, they come together

in the conviction that a contemporary radical engagement with Judaism must approach it as open to heretical revision, whether that means including Protestantism or removing God from its orbit. ■

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