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## *The Language of Lament*

Scholem's "On Lament and Lamentation" was written as a compliment to his translation of the biblical Book of Lamentations. Scholem's essay, while referencing the Israelites lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem and using the Book as a springboard for formal and linguistic theorizing, discusses lament and the language of prayer more generally.

How can a language handle death, or loss in a way that is not ironic or paradoxical, as the signification of absence would be? By failing. For Scholem, the language of lament is a language defined by its *failure* to express, and not by any positive signification of this failure. It is a language that can never be a vessel for communication, and which instead inflicts upon itself the very loss and destruction of which it cannot speak:

"Thus mourning partakes in language, but only in the most tragic way, since in its course toward language mourning is directed against itself – and against language. What appears here [in lament] is the truest anarchy, which emerges most clearly in the impression made by lament, in the utter inability of other things to answer lament in their language. There is no answer to lament, which is to say, there is only one: falling mute (*das Verstummen*)."<sup>19</sup>

Unlike other forms of language which use signifiers to address an external reality, convey a content, or to reveal hidden potentialities of meaning, the language of lament can never address anything outside of itself. According to Scholem, Lament does not elicit a response, provoke thoughts, or evoke images.<sup>20</sup> External signifiers or any language outside of the Lamentation are "utterly unable to answer" its anarchy. This kind of total internality means that the *what* that is mourned cannot be anything external to the lament itself. True lament is a mourn-

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<sup>19</sup> Scholem, Gershom. "On Lament and Lamentation." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 21, trans. Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014. p.9.

<sup>20</sup> This idea may seem counter-intuitive at first, but think of the very simple example of someone mourning a loss. They may wail: "Why? Why?", and this wail, though "semiotic" in its point of departure, expects no answer. "Why" has become more of a cry than a "semiotic" statement, and here lament is a gestural process which turns language into a sound. Following Scholem, in its truest sense, Lament is not any kind of *outward* show, or a demonstration for others, but is rather this very process of the breakdown of language and the giving up hope that its expression will lead to anything. If one is truly lamenting, one wails for the sake of wailing, and not to be heard or to make a point.

ing of its own language. But this is by no means to say that the language of lament is powerless. Lament appears on the other hand to have immense, chaotic power.

“This language [of lament] reveals nothing, because the being that reveals itself in it has no content (and for that reason one can also say that it reveals everything) and conceals (*verschweigt*) nothing, because its entire existence is based on a revolution of silence. It is not symbolic, but only points toward the symbol; it is not concrete, but annihilates the object.”<sup>21</sup>

The language of lament cannot escape its own border to address anything external, but this doesn't mean that it is powerless: the language of lament has a destructive power over anything it is oriented towards, and all symbols and desires for representation are smashed by this language. It is a language with an impossible system, which contains the trace of *all* objects on the precondition that they are always destroyed as soon as they are sensed or hinted at. For it is not external objects or signs that are destroyed in this process, but language itself, again and again.

“Language in the state of lament destroys itself, and the language of lament is itself, for that very reason, the language of destruction (*Vernichtung*). Everything is at its mercy. It repeatedly attempts to become symbol, but this must always fail, because it is border.”<sup>22</sup>

According to Scholem, lament is always on the *border* between silence and revelation, or in other words between the (silent) symbol and the expression of that symbol. The language of man usually involves a movement from one to the other, either the outward “expression” or revelation of a symbol, or the capturing of that revelation within the silent symbolic. Not so with lament: the language that *is* the border. As soon as it begins to move from the border (which it must, because this border takes up no space and lament is a constant unavoidable departure), lament destroys itself and all hope of revelation or content. Lament is an ultimate state of instability. Scholem continues:

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<sup>21</sup> Scholem, p.6

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.7

“And therefore lament can usurp any language: it is always the, not empty, but extinct expression, in which its death wish and its inability to die are joined together. The expression of innermost expressionlessness... This language is infinite, but it has the infinity of destruction, which is, as it were, the ultimate potency of the extinct.”<sup>23</sup>

To recap, Scholem writes that this language is at once mute but at the same time roars with the fires of destruction. He writes that its movement of pure expressionlessness is a gesture complete unto itself: this marks both a total failure of language to express, and a moment of complete expression. These statements would be totally paradoxical if we were talking about the normal languages of man, which either reveal the content of a symbol, or capture those revelations in new symbols. However, what is crucial is the understanding that lament is a language on the *border* between revelation and the symbolic, and that this border is impossibly thin, which means that lament is always slipping back and forth from one to the other, constantly destroying itself. This creates a kind of repetition, but it is a repetition without memory. Lament can never build upon itself. Indeed, each gesture of lament is truly alone, as if it were totally outside of time. As we can already sense, form and time function in completely unique ways in lament – these are the sorts of things we will look at shortly through musical examples. Lament is at once both cyclical and non-constitutive. It is both overwhelmingly repetitive and on the other hand hopelessly fragmented and alone in each utterance.

This gesture’s collapse is in many ways “tragic”, and indeed Scholem recognizes that the language of lament is closely linked to the tragic. However, the differences in these languages is defined by their failures. Tragic failure is constitutive. Tragic failure leads to the birth of a new era, a new mythology. Scholem is very careful with his language, insisting that lament is never *reborn* after its collapses. Instead of “birth” [*geburt*], Scholem, and Benjamin after him, use the term “origin” [*ursprung*] to describe the continual reappearance of lament. This is crucial, because *ursprung* does not mark any kind of beginning.<sup>24</sup> Rather, it seems that each instance of

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<sup>23</sup> Scholem pp.9-10

<sup>24</sup> For an in depth analysis of the term *Ursprung* in how it is used by Scholem and Benjamin, see Paula Schwebel’s “The Tradition in Ruins: Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem on Language and Lament”, and Ilit Ferber’s “‘Incline thine ear unto me, and hear my speech’: Scholem, Benjamin, and Cohen on Lament”, in *Lament in Jewish Thought* (De Gruyter 2014).

lament is totally unconnected by time, as if there was an undefined, or contentless amount of time between each instance. Instead of marking a new beginning, each lamentation is an action that leaves no mark of its failure upon the future at all. This can have immense musical implications.

Scholem does not directly critique the tragic in the way that Benjamin later does in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, but along with the crucial difference between birth and origin, we can detect a hint of another important concept in the divide between tragedy and lament:

“Lamentation is, in its deepest sense, mythical. In it, myth itself seeks exit to a world to which there is no access, in which one can and cannot be, but into which, since eternity, no one can reach from another world. In lamentation, mythical enchantment (with which it was perhaps originally enmeshed) is shattered by the unheard-of linguistic phenomenon of the border.”<sup>25</sup>

As I have mentioned earlier, tragedy and lament are very closely linked, but here we see the nuanced differences. Whereas lamentation is mythical in the sense of being totally inaccessible to those outside of it, any element of “enchantment” that derives from this, or any kind of power that the mythical could exert upon the outside, is gone. Scholem continues, “the order of lament itself destroys the possibility of exploiting magic as enchantment”. Here we have the germ of what will become an important political aspect to Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, and later to anti-Wagnerian operatists such as Luigi Nono. Fascist art – in contrast to lament (and other forms like *Trauerspiel* and allegory, which we will discuss soon) – exploits magic as enchantment, and uses mythology to achieve something external. In Tragedy, the meaning of events is bestowed after the fact. In Tragedy, something is retrospectively born with the hero’s death. Benjamin writes that “tragic death marks a moment of fulfillment,” which means that “all the events of a life gather significance from the anticipation of this moment”, whereas death in *Trauerspiel*, “does not fulfill a life,” but is “one a series of insignificant moments” in a game where “each moment is... a repetition of a repetition”.<sup>26</sup> While lamentation

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<sup>25</sup> Scholem p.11

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, Walter “*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy”, cited by Kiarina Kordela in *Sparks Will Fly* (SUNY press, 2015), p. 104.

and trauerspiel are not the same thing, it is clear that the two have a lot in common in terms of their relation to time and opposition to tragedy.