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Dynamic Repetition: History and Messianism in Modern Jewish Thought

Gilad Sharvit. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2022. 316 pp. \$45, ISBN 9781684581030

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To cite this article: Jacob Hermant (2024) Dynamic Repetition: History and Messianism in Modern Jewish Thought, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 99:1, 125-127, DOI: [10.1080/00168890.2023.2286717](https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2023.2286717)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2023.2286717>



Published online: 05 Feb 2024.



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BOOK REVIEWS

Gilad Sharvit. *Dynamic Repetition: History and Messianism in Modern Jewish Thought*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2022. 316 pp. \$45. ISBN 9781684581030.

The themes of repetition and messianism are by no means new discoveries in the study of modern Jewish thought, as well as modern philosophy more broadly. Gilad Sharvit knows this and reminds his reader throughout *Dynamic Repetitions* about the well-studied history of both trajectories. What Sharvit argues in his new book is that repetition and messianism are inherently intertwined in the German-Jewish philosophical milieu upon which he focuses his gaze. He identifies this conjoining in relation to the interpretative and exegetical practices that zero in on conceptions of history and the tradition in the German Jewish community of the early 20th-century. Through this scope, Sharvit discovers a repetition of differences, or a dynamic repetition, that flows between prominent figures of German-Jewish thought of the time – Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, and, though Czech, Franz Kafka. According to Sharvit, the reason why these scholars embark into repetition and difference is to uncover a collective Jewish messianic experience that can imagine a radical transformation of both the self and the world.

Sharvit's intervention in modern Jewish thought feels fresh and clear, and though the repeated, perhaps fittingly, restating of his thesis and the arguments of a given chapter can hinder the book's rhetorical flow, this style allows for both beginners and experienced readers to find something new and exciting in its sometimes-overwhelming scope. For Sharvit does not stay within the Jewish philosophical tradition; he takes care to align his project with current trends, particularly theories of repetition with contemporary discourses in modern philosophy. Chapter 1, for example, finds Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Deleuze all receiving subsections devoted to their own thought and their relations to the aforementioned Jewish writers. It is in these moments, most notably early in the book, that the scope slightly hinders Sharvit. The need to provide exegeses on so many difficult philosophical figures who are not even the book's focus sometimes leads to overly dense and complicated writing as when, for instance, the entirety of Deleuze's understanding of repetition is covered in a necessarily scant 5 pages. Thankfully, after these explanations Sharvit returns to the efficient and sharp prose of the exceptional introduction, which is immediately gripping and invites the reader gently into the debates and high stakes of the roles of repetition, history, and messianism in modern Jewish thought.

As previously mentioned, Chapter 1 does suffer slightly from the sheer amount of information that it communicates, setting up the broader philosophical stakes and positions of repetition as well as theories of return in Judaism, Christianity, and archaic peoples. Though the context Sharvit provides here is necessary for the structure and success of his argument, it can feel overbearing, especially as many of the arguments the chapter presents will not appear in the book for quite a while. Sharvit chooses to move through these ideas quickly and in a sustained burst of background information, a decision with which I agree, despite the sacrifices of style and clarity that are made by so doing. I wish to note that after this point, in my opinion, the book only improves, and as more of the primary figures become incorporated into the greater whole, Sharvit's argument grows in its astuteness, sophistication, and contemporary relevance.

In the second chapter, Sharvit gives historical context for the discussion of repetition in German-Jewish thought, looking at the well-known crisis of tradition in the secular Jewish

community in Germany and a range of responses including Zionism and the fascination with Jews from Eastern Europe. The chapter gives a succinct summary of the cultural moment, but encounters a perhaps counter-intuitive problem: unlike the complicated, yet necessary summaries of the first chapter, the focus here on the Jewish context can feel tacked-on and brushed-over. The general flow of the book would be stronger if the portions summarizing these movements were somehow subsumed into Chapter 1, and the remaining anecdotes about the book's main Jewish thinkers would be better suited to the chapters which focus on each respective figure. This is most noticeable in the treatment of Rosenzweig; one of the three listed responses to the crisis of tradition is his creation of the Frankfurt *Freies Jüdische Lehrhaus*, giving him an odd authoritative position before the more author-focused chapters.

Once Sharvit begins to dive into the individual thinkers, however, the minor pacing and structural issues vanish entirely, and the nuts-and-bolts of the book emerge alongside his especially clear writing. Chapter 3 is the first of two chapters on Rosenzweig, in which Sharvit offers rereadings of points of his thought such as the relation to *nunc stans* and Judaism's *weltliche Unlebendigkeit*, or 'worldly unliveliness.' Through Rosenzweig's centering of the Jewish liturgical and ritual understanding of time and history, Sharvit traces how this Jewish repetitive temporality leads to a messianic moment in explicit relation to communal structures through the Jewish anticipation of redemption in the present. This calendar model of dynamic repetition allows the Jewish people to resist the force of linear history and to experience redemption *in* their intensive feeling of time. In so doing, Sharvit explains, they produce a different, collective, and anticipatory reality, and become prepared for the messianic event of the true and unified temporal whole.

This line of interpretation continues in Chapter 4, which dissects Rosenzweig's translations of the poetry of Judah Halevi. The work attempts to create a text that can lead German Jews back to tradition, and thus to their anticipatory role in world redemption. Halevi's poems, relating to the Jewish liturgical calendar and which are often sung as prayers throughout the year, become events in time, with messianic implications in their reproduction of Jewish repetitive temporality. Crucially, Sharvit points to the unique construction of the translations as fundamental to their messianic potential. Rosenzweig keeps the poems in order, but moves his notes and larger commentary to the end of the book, resulting in a cyclical reading style wherein the reader continuously flips between the middle and end of the book that replicates the experience of dynamic repetition. In this process, Sharvit argues, Rosenzweig looks toward a material advancement of Jewish eternity and redemptive anticipation by actualizing the practice of repetition that is core to Jewish religious and temporal life.

Before the book's second half, Sharvit includes a short interlude on Kafka, building on often-recognized repetitions and patterns in his writing to present a literary model of messianism in the retellings of the story of Abraham in a letter to his friend Robert Klopstock. The many unconventional images of Abraham disorient Christian interpretations of unity and find redemption in the vision of a single historical moment encompassing various material histories. Sharvit's laser-focused analysis here may seem overly selective, but I found in it a clearly articulated presentation of how messianism in Jewish thought need not be restricted to the realm of philosophy. Kafka's fiction possesses that same drive, expanding the scope of the redemptive presence within the intellectual context of Sharvit's study.

Chapters 5 and 6 are, in my opinion, the book's strongest. Here, Sharvit tracks the messianic impulse in the thought of Walter Benjamin, from his early writing on language and Kabbalah to his late work on urban life and high capitalism. Sharvit's master stroke in this

section is his seamless matching of form and content. Mirroring his description of Rosenzweig's translation project, Sharvit does not read Benjamin in a linear fashion. Beginning with a chapter-long analysis of the *Passagenwerk*, he then turns to Benjamin's study of the German baroque mourning play (*Trauerspiel*), then to the philosophy of language, and then finally back to the *Passagenwerk*, enacting a dynamic repetition in the explanation of Benjamin's understanding of repetition, history, and messianism. It is an exceptionally well-argued position, finding multiple powerful through-lines in Benjamin's work and developing them forward and backward in time to highlight the practical political dimensions of repetition and redemption in modern Jewish thought.

Finally, in Chapter 7, Sharvit saves the most unconventional messianic thinker for last, that being Sigmund Freud. Writing alongside, between, and against Freud's well-known anti-religious stance, Sharvit finds a presumably unintended weak messianism (echoing Benjamin's formulations) in Freud's final completed work, *Moses and Monotheism*. This force emerges out of the repetitive structure of history Freud finds in the subsequent murders of the Mosaic patriarchal figure in Jewish – and religious – history. In the psychoanalytic fragmenting of absolute, eternal truths, Freud's dynamic repetition can wait for the Messiah rather than witnessing its moment of coming (in part reminiscent of Rosenzweig's redemptive anticipation), awakening the present rather than unveiling a futural vision.

In sum, Sharvit offers an exciting reorientation of a well-studied segment of the Jewish philosophical canon. By aligning repetition with messianism, he reads and rereads major figures of the German-Jewish tradition to uncover possible new lines of thought in their work. Despite early pacing issues and stylistic hiccups, *Dynamic Repetitions* is a wonderful analysis of these writers and texts and should be of major interest to those with any level of experience in this field.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2023.2286717>



Franziska Bergmann. *Schreibweisen des Exotismus. Sinnesfülle und Fremdheit in der westeuropäischen Literatur vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert.* Reihe: Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literaturgeschichte, Bd. 167. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023. 337 pp. 109,95 €. ISBN 9783110755022.

Als Victor Segalen 1904 Überlegungen für einen Essay über den Exotismus anstellt, nimmt er sich vor, alle fünf Sinne einzubeziehen. In eine ähnliche Richtung geht auch die Studie des Freiburger Anglisten Friedrich Brie über den *Exotismus der Sinne* aus dem Jahr 1920 (1). Vor diesem Hintergrund fasst Franziska Bergmann den Exotismus als einen Diskurs, der Alterität zu einer Quelle starker sensorischer Reize stilisiert und verspricht, die in Europa von Verkümmern bedrohte Sinnlichkeit zu rehabilitieren (5–6, 167, 267). Die Ästhetik des Exotismus fasst Bergmann als eine „Asthetik,“ in deren Mittelpunkt die „sinnliche Wahrnehmung“ steht, also das Sehen, Hören, Tasten, Riechen und Schmecken, oft zusammengeführt in „synästhetische Perzeptionsformen“ (7). Im Anschluss an Wolfgang